

Colorado 2026 Primary Election

Observation Report

Alliance for Competitive Elections
2026 Colorado Primary Election

ACE

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Competitive
Elections



1. Executive Summary

The Alliance for Competitive Elections (ACE) conducted a limited, nonpartisan observation of selected locations during the 2026 Colorado Primary Election. ACE deployed seven (7) observers across three (3) counties (Denver, Adams, Chaffee) who visited 30 total locations. Based on observation of selected Voter Service and Polling Centers (VSPC), drop boxes, and ballot processing centers, the election appeared to be well administered at observed sites. Observers reported a generally calm, orderly, and professional voting environment, with no observed intimidation, disruption, or electioneering issues in or around observed voting locations.

The primary took place in a consequential election environment. Statewide turnout was 35.61 percent, with 1,433,032 voters participating out of 4,024,717 registered voters. Unofficial results were made available quickly after polls closed and were generally conveyed clearly through state reporting, county updates, and media coverage. Several statewide, congressional, and third-party primaries were closely watched, and one major statewide contest remained close during post-election processing before ultimately being called after additional counting, ballot curing, and overseas ballot processing.

ACE commends the efforts of the elections staff, who administered locations with utmost professionalism and knowledge of the process. Observation identified several particular strengths in Colorado's election administration. Observed VSPCs were generally calm, accessible, and well-organized, with professional election staff and visible accessibility and language access materials. Drop boxes were heavily used and appeared clearly marked and secure, with identifiable collection teams and secured ballot containers. Observed ballot processing centers appeared secure and professionally managed, with ballot handling conducted by authorized election staff in a manner that appeared to preserve voter anonymity.

ACE also identified areas for improvement. Unaffiliated voters were automatically mailed Democratic and Republican primary ballots but were required to affirmatively request a Unity Party ballot, despite being eligible to participate in that primary. While this approach may reflect cost and logistical considerations for a small-party primary, it created unequal default access among eligible unaffiliated voters. Observers also reported voter-facing confusion around party affiliation, ballot selection, and eligibility to participate in a particular party's primary. At observed VSPCs, election watchers were not present in most locations, and one shared VSPC reflected confusion over the distinction between nonpartisan observers and election watchers.

These findings underscore the value of expanding credible, nonpartisan election observation in Colorado and elsewhere. Nonpartisan observation is a common electoral transparency practice across the world and can help document what works, identify practical improvements, and strengthen public understanding of election safeguards without interfering in the voting process. ACE's limited observation provides a useful snapshot of selected election processes and demonstrates how broader observation can support transparency, accountability, and public confidence in elections.



2. Recommendations

ACE provides the following recommendations to election administrators, legislators, electoral competitors, and civil society to encourage continued investment in free, fair, and secure elections across the state of Colorado.

To Election Administrators

- **Increase public understanding of election safeguards.** Election administrators should expand public-facing communications that explain how Colorado's election processes work, including ballot processing, signature verification, chain-of-custody procedures, bipartisan or multipartisan ballot handling, risk-limiting audits, ballot curing, recounts, and certification. These communications should make existing safeguards more visible to voters and help address public concerns about election integrity with clear, accessible explanations of the systems already in place.
- **Help voters verify their registration before primary deadlines.** Election administrators should increase proactive voter education before primary elections so voters understand their current party affiliation, applicable affiliation-change deadlines, and which primary ballots they are eligible to receive or request. Statewide guidance should be consistent and plain language, even where county-level procedures differ, so voters receive the same core information regardless of where they vote.
- **Ensure observation areas allow meaningful observation.** Election administrators should ensure that observer and watcher areas allow authorized individuals to see and hear enough to understand the process being observed while preserving voter privacy, ballot security, and noninterference with election workers.
- **Clarify observer and watcher roles.** Provide clearer guidance to election judges and county staff on the distinction between nonpartisan observers and election watchers, including credentialing procedures, badge or lanyard practices, access rules, and how discretionary limits should be communicated and applied.

To the Colorado General Assembly

- **Provide unaffiliated voters equal access to all eligible primary ballots.** The General Assembly should consider how to ensure unaffiliated voters receive equal notice of and access to all primary ballots in which they are eligible to participate, including eligible minor-party primaries, while preserving the rule that voters may participate in only one party primary and accounting for ballot-production, cost, and implementation considerations.
- **Avoid major election-law changes within 12 months of an election.** Follow international best practice by avoiding changes to the fundamental elements of election law within twelve months of an election in which those changes would apply, except for technical or rights-protecting adjustments.



To Political Parties, Candidates, and Ballot Measure Committees

- **Expand election watcher participation.** Political parties, candidates, and ballot measure committees should recruit, train, and deploy election watchers as a regular part of election participation, especially in counties or contests where watcher presence has historically been limited.

To Civil Society

- **Expand nonpartisan observation capacity.** Civil society organizations should invest in nonpartisan domestic election observation from multiple perspectives to help identify, document, and resolve challenges related to election integrity, election security, voter access, transparency, and public confidence.
- **Support voter education on election safeguards.** Civil society organizations should provide clear, accurate, and nonpartisan voter education on Colorado's election safeguards, including ballot curing, signature verification, risk-limiting audits, recount procedures, and public access to election information.

3. Primary Results and Certification

Unofficial results were made available quickly after polls closed and were generally conveyed clearly through state reporting, county updates, and media coverage. Statewide turnout was also notable, reaching 35.61 percent, with 1,433,032 voters participating out of 4,024,717 registered voters. This was higher than the 2024, 2022, and 2018 state primary elections, though below the 2020 primary. The majority of ballots were returned by mail, underscoring the importance of Colorado's mail ballot, ballot curing, signature verification, and post-election processing procedures.

Democratic primaries received the broadest cross-spectrum media coverage, especially the gubernatorial primary, U.S. Senate primary, and select congressional races. Attorney General Phil Weiser defeated U.S. Sen. Michael Bennet for the Democratic gubernatorial nomination, while incumbent U.S. Sen. John Hickenlooper defeated state Sen. Julie Gonzales in the Democratic U.S. Senate primary. In congressional races, Melat Kiros defeated incumbent Diana DeGette and Wanda James in the 1st Congressional District Democratic primary, and Manny Rutinel won the Democratic primary in the 8th Congressional District, a competitive general-election district.

The Republican gubernatorial primary was the closest major statewide contest in the post-election period. Victor Marx, Barb Kirkmeyer, and Scott Bottoms competed in a three-candidate primary, with Marx ultimately winning after delayed counting, ballot curing, and overseas ballot processing. The close margin drew attention to Colorado's post-election procedures, though the race was called before any statewide recount. Three other high-level Republican primaries were uncontested: U.S. Senate, Secretary of State, and State Treasurer.



Third-party primary activity was more limited but still relevant to the broader election environment. In the Unity Party gubernatorial primary, Jeff Peckman defeated Paul Noël Fiorino, 139 votes to 116. In the Libertarian Party Secretary of State primary, Alex Astley defeated Sean Vadney, 2,032 votes to 1,244. Unaffiliated voters were eligible to participate in the Unity Party primary, while the Libertarian primary was limited to eligible Libertarian voters. These contests received comparatively little media coverage and did not appear to shape the overall post-election narrative, which was dominated by major-party gubernatorial, U.S. Senate, and congressional races.

4. Key Findings

ACE generally found a calm, orderly, and professionally managed primary election environment. Election staff were responsive to voters, signage was generally clear, and observers did not report intimidation, disruption, or electioneering issues in or around observed voting locations. The findings below identify both observed strengths and areas for improvement, including primary ballot access for unaffiliated voters, voter-facing confusion around party affiliation and ballot selection, and the distinction between nonpartisan observers and election watchers at VSPCs.

Mail Ballot Distribution

ACE did not independently observe the distribution or delivery of mail ballots through the United States Postal Service. However, mail ballot distribution is a critical part of Colorado's election process and directly shapes voter access, voter awareness, and participation in primary elections. This finding is therefore based on publicly available election data, state and county election guidance, and voter-facing issues observed at VSPCs.

Colorado's mail-ballot system shaped voter participation in the primary. Publicly available state data did not identify exact statewide mail-ballot distribution totals by party, but active-voter data provides a useful proxy for the voters eligible to receive primary ballots by mail. As of the June 25 ballot-return report, Colorado reported 4,021,408 total active voters, including 2,067,943 active eligible unaffiliated voters. Based on the state's reported party-registration shares, the active-voter universe included approximately 1,006,000 Democratic voters, 909,000 Republican voters, 35,000 Libertarian voters, and 3,200 Unity Party voters.

Under state guidance, voters affiliated with the Democratic, Republican, Libertarian, or Unity parties received only the ballot of the party with which they were affiliated. Unaffiliated voters, however, were sent both Democratic and Republican primary ballots by default and could return only one ballot. Unaffiliated voters were also eligible to participate in the Unity Party primary, but they had to affirmatively request a Unity Party ballot from their county clerk or obtain one at a VSPC. The Libertarian Party primary was closed to unaffiliated voters.



The current system appears consistent with a major-party-centered open-primary framework, but it creates an implementation gap when a minor party allows unaffiliated voters to participate. ACE's concern is not that the current approach clearly violates the original ballot measure, but that eligible unaffiliated voters do not receive equal default notice and access to all primary contests in which they may participate.

The Secretary of State's Office identified cost, printing, and logistical considerations as relevant factors in this approach, particularly given the small number of Unity Party voters and the limited number of ballots returned in the Unity Party primary. ACE recognizes these operational considerations. However, the structure still created unequal default access among unaffiliated voters who were eligible to participate in that primary but did not automatically receive that ballot. A system that provides all eligible unaffiliated voters equal notice of all available primary options would preserve Colorado's rule that voters may participate in only one party primary while reducing unequal default access among eligible voters.

Voter Service and Polling Centers (VSPCs)

Observed VSPCs were generally calm, accessible, and well-organized. Election staff were professional and helpful, and most locations were arranged to manage voter flow while protecting ballot secrecy.

Accessibility and language access were notable strengths at observed VSPCs. Facilities appeared ADA accessible, and observers reported the availability of required accessibility materials and equipment, including accessible voting machines. English and Spanish signage was generally available, and some locations displayed information about virtual or telephone interpretation services for additional languages. Observers reported that election staff appeared aware of available interpretation services, although ACE did not observe whether voters used those services during the observation period. Observers also noted that additional public information could help ensure voters with disabilities know what accommodations are available before arriving at a VSPC.

The most significant voter-facing issues observed at VSPCs involved party affiliation, ballot selection, and voter eligibility to participate in a particular party's primary. Observers reported several instances in which voters were unable to complete the voting process. Based on the observed interactions, ACE inferred that some voters were unaware they were registered as affiliated with a political party or did not know that they needed to change their party affiliation at least 22 days before Election Day to vote in a different party's primary. As a result, those voters were unable to vote in the primary they sought to participate in on Election Day.

Observers also reported one ballot-on-demand printer malfunction. Election staff provided an alternative voting method, contacted support staff, and resolved the issue before observers left the location.



Election watchers were not present in most observed VSPCs. Where designated watcher or observer areas were provided, they generally allowed observers to view the process without compromising voter privacy. Some locations provided small tables, which were helpful for note-taking and allowed observers to document the process more effectively without interfering with election workers or voters.

Observer access at VSPCs was generally accommodated. However, at one multi-county VSPC, an election judge appeared to misunderstand the distinction between nonpartisan observers and election watchers. The election judge reportedly asked which party the ACE observers were with, and when the observers explained that they were nonpartisan, the election judge appeared to treat the issue as one of party-watcher eligibility rather than state-authorized nonpartisan observation. While election judges may limit the number of observers or watchers present at their discretion based on space, safety, voter privacy, and operational needs, this incident suggests that clearer guidance would help election judges distinguish between observers and watchers and communicate access decisions consistently.

Drop Boxes

Drop boxes were among the busiest observed election locations. They were generally clearly marked, visible, and easy for voters to use. Observers reported steady traffic at several drop boxes, including one instance of vehicle backup during ballot collection.

Observed ballot collection procedures appeared secure. Collection teams were identifiable, appeared to include bipartisan or multipartisan election staff, and placed ballots into secured containers. Visible camera surveillance was observed at most, though not all, drop box locations. Observers did not report intimidation, disruption, or electioneering issues at observed drop boxes.

Ballot Processing Centers

Observed ballot processing centers appeared secure and professionally managed. Access was limited to authorized personnel, ballot handling was conducted by election staff, and ballots and envelopes appeared to be handled in a manner that preserved voter anonymity.

Observation access varied by facility. In Chaffee County, observers viewed ballot processing through internal windows while remaining outside the secured processing area, and county staff explained parts of the process being observed. While separated viewing arrangements may support physical security and noninterference, they can limit meaningful observation if observers are unable to hear procedural explanations, ballot-processing discussions, or decisions in real time. Observation areas should allow observers to see and hear enough to understand the process while preserving ballot security, voter anonymity, and noninterference with election staff.



5. Next Steps

At the time of publication, certain post-election processes have not been completed. ACE will continue tracking any outstanding items, including final canvass materials, risk-limiting audit documentation, recount-related developments, final or later-filed campaign finance reports, campaign finance complaints, post-election litigation, and any official reports concerning election-related threats, intimidation, violence, misinformation, cybersecurity, or administrative irregularities.

ACE will continue analysis into the midterm period focusing on key areas of observation, including voter access, process transparency, ballot return environments, election security, campaign finance transparency, electoral competitiveness, and public confidence.

ACE will expand the scope of its midterm observation to build on primary findings, with the goal of increasing geographic coverage, strengthening observation across different location types, and improving the ability to compare county-level implementation.

ACE may issue a follow-up update or internal addendum if post-publication information materially affects the findings or identifies issues that should inform midterm planning.

6. Methodology

ACE conducted a limited, nonpartisan observation of selected locations during the 2026 Colorado Primary Election. ACE deployed seven (7) observers across three (3) counties (Denver, Adams, Chaffee) who conducted 30 location visits, including visits to 17 VSPCs, 8 drop boxes, and 2 ballot processing centers. Observation focused on selected VSPCs, ballot drop boxes, and ballot processing locations. Observers were assigned to specific locations and instructed to rely only on direct observation, avoid interference with voters or election workers, and protect voter privacy.

ACE's observation principles are informed by the Declaration of Global Principles for Nonpartisan Election Observation and Monitoring by Citizen Organizations and the accompanying Code of Conduct for Nonpartisan Citizen Election Observers and Monitors. ACE observers also completed the required Election Watcher training course provided by the Colorado Secretary of State's Office.

ACE's findings are based on limited direct observation and post-election observer debriefs. While the findings should not be interpreted as a statewide audit or statistically representative assessment, they provide useful insight into how selected Colorado primary election processes functioned in practice.



7. Acknowledgements

ACE thanks the Colorado Secretary of State's Office for its guidance on election observation rules and procedures, the League of Women Voters of Colorado for its partnership and support, and the volunteer observers whose time and care made this observation possible.