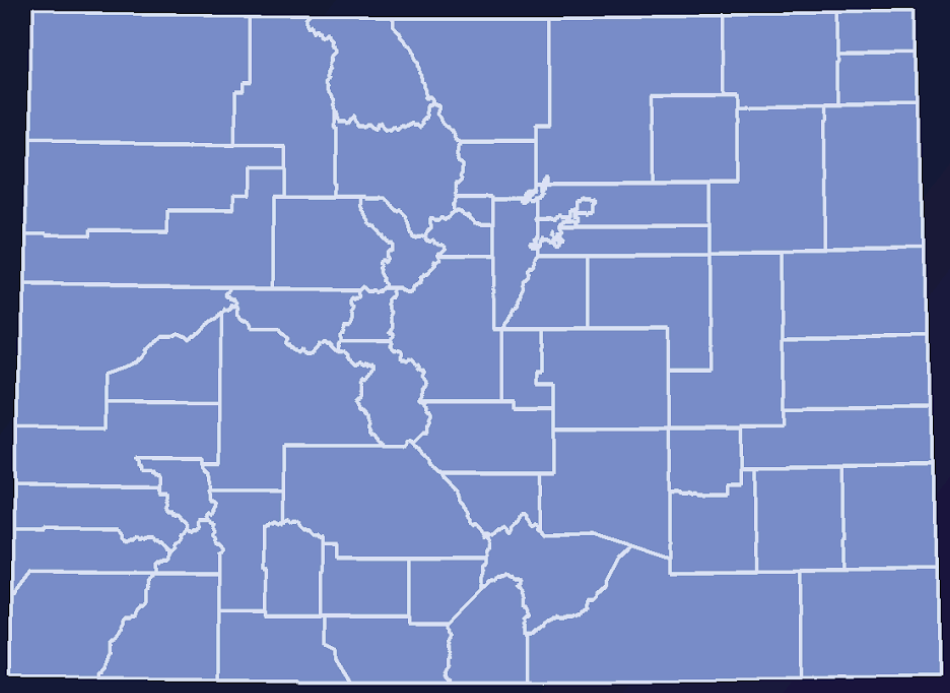
ACE | Alliance *for* Competitive Elections

The State of Political Competition

Colorado's 2026 Midterm Elections



November 2026

competitiveelections.org

About the Alliance for Competitive Elections

The Alliance for Competitive Elections (ACE) is a nonprofit organization dedicated to strengthening democracy and expanding meaningful voter choice by supporting the development, cooperation, and visibility of political parties and independent political movements.

ACE works to foster a competitive multiparty political system through political party development, training, cross-partisan coalition-building, electoral reform, and research. Its research examines the conditions under which political parties and candidates compete, identifying barriers to political participation and opportunities to strengthen electoral competition and representation.

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Table of Contents

Executive Summary 4

Recommendations 5

Political and Electoral Context 7

1. Political Competition and Meaningful Choice 8

1.1 Candidate Choice and Electoral Performance 8

1.2 Competition Across the Electoral Cycle 12

1.3 Party Status, Ballot Access, and Legal Barriers 13

1.4 Electoral Reform and Opportunities for Greater Competition 14

2. Campaign Environment and Equality of Opportunity 15

2.1 Freedom and Safety to Campaign 15

2.2 Public-Resource Neutrality and Institutional Advantages 16

2.3 Media Access, Debates, and Candidate Visibility 17

2.4 Campaign Conduct, Enforcement, and Remedies 18

2.5 Campaign Finance 19

3. Election Information, Administration, and Accountability 22

3.1 Electoral Information and Voter Education 22

3.2 Election Administration 23

3.3 Election Watchers and Independent Observation 24

3.4 Complaint Transparency and Accountability 25

Methodology and Limitations 26

Next Steps 27

Executive Summary

Colorado has developed an electoral framework that provides extensive opportunities for voters to participate. However, access to the ballot does not necessarily guarantee voters a choice among competing candidates. In the 2026 midterm elections, approximately 891,000 residents lived in state House districts with only one printed candidate, while more than two-thirds of the county-office contests examined by the Alliance for Competitive Elections (ACE) featured a single printed candidate. In 18 counties, none of the county-office contests examined featured multiple printed candidates. In some constituencies, electoral competition occurred exclusively within one political party's primary, preventing more than 90,000 registered voters from participating in at least one of these contests under their existing political affiliation. Meaningful electoral competition must therefore be assessed across the entire electoral cycle.

Colorado's electoral landscape demonstrates both the potential for political pluralism and the challenges of translating it into elected representation. Organizations operating within established political parties have demonstrated an ability to secure representation, while independently registered minor parties have struggled to expand their electoral support. Unaffiliated candidates have achieved increasing success in county elections, although most of their victories occurred in the absence of opposition. Minor-party and unaffiliated candidates nevertheless play an important role in providing electoral alternatives where both major parties do not compete.

Expanding electoral competition requires attention to the conditions under which political organizations and candidates compete. Differences in legal requirements, access to media coverage and debates, financial resources, and organizational capacity can restrict opportunities for political participation. Efforts to strengthen equality of electoral opportunity should seek to reduce unnecessary barriers while recognizing the different stages of development of political organizations.

Colorado's generally professional election administration provides a strong foundation for further improvements in electoral transparency and accountability. Greater accessibility of electoral complaints, clearer procedures for independent election observation, and improvements in the comprehensiveness of electoral information would strengthen the ability of voters and political competitors to participate effectively throughout the electoral cycle.

Electoral reforms approved by voters in several Colorado jurisdictions present opportunities to expand political representation and meaningful voter choice. However, changes to electoral systems alone will not necessarily produce greater competition. Electoral reform must be accompanied by efforts to strengthen political parties and expand candidate participation. ACE will draw on the findings of this assessment to inform its training, coalition-building, and electoral reform activities, with the overarching objective of expanding meaningful electoral choice for voters.

Recommendations

Legislators and Policymakers

- Review electoral legislation to identify and reduce unnecessary barriers to political participation, ensuring that differences in the legal treatment of parties and candidates do not create unjustified competitive disadvantages.
- Review political party recognition thresholds to facilitate the development of emerging political parties, harmonize petition circulation periods and candidate replacement procedures to ensure equitable opportunities for ballot access, and eliminate unnecessarily burdensome public notice requirements.
- Restore a combined primary ballot for unaffiliated voters, providing equitable access to participating political parties' primaries while reducing unnecessary ballot production.
- Introduce randomized or rotated candidate ordering to reduce advantages associated with ballot placement.

Election Administrators

- Establish standardized, publicly accessible electoral complaint registers and publish relevant decisions and documents in a timely manner, subject to appropriate safeguards.
- Establish clear and accessible accreditation procedures for independent election observation, supported by standardized training and conduct requirements.
- Publish aggregate information concerning election watcher participation and candidate qualification, including appointments, nomination pathways, and petition outcomes.
- Strengthen transparency surrounding the use of artificial intelligence in election administration and incorporate AI-related literacy into voter education programs.

Political Parties and Other Political Organizations

- Strengthen candidate recruitment and development, particularly in constituencies characterized by limited electoral competition and where new elected positions are being established.
- Invest in sustainable organizational infrastructure, including institutional fundraising, volunteer networks, and shared campaign resources.
- Make greater use of existing election oversight mechanisms through the recruitment, training, and deployment of election watchers.
- Strengthen cooperation among political organizations on issues of mutual interest, including electoral reform and equality of electoral opportunity.

Media Organizations and Debate Organizers

- Publish transparent candidate inclusion criteria for election coverage, debates, and public forums, and apply these criteria consistently.
- Proceed with candidate debates and forums where practicable, irrespective of whether particular candidates decline participation.
- Regularly review published electoral information against authoritative sources to ensure its accuracy and relevance throughout the electoral cycle.

Federal Authorities

- Resume inviting the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) to conduct independent election observation missions in the United States to promote electoral transparency, accountability, and the exchange of international good practices.

Political and Electoral Context

Colorado approached the November 3, 2026, midterm elections with an established pattern of Democratic electoral strength at the statewide level. Democrats had controlled the governorship and both chambers of the General Assembly since 2019. Democrats also held both U.S. Senate seats, although Colorado's eight congressional districts were divided equally between Democratic and Republican representatives. Republicans maintained considerable electoral strength in county government, particularly in rural areas.

Colorado's most recent decennial redistricting process was completed in 2021 by independent congressional and legislative redistricting commissions established through constitutional amendments approved by voters in 2018. Following the 2020 census, Colorado gained an additional congressional seat, increasing its representation in the U.S. House of Representatives from seven to eight members. The new congressional and state legislative district boundaries were first used in the 2022 elections.

Despite the dominance of the two major parties in elected office, most registered Colorado voters are unaffiliated. As of 9 a.m. on November 3, 2026, 50.9% of active registered voters were unaffiliated, compared with 24.8% registered as Democrats, 21.9% as Republicans, and approximately 2.5% with other registered political party affiliations. While unaffiliated registration does not necessarily indicate ideological independence, the composition of the electorate contrasts with the concentration of elected political power within the two major parties.[1]

Political pluralism in Colorado manifests both within and outside established political parties. Recognized minor parties seek to develop independent political structures and nominate candidates under their own party designations, while organizations such as the Working Families Party and Democratic Socialists of America primarily pursue electoral influence through candidates operating within established party structures. Unaffiliated candidates provide an additional pathway to elected office. These approaches have demonstrated differing capacities to translate political participation into elected representation.

The 2026 elections presented consequential opportunities for changes in political leadership. Governor Jared Polis was term-limited, creating an open gubernatorial contest alongside elections for other statewide executive offices, the U.S. Senate, all eight congressional districts, and the state legislature. The June primaries also featured significant nomination contests, including Melat Kiros's victory over longtime Democratic congressional representative Diana DeGette.

[1] Colorado Secretary of State, *Ballot Return Reporting*, November 3, 2026, 9 a.m.

Direct democracy continued to represent an important component of Colorado's political environment. Voters considered 14 statewide ballot measures, 13 of which were citizen-initiated. Disputes concerning congressional redistricting and local proposals to expand county commissioner boards and introduce alternative electoral systems placed questions of political representation and electoral competition directly before voters.

Colorado administers elections through a decentralized system in which county clerks operate within a statewide legislative and regulatory framework. The state recognizes major and minor political parties and provides distinct nomination pathways for party-affiliated and unaffiliated candidates. Following the approval of Proposition 108 in 2016, unaffiliated voters became eligible to vote in participating parties' primary elections without formally joining those parties.

Preliminary general election results indicated that Democrats had further consolidated their political control in Colorado. Democrats retained control of statewide executive offices and expanded their representation in Colorado's congressional delegation from four to seven of the state's eight U.S. House seats. Democrats also secured supermajorities in both chambers of the General Assembly, with 49 of 65 House seats and 24 of 35 Senate seats. The incoming legislative composition provides Democrats with sufficient representation to refer constitutional amendments to voters without Republican legislative support.[2]

1. Political Competition and Meaningful Choice

1.1 Candidate Choice and Electoral Performance

Meaningful electoral competition requires voters to have a choice among candidates and political organizations to be able to compete for representation. Colorado's 2026 elections demonstrate considerable variation in the availability of electoral alternatives across elected offices and constituencies.

Of the 86 state legislative contests, 12 featured only one printed candidate: ten incumbents (five Democrats and five Republicans) and two non-incumbent Democrats. In five additional state House contests, a minor-party or unaffiliated candidate provided the only opposition to a major-party nominee on the printed ballot.

Based on 2020 Census population figures, approximately 891,000 residents lived in state House districts with only one printed candidate, while approximately 446,000 lived in districts where minor-party or unaffiliated candidates provided the sole alternative to a major-party nominee. The number of legislative contests without a Democratic–Republican matchup increased from six in 2022 to 13 in 2024 and 17 in 2026, compared with 11 in 2020.

[2] Decision Desk HQ, [Colorado election results], November 3, 2026; Associated Press, [Colorado election results], reproduced in Movement Voter Project election tracker, November 16, 2026 (preliminary).

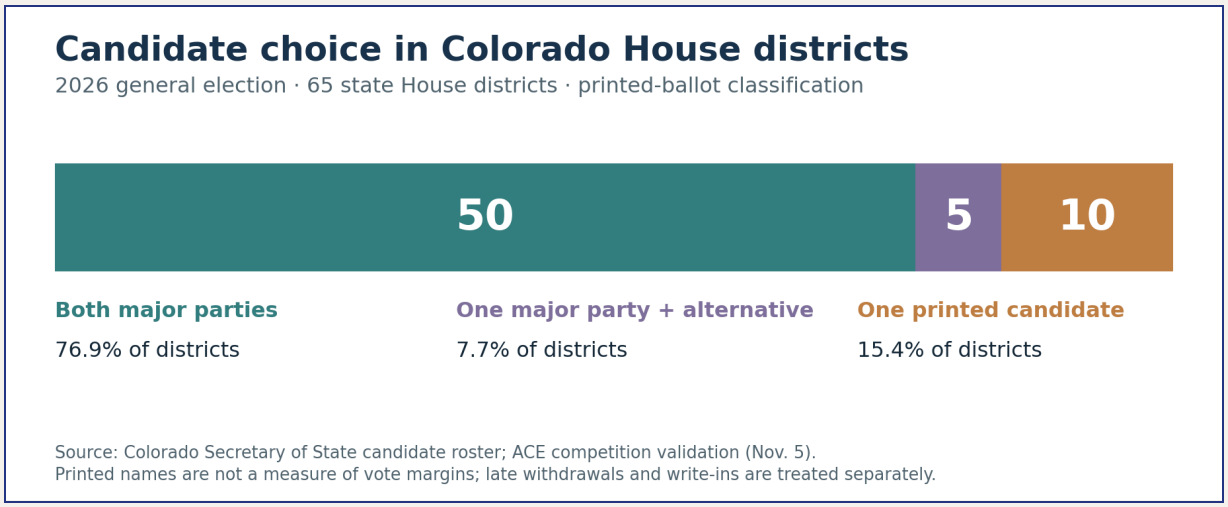


Figure 1. Composition of the 65 state House contests by printed-ballot category.

Limited candidate choice was particularly prevalent in county elections. Of 418 county-office contests reviewed across 60 counties, 282 (67.5%) featured only one printed candidate and 36 (8.6%) featured none. In 18 counties, none of the county-office contests reviewed featured multiple printed candidates. Among contests with only one printed candidate, approximately 66% featured Republican nominees, 19% Democratic nominees, and 14% unaffiliated candidates.

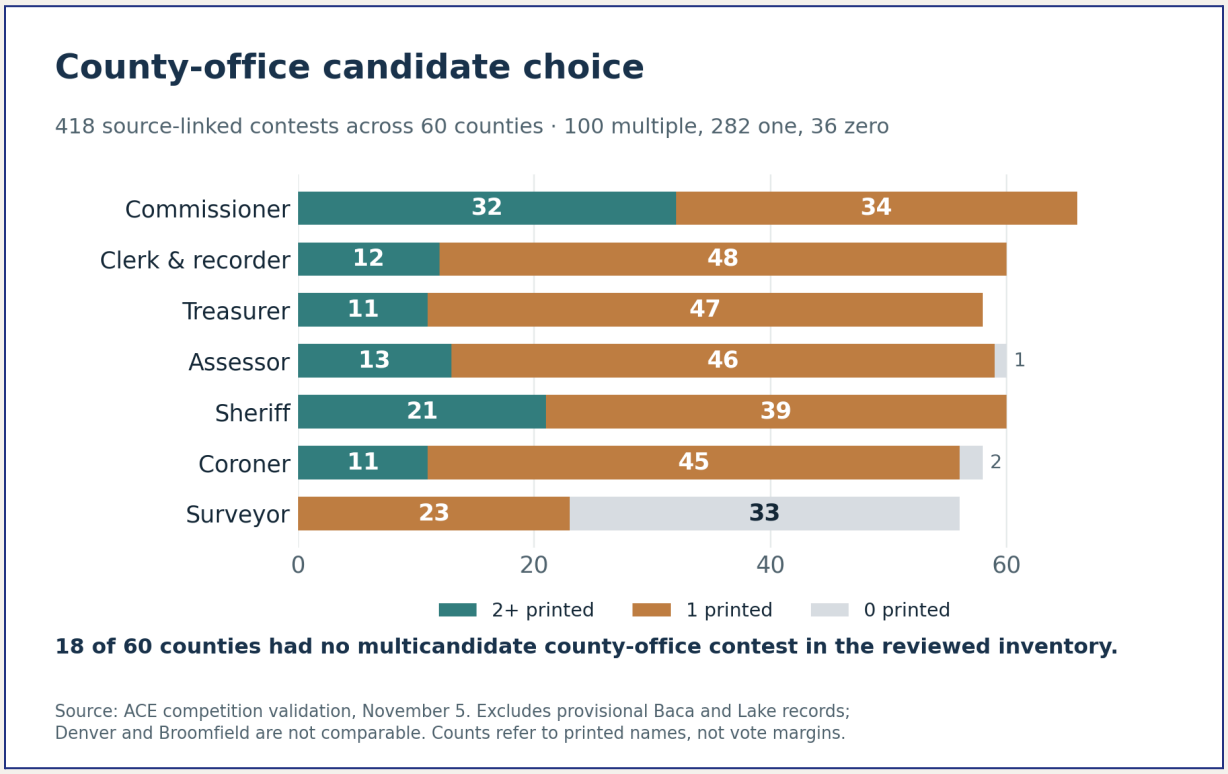


Figure 2. County-office competition by office in the 60-county inventory.

Minor-party and unaffiliated candidates participated in 75 county-office contests, providing the only opposition to a major-party candidate in 26 contests. These candidacies therefore contributed to electoral competition in constituencies where both major parties did not field candidates.

Political pluralism also manifests within established political parties. Organizations such as the Working Families Party and Democratic Socialists of America achieved representation through candidates operating within major-party structures, while independently registered minor parties continued to face considerable challenges in translating electoral participation into elected representation.

Across the 2020, 2022, 2024, and 2026 state legislative elections, minor-party and unaffiliated candidates collectively received no more than approximately 2.5% of printed-candidate votes. In 2026, minor-party candidates received 63,803 votes, compared with 70,381 in 2024, while votes for unaffiliated candidates increased from 3,122 to 9,678. The combined number of votes for candidates competing outside the two major parties remained broadly unchanged, although total legislative votes differed between the two elections.

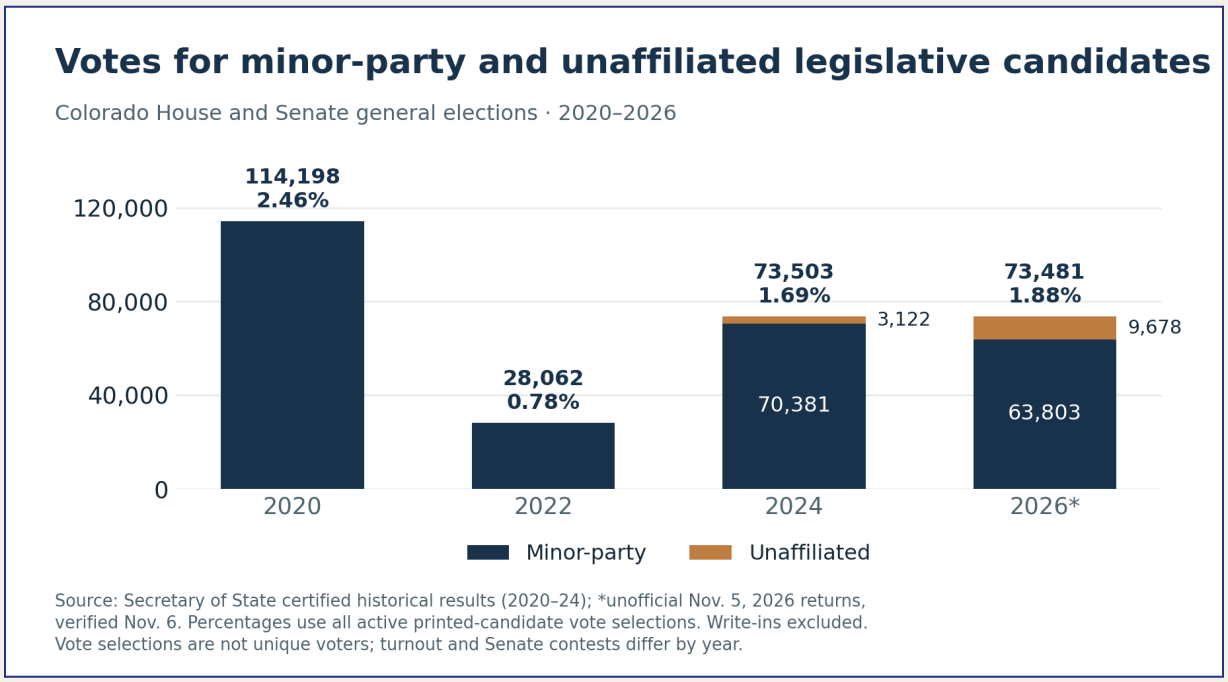


Figure 3. Minor-party and unaffiliated legislative vote selections, 2020–2026.

Minor-party candidates received substantially higher levels of electoral support in contests where they faced only one major-party candidate. In state House contests, based on the November 5 unofficial results reviewed by ACE, their median vote share was approximately 18.5% among six candidates facing one major-party candidate, compared with 2.2% among eleven candidates facing both. Candidates including Steve Yurash and Ross Metler obtained approximately 29% and 28% of the vote in their respective districts.

Unaffiliated candidates demonstrated increasing success in county elections. Between 2022 and 2026, the number of identified unaffiliated candidacies increased from 54 to 71, while documented victories increased from 27 across 14 counties to at least 49 across 23 counties. ACE's review of preliminary results across 57 counties as of November 6, 2026, indicated that unaffiliated candidates won ten clerk and recorder, eight assessor, eight treasurer, seven coroner, six sheriff, six surveyor, and four county commissioner positions.

While this represents a considerable expansion of unaffiliated political representation, most successful candidates faced no named opposition. The number of victories by unaffiliated candidates facing no other named candidate increased from 23 in 2022 to 42 in 2026, while victories against major-party opposition increased from four to at least five. In 2024, however, unaffiliated candidates defeated major-party opponents in six of their nine documented victories. These outcomes demonstrate both the opportunities presented by the absence of major-party candidates and the ability of unaffiliated candidates to compete successfully against established political parties.

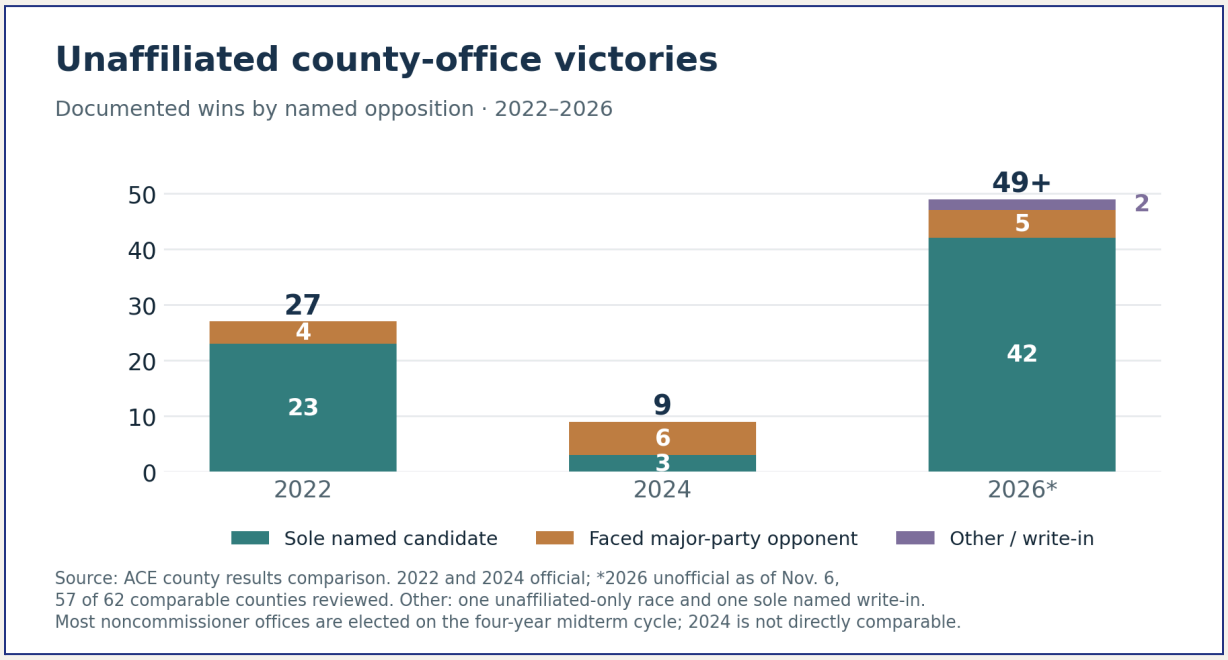


Figure 4. Documented unaffiliated county-office victories by opposition type.

These findings illustrate the different opportunities available to political competitors depending on the offices and constituencies in which they compete. Ballot access alone does not ensure effective electoral competition. Candidate recruitment, organizational capacity, campaign resources, and the institutional conditions under which candidates compete warrant continued attention in efforts to broaden political representation and meaningful voter choice.[3]

[3] Colorado Secretary of State, [certified candidate roster]; Colorado Independent Redistricting Commissions, [final approved House plan and 2020 Census district populations]; Colorado Secretary of State, [historical election archives]; [2026 unofficial statewide returns], November 5, 2026 snapshot; ACE, [candidate and competition validation], November 5–6, 2026 (418

1.2 Competition Across the Electoral Cycle

Electoral competition does not occur exclusively during the general election. In areas dominated by one political party, the selection of elected representatives may effectively take place during primary elections or even earlier in the nomination process. Conversely, competition may exist during the primary election but subsequently diminish before the general election.

Of the 305 contests examined due to limited general election competition, including county contests from the broader provisional inventory, ACE identified 271 in which neither the primary nor the general election featured multiple candidates. These findings demonstrate the extent to which voters lacked electoral alternatives throughout the principal voting stages of the electoral cycle, although competition may have occurred earlier in the candidate nomination process.

In 28 contests, the only documented electoral competition occurred within a single political party's primary. These included 23 Republican and five Democratic primaries across two state House seats and 26 county offices. The latter included eight county commissioner seats, eight sheriffs, five clerks and recorders, three coroners, one treasurer, and one assessor.

Across these constituencies, 90,074 active registered voters were unable to participate in at least one of the competitive primaries under their existing party affiliation. Based on voter registration data from June 1, 2026, these included 38,975 Republicans, 37,571 Democrats, and 13,528 voters registered with other political affiliations. These figures count each affected voter only once, accounting for overlapping contests.

While unaffiliated voters could choose which eligible party primary to participate in, voters registered with other political parties did not have an equivalent opportunity under their existing affiliation. This illustrates how electoral competition within political parties, while valuable, does not necessarily provide meaningful electoral choice to the broader electorate.

The absence of multiple candidates at both the primary and general election stages represents a particularly significant limitation on voter choice. Assessments of electoral competition should therefore consider the entire electoral cycle, including candidate nomination, primary elections, and general elections.[4]

source-linked contests across 60 counties); ACE, [county victory review], November 6, 2026 (57 counties); legislative vote selections exclude write-ins. County outcomes are preliminary; vote selections are not unique voters.

[4] ACE, [2026 nomination-stage competition race review and voter registration crosswalk] (305 prioritized contests; June 1, 2026 active registration snapshot; unique voters deduplicated across overlapping electorates); Colorado Secretary of State, [historical election data and official primary returns]; ACE, Commissioner Primary Crosswalk.

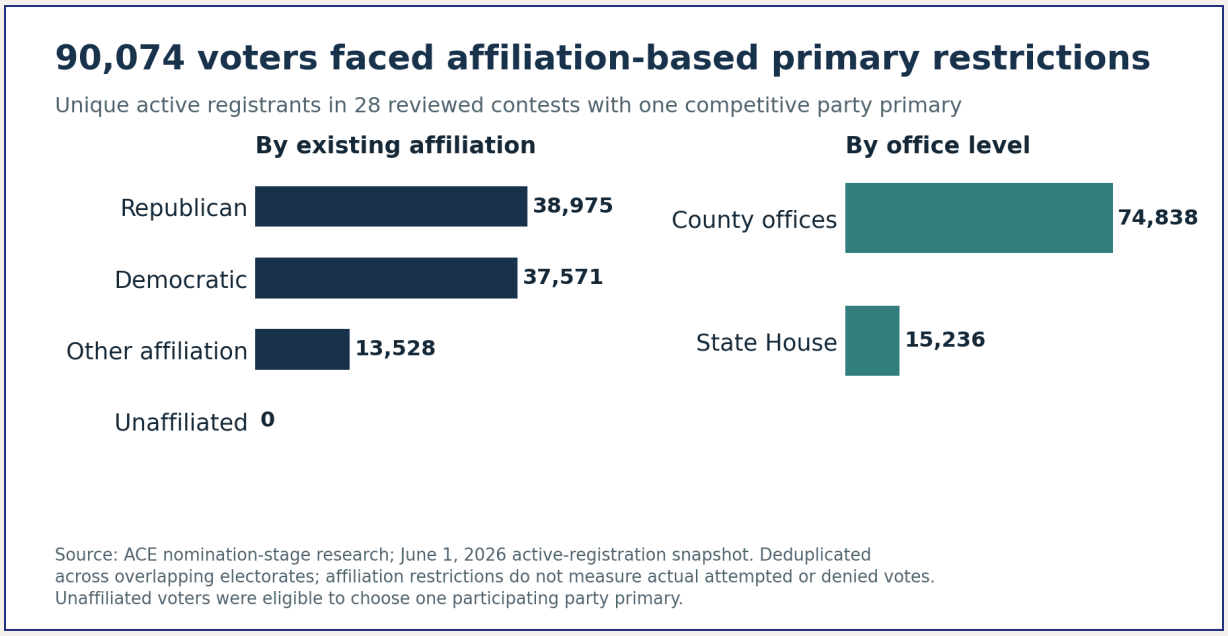


Figure 5. Active registered voters restricted from competitive primaries by existing affiliation.

1.3 Party Status, Ballot Access, and Legal Barriers

Colorado's electoral legislation establishes different rights and obligations for political parties and candidates according to their legal classification. Major political party status is determined by whether a party's gubernatorial candidate received at least 10% of the votes cast in the most recent gubernatorial election. The American Constitution Party attained major-party status following the 2010 election but lost that status following the 2014 election. While minor-party recognition may be attained through alternative mechanisms involving petitions, voter affiliation, or electoral performance, opportunities to attain major-party status remain limited.

Major political parties enjoy certain institutional advantages but also have additional organizational requirements and responsibilities in election administration. Conversely, other provisions facilitate minor-party participation, including lower petition signature requirements for several elected offices and opportunities to nominate candidates directly to the general election when nominations are uncontested. Efforts to harmonize electoral requirements should preserve provisions that facilitate participation.

In 2026, unaffiliated candidates seeking general election ballot access had approximately 25% less time to circulate nomination petitions than party-affiliated candidates seeking access to the primary ballot. While unaffiliated candidates may collect signatures from a broader pool of eligible voters, the difference in circulation periods warrants review.

Differences in treatment also extend beyond candidate nomination. During the June primary, unaffiliated voters routinely received Democratic and Republican ballots by mail but were required to request the Unity Party ballot separately. All participating parties should have

equitable access to eligible primary voters. Similarly, randomized or rotated candidate ordering could reduce advantages associated with ballot placement.

The court-ordered replacement of Libertarian secretary of state candidate Alex Astley with Sean Vadney illustrates the need to review differences in candidate replacement procedures. Minor political parties also face newspaper publication requirements concerning party officers, delegates, and assemblies that do not apply equivalently to major political parties. Where public notice is necessary, an accessible and consistent publication standard should apply.

Reviewing Colorado's electoral legislation against the principles of proportionality and equality of opportunity could facilitate broader political participation without imposing unnecessary additional burdens on electoral stakeholders.[5]

1.4 Electoral Reform and Opportunities for Greater Competition

Several local ballot measures approved by Colorado voters in November 2026 present opportunities to improve political representation and electoral competition. Realizing these opportunities will depend not only on the implementation of institutional reforms but also on the ability of political parties, unaffiliated candidates, and community organizations to participate effectively within the resulting electoral frameworks.

In Boulder and Douglas counties, voters supported expanding their respective boards of county commissioners from three to five members. In Boulder County, voters also supported introducing a mixed electoral system under which three commissioners will be elected exclusively by voters residing within their respective districts, while two will be elected countywide. In Douglas County, voters supported competing provisions concerning the method of electing commissioners, the legal effect of which remains subject to ongoing litigation.

These reforms are particularly significant given the differing levels of electoral competition in the two counties. Between 2022 and 2026, two of the four county commissioner elections in Boulder County featured only one printed candidate, compared with none in Douglas County.

The introduction of district-based elections in Boulder County creates an opportunity to assess whether changes to electoral arrangements can improve competition and diversify political representation. More broadly, expanding elected bodies creates additional opportunities for prospective candidates to seek public office. Given the prevalence of single-candidate county commissioner elections across Colorado, these expansions should be accompanied by efforts to recruit, prepare, and support candidates. Expanding representative institutions without corresponding efforts to strengthen electoral competition risks increasing the number of uncontested elected offices.

[5] Colorado Revised Statutes, Title 1, particularly §§ 1-1-104, 1-4-802, 1-4-1005–1007, 1-4-1301–1305, 1-5-404 and 1-7-201; Colorado Secretary of State, [election rules]; ACE, *Political Party Status and Ballot Access Analysis*, October–November 2026; review of statutory nomination pathways and candidate replacement.

In Longmont, voters approved Questions 3C and 3D, providing for the introduction of ranked-choice voting methods beginning in 2029, subject to applicable implementation requirements. The realignment of city council election cycles also creates a pathway toward proportional ranked-choice voting for the city's three at-large council seats. These reforms represent an important opportunity to demonstrate how alternative electoral systems can improve voter choice and political representation.

Electoral reform and political party development should be understood as complementary processes. More inclusive electoral systems can create opportunities for political competitors, while stronger political organizations and a broader field of candidates are necessary to translate those opportunities into meaningful electoral choice.[6]

2. Campaign Environment and Equality of Opportunity

2.1 Freedom and Safety to Campaign

The incidents reviewed by ACE do not indicate widespread restrictions on the ability of political candidates and voters to participate freely in Colorado's 2026 elections. Nevertheless, several documented incidents raised concerns regarding the safety of political participants and their ability to conduct lawful electoral activities.

On October 19, several members of Colorado's congressional delegation received suspicious letters, some containing unidentified white powder, as part of a nationwide series of similar mailings. Although initial testing did not identify hazardous substances in the letters examined, the incidents raised concerns about the safety of elected officials and their staff.

Candidates also reported personal security concerns during the campaign. Unaffiliated congressional candidate Shimon Blau reported receiving approximately 250 antisemitic comments following the publication of social media advertisements.

In a separate incident, congressional candidate Jessica Killin attributed increased security measures at her family home to campaign advertisements depicting the property. The campaign of her opponent, Jeff Crank, disputed Killin's characterization of the advertisements.

Security concerns also disrupted campaign activities. A June rally organized by congressional candidate Melat Kiros was relocated following several venue cancellations, and two scheduled speakers withdrew from appearing in person, citing safety concerns. Kiros alleged that her

[6] Boulder County, [preliminary 2026 election results, including Boulder Questions 200–201 and Longmont Questions 3C–3D]; Douglas County, [3-to-5 commissioners: voter-initiated measure, unofficial results and pending litigation]; ACE, [historical county commissioner contest comparison], 2022–2026.

primary opponent, Diana DeGette, influenced the venue cancellations, an allegation that DeGette's campaign denied.

While these accounts illustrate security concerns reported by candidates during the electoral cycle, ACE did not independently verify the claims made by the respective campaigns or establish responsibility for the alleged conduct.

Interference with campaign materials was documented in local elections in Castle Rock and Vail, involving the unauthorized removal of campaign literature and the reported theft of campaign signs, respectively. In Salida, individuals confronted voters near a ballot drop box using amplified insults and filming, although the reported confrontation did not prevent the voters from casting their ballots.

Freedom of political expression remains fundamental to competitive elections. While the incidents reviewed by ACE do not establish widespread or systematic restrictions on political participation, they underscore the importance of documenting threats and interference and ensuring effective responses that safeguard lawful electoral activities.[7]

2.2 Public-Resource Neutrality and Institutional Advantages

The use of public resources during election campaigns warrants particular attention given the potential for publicly funded activities to provide electoral advantages to incumbent candidates or ballot-measure campaigns. While public institutions have legitimate responsibilities to communicate with citizens, safeguards are necessary to maintain the distinction between official communications and electoral advocacy.

Prior to the formal referral of Ballot Issue 7A, the Front Range Passenger Rail District reportedly spent nearly $2 million on public communications promoting the proposed passenger rail service. These activities included three mailings to approximately 246,000 households and digital advertising. While the district characterized its activities as authorized public education and discontinued them following the formal referral of the measure, critics questioned the promotional nature of the communications.

Concerns also arose regarding federally funded communications during the campaign period. In September, the White House publicized President Donald Trump's proposal to provide adult U.S. citizens $5,000 conditional upon Republicans retaining control of both chambers of Congress. Separately, approximately $19 million in Department of Homeland Security advertising placements featured the president nationwide, including an advertisement closely resembling a video used during his 2024 presidential campaign. Federal judges issued temporary restrictions on the advertising in October, although the extent of its exposure to Colorado voters remains unestablished.

[7] Colorado Public Radio, [suspicious mailings], October 19, 2026; FOX31, [report on Blau], October 19, 2026; KRDO, [Killin campaign security concerns], October 19, 2026; Denverite, [Kiros rally], June 15, 2026; Colorado Politics, [Castle Rock incident], October 24, 2026; Denver7, [Vail campaign signs]; Axios Denver, [Salida incident], October 26, 2026.

These cases demonstrate the importance of distinguishing legitimate institutional advantages from the use of public resources for electoral advocacy. Transparency regarding expenditure, content, sponsorship, and distribution, alongside effective oversight mechanisms, can help safeguard equality of opportunity among electoral competitors. The cases reviewed do not establish a systematic pattern of unlawful use of public resources in Colorado.[8]

2.3 Media Access, Debates, and Candidate Visibility

Media coverage, candidate debates, and public forums play an important role in enabling voters to evaluate electoral alternatives. The criteria used to determine candidate participation and coverage can therefore influence the extent to which voters are able to make informed electoral choices.

During the 2026 elections, debate organizers employed differing participation requirements, including ballot qualification, polling thresholds, and political party affiliation. Participation requirements based on perceived electoral viability can reinforce existing disparities in candidate visibility. Candidates who receive limited media coverage may struggle to gain the public recognition necessary to qualify for debates, while exclusion from debates further limits opportunities to increase public awareness of their candidacies.

Candidate decisions not to participate also affected voters' opportunities to evaluate electoral alternatives. Several events were canceled due to insufficient confirmed participation, while others proceeded with the candidates who accepted invitations. Notably, gubernatorial debates in Colorado Springs and Grand Junction proceeded with Democratic candidate Phil Weiser and unaffiliated candidate Greg Lopez despite Republican candidate Victor Marx declining participation.

Accounts received by ACE described difficulties arranging a gubernatorial debate with the participation of the two major-party nominees. STARRS subsequently organized a gubernatorial forum for October 28, inviting all seven ballot-qualified candidates. Five candidates had confirmed, the Democratic candidate had declined, and the Republican candidate's response remained pending. While this demonstrated initiative and cooperation among political competitors, candidates should be able to devote their resources to participating in debates rather than organizing them. This additional organizational burden is particularly consequential for campaigns with limited financial and human resources.

The League of Women Voters provides a constructive model through its practice of inviting all ballot-qualified candidates to participate in forums. Debate organizers should establish and publish transparent participation criteria in advance, apply them consistently, and proceed with events where practicable, irrespective of whether particular candidates decline participation. The

[8] Denverite, [Front Range Passenger Rail communications], October 1, 2026; White House, [dividend proposal], September 2026; *Common Cause v. DHS*, interim order, October 11, 2026; *DNC v. Trump*, interim order, October 28, 2026.

participation of major-party candidates should not be a prerequisite for providing voters with opportunities to learn about other electoral alternatives.

A broader concern identified by ACE is the limited transparency of media organizations' criteria for determining which candidates receive substantive election coverage. ACE's review found that media organizations frequently did not publish their criteria for selecting candidates for interviews, profiles, debates, and other election-related programming. The absence of published criteria makes it difficult for voters and candidates to assess whether editorial decisions are based on objective and consistently applied considerations. It also leaves candidates without a clear understanding of the requirements they must meet to be considered for coverage. Given the significant role of media organizations in shaping public awareness of electoral alternatives, this represents an important transparency and accountability concern.

Media organizations should publish their candidate selection criteria, explain exceptions, and distinguish decisions not to include candidates from instances in which candidates decline opportunities to participate. Such transparency is compatible with editorial independence and does not require news organizations to provide equal publicity or airtime to every candidate.[9]

2.4 Campaign Conduct, Enforcement, and Remedies

Effective enforcement of electoral legislation is essential to maintaining equality of opportunity among political competitors. However, the effectiveness of electoral remedies depends not only on their substance but also on whether they are implemented in a timely manner.

In an October 2 initial decision, an administrative hearing officer identified 210 campaign-finance violations involving Republican gubernatorial candidate Victor Marx's campaign and recommended a financial penalty of approximately $57,647. The initial decision identified the campaign's continued retention of prohibited contributions, including during the competitive June primary, as an aggravating factor. The campaign disputed the recommended penalty, and the matter remained pending a final agency decision following the general election.

Separate complaints involving Democratic gubernatorial candidate Phil Weiser's campaign alleged 46 instances of excessive contributions and delayed refunds. The campaign was provided an opportunity to remedy the alleged violations and reported taking corrective action. Both complaints remained open following the general election.

These cases illustrate the challenges associated with enforcing campaign-finance requirements within the electoral cycle. Financial penalties imposed after an election may serve as a deterrent against future violations but cannot necessarily remedy competitive advantages obtained during a campaign.

[9] ACE, *Candidate Media Coverage Analysis* and [media/debate inclusion review], October–November 2026; Club 20 Foundation, [candidate selection account], August 18, 2026; League of Women Voters Pikes Peak, [forum], September 12, 2026; League of Women Voters Jefferson County, [forum information]; Kim Monson, [STARRS gubernatorial forum announcements], October 22, 2026.

While electoral enforcement mechanisms must safeguard due process, particular attention should be given to the timely resolution of complaints and the availability of corrective measures capable of restoring fair competitive conditions before the relevant election takes place.[10]

2.5 Campaign Finance

Access to financial resources represents an important consideration for prospective candidates seeking elected office. Both the actual costs of campaigning and perceptions regarding the financial resources necessary to mount a competitive campaign may discourage political participation.

ACE's preliminary analysis of campaign-finance records identified considerable differences in reported expenditures between major-party and minor-party candidates. Among state House candidates for whom ACE identified expenditure records, major-party candidates had average reported expenditures of approximately $41,000, compared with less than $1,000 among minor-party candidates. These estimates are preliminary and reflect the records examined rather than the full candidate population.[11]

Campaign expenditures also varied considerably by office. Among apparent leading candidates in contests featuring multiple printed candidates for whom ACE identified expenditure records, preliminary median reported expenditures were approximately $21,600 for county commissioner candidates, $45,700 for state House candidates, and $85,200 for state Senate candidates.[12]

[10] Colorado Secretary of State, TRACER, ED2026-52 (initial decision, October 2, 2026; pending final agency decision), and ED2026-97/98 (open in the retrieved post-election record); Colorado Politics, [report on Marx's appeal and allegations concerning Weiser], October 5, 2026.
[11] ACE, [TRACER expenditure screen], November 3, 2026 (104 of 115 major-party and eight of 17 minor-party House candidates matched, including provisional name-only matches). Activity January 1, 2025–October 28, 2026; incomplete and uneven coverage, with committee and transaction reconciliation outstanding. Missing records are excluded, not treated as zero.
[12] ACE, [expenditure screen], November 6, 2026 (19 of 32 commissioner, 55 House and 19 Senate multicandidate contests). Monetary records through October 25 (county) or October 28 (legislature); excludes independent and noncash spending. Results unofficial; committee identities, amendments, refunds and reimbursements remain subject to reconciliation. Not statewide cost-to-win estimates.

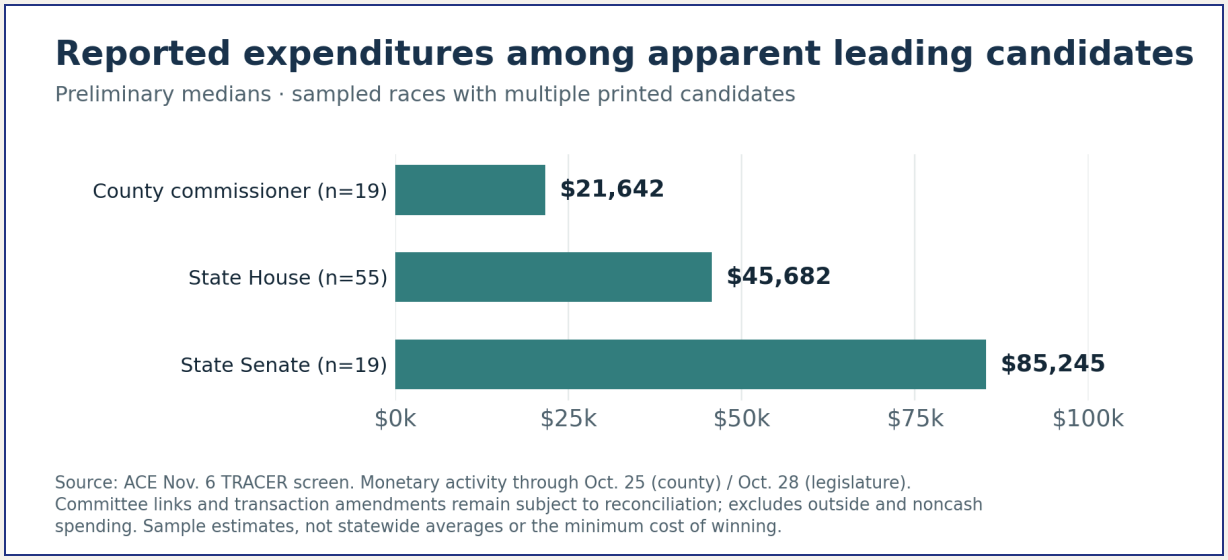


Figure 6. Preliminary median expenditures among apparent leaders with matched records.

Considerable differences also exist between elections for the same office across different constituencies. In a separate preliminary analysis of county commissioner elections, apparent winning candidates examined in eight of Colorado's largest counties recorded average expenditures of approximately $70,300 in 2026, compared with $9,200 among those examined in the remaining counties. A similar disparity was observed in the 2022 sample. These findings illustrate how perceptions of campaign costs based on higher-profile elections may obscure opportunities to compete for elected office with more limited financial resources. The figures do not establish the minimum resources necessary to win an election.[13]

[13] ACE, [separate commissioner expenditure comparison], 2022 and 2026. 2022 sample: 10 winners in the eight largest counties and 25 elsewhere; 2026 sample: nine apparent winners in the eight largest counties and 23 elsewhere. Sample and reporting-period comparability remain subject to verification; these are descriptive group comparisons, not a measured historical spending trend.

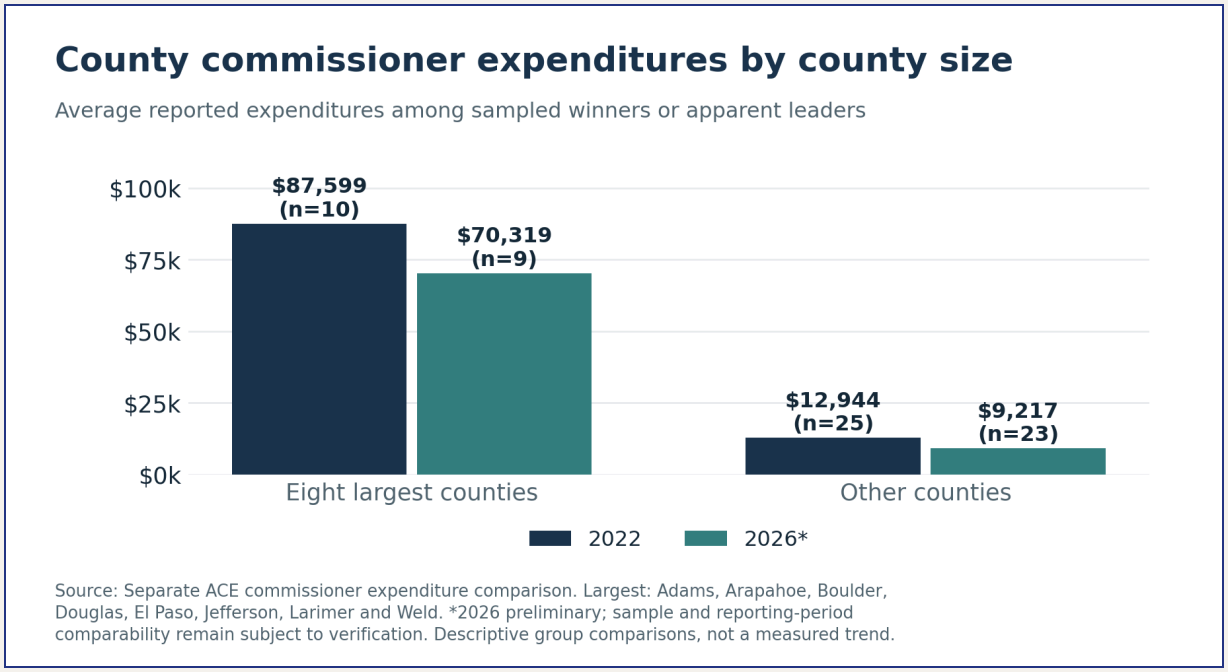


Figure 7. Preliminary mean commissioner campaign expenditures by county population group.

Some minor-party candidates demonstrated an ability to mobilize substantial financial resources. Forward Party U.S. Senate candidate Bob Chew's campaign reported approximately $3.37 million in disbursements through October 14, financed predominantly through personal contributions and loans. Other candidates demonstrated an ability to attract considerable electoral support with relatively limited financial resources. Libertarian state House candidate Ross Metler, for example, received approximately 28% of the vote in his district. His latest campaign-finance filing verified by ACE, covering activity through October 14, reported expenditures of less than $3,000.

Financial parity, however, does not necessarily produce equality of electoral opportunity. Established political parties benefit from organizational infrastructure developed over successive electoral cycles, including donor and volunteer networks, voter outreach systems, experienced campaign personnel, and institutional knowledge. Emerging political parties must often develop these capabilities while simultaneously supporting individual electoral campaigns.

Investments in sustainable campaign infrastructure are therefore particularly important for emerging political parties. Developing institutional fundraising capacity and shared campaign resources between elections can reduce the financial and operational burdens placed on individual candidates. Political organizations should also explore opportunities to pool resources and develop mechanisms through which financial contributions can support multiple candidacies and contribute to longer-term organizational development.

Efforts to strengthen electoral competition should recognize the importance of both financing individual campaigns and investing in the institutional capacity of political parties to compete across successive electoral cycles.[14]

3. Election Information, Administration, and Accountability

3.1 Electoral Information and Voter Education

The availability of electoral alternatives does not necessarily ensure that voters are adequately informed about them. Accurate, comprehensive, and accessible information concerning candidates, ballot measures, and electoral procedures is essential to meaningful electoral participation.

Colorado benefits from a diversity of official and independent election information resources. Nevertheless, ACE identified instances of inaccurate or outdated information concerning candidate identities, political affiliations, voter eligibility, and ballot correction deadlines. For example, as of October 28, Denver7's voter guide continued to identify Alex Astley as the Libertarian candidate for secretary of state despite his replacement on the ballot by Sean Vadney. Such discrepancies demonstrate the importance of regularly reviewing election information against authoritative sources, particularly during periods when voters are receiving and completing their ballots.

Concerns also arose regarding the accuracy of information distributed through political outreach. During the general election campaign, text messages distributed by America PAC misleadingly suggested that recipients had requested a ballot, generating confusion and inquiries to county election offices. Separately, America PAC's VoteSafe platform solicited personal information from voters. Its published privacy policy permits certain forms of data sharing and sale, raising questions regarding transparency in the collection and use of voter data.

Artificial intelligence is becoming an increasingly important component of the electoral information environment. Colorado Polling Institute surveys found that the proportion of Colorado voters reporting interaction with AI tools increased from 60% in November 2025 to 75% in March 2026. While AI can facilitate access to electoral information and reduce operational barriers for political competitors, its use also presents challenges concerning information accuracy and the transparency of AI-generated political content.

[14] Colorado Secretary of State, TRACER [bulk data and committee filings]; ACE, [coverage-aware spending screen], November 3, 2026, and [winner expenditure screen], November 6, 2026; Federal Election Commission, [Bob Chew authorized committee records], March 20–October 14, 2026; Colorado TRACER, [Ross Metler candidate filing], period ending October 14, 2026. Comparative estimates remain preliminary and subject to the qualifications above.

During the 2026 campaign, an AI-generated video depicting state Senator Cathy Kipp prompted a complaint under Colorado's synthetic-media disclosure legislation. The case illustrates emerging questions regarding the application of electoral legislation to AI-generated political communications while safeguarding legitimate political expression.

Colorado's existing voter education initiatives provide a foundation for addressing these challenges. Election administrators and civil society organizations should adapt their educational activities to help voters identify authoritative information sources, verify AI-generated content, and navigate increasingly fragmented information environments. Continued assessment of how AI influences electoral participation, political competition, and voter decision-making is warranted.[15]

3.2 Election Administration

Colorado's established election administration framework provides a strong foundation for electoral participation. Automatically mailed ballots, voter service and polling centers, ballot drop boxes, and established verification procedures provide voters with multiple opportunities to participate and safeguard the integrity of election results. ACE's observation of 30 locations across three counties during the June primary identified a generally orderly and professional electoral environment.

Election administrators demonstrated their capacity to respond to administrative challenges following the erroneous inclusion of Front Range Passenger Rail District Ballot Issue 7A on approximately 835,000 ballots issued to voters residing outside the district. Separately, approximately 320 eligible voters in Columbine Valley received ballots that omitted the measure. Election authorities responded promptly, communicated corrective measures to voters, and established procedures intended to preserve valid votes. The final effectiveness of those measures and the associated administrative costs had not been established at the time of this assessment. The incident highlights both the importance of effective interagency coordination in preparing ballots and the value of established mechanisms for addressing administrative errors.

An opportunity to improve administrative efficiency concerns the distribution of primary ballots to unaffiliated voters. Proposition 108, approved by voters in 2016, originally provided for a combined primary ballot containing candidates from participating political parties, while limiting voters to participation in one party's primary. Subsequent legislative changes established the current separate-ballot system. Restoring a combined primary ballot could reduce the number of ballots printed while providing unaffiliated voters with more consistent access to all primaries in which they are eligible to participate.

The increasing use of artificial intelligence also warrants attention within election administration. ACE's review of publicly available county policies identified limited information concerning the

[15] ACE, [candidate information accuracy and voter link and data claims audits], October 2026; Denver7, [voter guide]; CNN, [report on America PAC messages], October 10, 2026; VoteSafe, [privacy policy]; Colorado Polling Institute, [surveys], November 2025 and March 2026; Colorado TRACER, synthetic-media complaint ED2026-81.

governance of AI use specifically within election offices. Greater transparency regarding the adoption of these technologies, applicable safeguards, and human oversight would help maintain public confidence as their capabilities evolve.[16]

3.3 Election Watchers and Independent Observation

Election observation provides an important mechanism for strengthening electoral transparency, accountability, and public confidence. Colorado's existing framework provides opportunities for political competitors to appoint election watchers and for the Secretary of State to authorize independent election observers. During ACE's limited observation of the June primary, observers did not encounter election watchers at most of the voting centers visited. Limited publicly available data concerning watcher participation prevent a broader assessment of the extent to which political parties utilize these oversight mechanisms.

ACE's experience organizing its primary observation mission and exploring observation arrangements for the general election revealed the limited development of standardized procedures for authorizing independent election observers. While the Secretary of State facilitated the accreditation of seven ACE observers during the primary, the process relied considerably on individual coordination.

Considerable interest in electoral monitoring was demonstrated during the general election. Approximately 650 Election Protection field monitors were reportedly deployed across Colorado to assist voters and identify potential problems. Organizations seeking to observe election administration often pursue election watcher appointments through coordination with political parties or ballot-measure committees, as this pathway presents fewer procedural barriers and requires less individualized coordination than obtaining independent observer authorization.

Federal monitoring activities also occurred during the general election. Following disagreement with the Colorado Secretary of State regarding access arrangements, the United States Department of Justice conducted monitoring outside voting locations in Adams County, including engaging directly with voters. Congressional observers, operating under separate federal authority, were also deployed in Colorado.

Domestic election observation initiatives elsewhere in the United States provide useful comparative experience. In neighboring New Mexico, established organizational registration and accreditation procedures facilitated the deployment of 260 trained and certified independent observers across all 33 counties during the 2026 general election, covering multiple stages of election administration.

Colorado would benefit from clearer and more predictable accreditation procedures that facilitate professional, independent election observation. Established standards concerning observer

[16] ACE, *Colorado 2026 Primary Observation Report*, June 2026; Colorado Secretary of State and County Clerks Association, [joint update on Issue 7A], October 9, 2026; Colorado Sun, [county estimates for Issue 7A], October 19, 2026; Arapahoe County, [Issue 7A FAQs]; Proposition 108 (2016), original text; ACE, [county AI governance review], October 2026.

identification, training, conduct, coordination with election authorities, and accountability could strengthen electoral transparency while reducing opportunities for misuse of electoral monitoring activities and safeguarding voters against actual or perceived intimidation.

ACE also encourages greater participation by political parties in existing election watcher mechanisms, improved public reporting on watcher participation, and the resumption of invitations to international election observation missions, including those conducted by the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights.[17]

3.4 Complaint Transparency and Accountability

The transparency of electoral complaint mechanisms is important to maintaining public confidence and ensuring accountability throughout the electoral cycle. While Colorado provides established mechanisms for submitting electoral complaints, the public accessibility of information concerning their submission, consideration, and resolution varies.

ACE reviewed official websites across all 64 counties and conducted an initial screening of information available from 273 municipalities. This research did not identify a comprehensive, publicly accessible register of ordinary election administration complaints. While such complaints constitute public records, access to information through individual records requests does not provide the same degree of transparency as proactive publication.

Several public institutions demonstrate constructive approaches to complaint transparency. The Secretary of State maintains publicly accessible records of campaign-finance complaints through TRACER, while municipalities including Fort Collins and Lakewood publish information concerning locally administered campaign-finance complaints and their dispositions. These practices provide useful models for improving transparency across other electoral complaint mechanisms.

Electoral transparency has a particularly important time-sensitive function. Political competitors and other electoral stakeholders should be able to identify complaints, understand their substance, and follow their resolution while the relevant electoral process remains ongoing. Delayed access to information may limit opportunities to identify recurring problems and pursue effective remedies before an election takes place.

Authorities responsible for administering electoral complaints should establish standardized, publicly accessible registers identifying the nature of complaints, filing dates, responsible authorities, procedural status, and dispositions. Relevant complaint documents and decisions should be published in a timely manner, subject to appropriate privacy and security safeguards.

[17] ACE, *Colorado 2026 Primary Observation Report*; ACE, [watcher participation and independent observation research], November 16, 2026; Colorado Secretary of State, Rule 8; Colorado Newsline, [election live updates], November 3, 2026; Colorado Secretary of State, [DOJ statement], October 29, 2026; Colorado Public Radio, [Adams County federal monitoring], November 3, 2026; The Gazette, [congressional observers in El Paso County], November 3, 2026; New Mexico Secretary of State, [watcher and observer information]; Observe New Mexico Elections, [election monitoring release], November 4, 2026.

Routine access to publicly disclosable electoral complaints should not depend upon individual requests under the Colorado Open Records Act.[18]

Methodology and Limitations

This preliminary assessment examines Colorado's 2026 elections from the perspective of political competition, equality of electoral opportunity, electoral transparency, and accountability. ACE's research draws on electoral legislation, official candidate records and election returns, voter registration statistics, campaign-finance disclosures, publicly available information, correspondence with electoral stakeholders, and discussions with political party representatives.

ACE conducted original quantitative analyses of candidate participation and electoral competition across multiple election cycles, alongside targeted research concerning nomination procedures, media inclusion, campaign expenditures, and electoral administration. To assess candidate choice, ACE generally classifies electoral contests according to the number of candidates appearing on the printed ballot. Where relevant, the analysis separately considers write-in candidacies, candidate withdrawals, nomination-stage competition, and political organizations supporting candidates within established political parties. The presence of multiple candidates does not necessarily establish effective electoral competition.

The scope and availability of data vary across the analyses presented. Where comprehensive records were unavailable, ACE limited its findings to the records examined. General election outcomes and associated quantitative analyses are preliminary and subject to revision following certification and the availability of additional information.

ACE conducted limited independent election observation during the June primary but did not deploy an independent observation mission during the November general election. This report constitutes an analytical assessment of the electoral cycle rather than the findings of a comprehensive election observation mission. Its findings and recommendations should be interpreted accordingly.

[18] ACE, [county and municipal complaint-access website audit], October 31, 2026 (64 county sites directly reviewed and initial screening of 273 municipalities); Colorado Secretary of State, [election complaint form]; Colorado Secretary of State, [HAVA complaint procedures and published dispositions]; Fort Collins, [complaint records]; Lakewood, [election complaints].

Next Steps

The findings of this assessment will inform the Alliance for Competitive Elections' programmatic priorities in 2027, with particular emphasis on strengthening political competition through both political party development and electoral reform.

ACE will continue developing training programs to strengthen the institutional capacity of political parties and prepare prospective candidates to compete effectively for elected office. These activities will include supporting political parties in exercising their existing electoral oversight rights through election watcher training.

ACE will convene political parties and other political organizations to promote dialogue and cooperation on shared priorities. ACE will also seek to strengthen their capacity to engage in electoral reform discussions and participate effectively in legislative and other policymaking processes.

ACE will serve as a convener, trainer, and facilitator, supporting political organizations in developing their own priorities and approaches to electoral participation. The organization will continue assessing electoral competition in Colorado and use its findings to identify opportunities for practical improvements to the electoral framework and to inform future programming.