



SERVE & OBSERVE: MICHIGAN 2026 PRIMARY

Lessons from PILF's Deployment Throughout the Great Lakes State

OCTOBER 2026 – The Public Interest Legal Foundation will continue to monitor elections. PILF sent observers across Michigan for the August 4, 2026, Primary Election, building on a record of similar work in 2020² and 2024³.

PILF observers are trained to conduct election coverage in the style of the U.S. Department of Justice. This program is designed to capture maximum detail from polling sites. PILF observers are equipped with pens and observer forms to capture data at each site. PILF observers do not simply stand off to the side. They gather evidence of how the elections were run inside the polling places which allows for concrete discussion of what can be improved.

Ballot Confusion

PILF observers cataloged widespread confusion on the ballot design and associated election official action. In Michigan, only the Presidential Primary is a closed primary. So, the August 2026 election was an open primary where each voter receives one ballot listing all candidates for all parties. According to the Bureau of Elections, “[v]oting for candidates in more than a single party’s column will void the entire partisan ballot.”⁴ PILF observers documented ballots spoiled by “cross-over votes” where the voter selected Republican and Democratic candidates on one ballot. PILF observers heard poll workers telling voters to “stay in your lane” when marking ballots.

- Three with 10 minutes all due to same reason - voting for both Rep + Dem candidates. One person chose not to fix it, knowing that none of it would count (#4).

Quick Takes

Ballot confusion: PILF observers logged numerous spoiled ballots due to the design of the ballot, which included both Democratic and Republican candidates on the same piece of paper.

Lopsided Eyes Inside, Again: Most sites had zero or few other observers. This is a repeat phenomenon from the 2024 General Election.

State laws vary on who may observe an election. In Michigan, members of the public are permitted to be “poll watchers.”¹

¹ Michigan Secretary of State; The Appointment, Rights, and Duties of Election Challengers and Poll Watchers (July 2026), https://www.michigan.gov/sos/-/media/Project/Websites/sos/01vanderroest/SOS_ED_2_CHALLENGERS.pdf.

² PILF; PILF Deploying Legal Observers to Michigan for Election (October 30, 2020), <https://publicinterestlegal.org/press/pilf-deploying-legal-observers-to-michigan-for-election/>.

³ PILF; Serve & Observe (May 2025), <https://publicinterestlegal.org/research/serve-and-observe-detroit/>.

⁴ Michigan Department of State Bureau of Elections, “Michigan Ballot Production Standards” (September 2024). *See also* Mich. Comp. Laws § 168.576.

Ballots rejected by Scanner for Voter errors

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Notes from PILF observer.

Observing the Observers

In 2024, PILF encountered poll watchers from the Democratic Party, Election Protection (a.k.a. 866-Our-VOTE), APIA Vote, NAACP, and Promote the Vote Michigan. During the 2026 Primary, most of the other observers were recognized as from Election Protection. One PILF observer memorialized a person associated with Election Protection arguing with a poll worker. There is a stark imbalance inside the polls where Democrat Party aligned observers dominate observer coverage.

Election Protection worker argues with head woman that people outside campaigning are fine she says NO that is not the rules and re-read him the rules

Notes from PILF observer.

PILF memorialized observers from other organizations and found a wild ideological imbalance.

Organization	Number of Observers (tally marks)
Election Protection	11 (challengers) 11 (same, just returned)

Notes from PILF observer.

Voters Who Showed as Already Voted, and More

PILF observers memorialized other incidents from the day, including voters hearing for the first time that they already voted or that they received a ballot by mail. This is a recurring phenomenon across the country with inadequate social science research to identify the cause of the prevalence of the problem. Voters who are attempting to vote in person have voter history records indicating that they had already cast an early vote. Some of the voters dispute that they were ones who cast the early vote. Other problems were found, including observers memorializing an individual holding a candidate sign outside of the polling location and then confusion surrounding her role inside the polling location.

One PILF observer saw documents with the words “The Black Slate” written on it. In the 2024 General Election similar slates were being distributed inside the exclusion zone where no campaigning or materials of any sort are to be distributed.⁵

Poll observers serve an important function to create a record of what goes on inside the polls. Election officials are busy and often short-handed. They cannot see everything that happens.

The best poll observers show up and are ready to record observations that others can rely upon when unbiased reporting is in short supply.

⁵ PILF; Serve & Observe (May 2025), <https://publicinterestlegal.org/research/serve-and-observe-detroit/>.

“PILF is dedicated to the important work of monitoring elections,” said J. Christian Adams, President of the Public Interest Legal Foundation. “PILF observers witnessed ideological imbalance and voter confusion within the polling place, and PILF observers’ reports provide a bird’s eye view of how elections are run in Michigan.”

About PILF

The Public Interest Legal Foundation (PILF) is the nation’s only public interest law firm dedicated wholly to election integrity. The Foundation exists to assist states and others to aid the cause of election integrity and fight against lawlessness in American elections. Drawing on numerous experts in the field, PILF seeks to protect the right to vote and preserve the Constitutional framework of American elections.

Learn more: www.publicinterestlegal.org