



March 12, 2025

Procedure for Elections

Dear Reader:

The following document was created from the CTAS website (ctas.tennessee.edu). This website is maintained by CTAS staff and seeks to represent the most current information regarding issues relative to Tennessee county government.

We hope this information will be useful to you; reference to it will assist you with many of the questions that will arise in your tenure with county government. However, the *Tennessee Code Annotated* and other relevant laws or regulations should always be consulted before any action is taken based upon the contents of this document.

Please feel free to contact us if you have questions or comments regarding this information or any other CTAS website material.

Sincerely,

The University of Tennessee
County Technical Assistance Service
226 Anne Dallas Dudley Boulevard, Suite 400
Nashville, Tennessee 37219
615.532.3555 phone
615.532.3699 fax
www.ctas.tennessee.edu

Table of Contents

Procedure for Elections 3
Dates for Regular Elections 3
Special Elections 3
Early Voting Procedures 3
Inactive Voters and Provisional Ballots 4
Referenda 4

Procedure for Elections

Reference Number: CTAS-866

Dates for Regular Elections

Reference Number: CTAS-867

Regular general elections are held in every even-numbered year on the first Thursday in August for county offices, and on the first Tuesday after the first Monday in November for state offices. Elections for the following offices are to be held at the regular August election when the election immediately precedes the commencement of a full term:

1. Sheriff;
2. Constable;
3. Assessor of property;
4. County clerk and clerks of the circuit and other courts;
5. Register;
6. County trustee;
7. Members of the county legislative body;
8. Judges of all courts; and
9. District attorney general.

T.C.A. § 2-3-202.

Elections for the following offices are to be held at the regular November election when the election immediately precedes the commencement of a full term:

1. Representative in the General Assembly;
2. Representative in the United States Congress;
3. Senator in the General Assembly;
4. Senator in the United States Congress;
5. Governor; and
6. Electors for the president and vice-president.

T.C.A. § 2-3-203.

Special Elections

Reference Number: CTAS-868

A special election must be held whenever a vacancy in any office is required to be filled by election at a time other than the time fixed for general elections. T.C.A. § 2-14-101. For all county and municipal offices, special elections are ordered by the county election commission, while the governor orders those for all other offices. T.C.A. § 2-14-103. Special elections must be held from 75 to 80 days after notice of the need for an election is received. However, if a regular general election or primary is scheduled within 30 days of the time required for a special election, then the special election may be held on that day. If the day of the election is moved, then all other dates are adjusted accordingly. T.C.A. § 2-14-102. The county election commission must publish notice of the special election within 10 days after it receives the election order. T.C.A. § 2-14-105. In most cases, candidates in a special election must qualify as in regular elections, although the deadline for filing qualifying petitions and party nominations is 12 noon on the sixth Thursday before the day of the special election. T.C.A. § 2-14-106.

Early Voting Procedures

Reference Number: CTAS-869

In 1994 the General Assembly passed legislation that adopted an early voting period and amended absentee voting procedures. T.C.A. § 2-6-101 et seq. This act replaced the procedure to vote absentee by personal appearance (T.C.A. § 2-6-109) with an early voting period, which starts 20 days before an election and runs through the fifth day before the election (seventh day if the election is held at the same time as a presidential preference primary), in which any registered voter may vote (although different time periods may apply to municipalities). Upon the request of a municipality holding an election at some time other than the regular August or November election, the county election commission shall establish a satellite voting location within the corporate limits of the municipality. The municipality must pay the costs of the location. T.C.A. § 2-6-103. For early voting the county election commission may choose to use voting machines, paper ballots, or a combination of both. The state coordinator of elections is to promulgate rules for voting machine use, as well as forms for early voter and absentee ballot applications, determining distinguishable colors for each type of envelope. Instead of the state forms, a county election commission may use its own computer-generated forms with the approval of the coordinator of elections. T.C.A. § 2-6-312. Voters who are unable to vote either during the early voting period or on election day may submit an application to vote absentee but must meet the statutory requirements. For specific absentee voting procedures, see T.C.A. § 2-6-101 et seq.

Inactive Voters and Provisional Ballots

Reference Number: CTAS-870

County election commissions are permitted to establish a centrally located polling place for voters whose registration is inactive or whose registration has been transferred to a new precinct. T.C.A. §§ 2-7-140 and 2-7-141. When a voter attempts to vote at a precinct where he or she is no longer eligible to vote, the election official at the voter's old polling place would notify the voter that he or she has the choice to vote at either the centrally located place or the new polling place. If the central location is other than the county election commission office, then the site must be equipped with computers linked to the county election commission office to allow voters' records to be changed.

In 2003, the General Assembly authorized provisional ballots in Tennessee. T.C.A. § 2-7-112. Under this law, a person shall be entitled to vote a provisional ballot if they claim to be properly registered in the county and eligible to vote at the precinct, but their eligibility cannot be determined by the computer signature list or by examination of the permanent registration records or an election official asserts that the individual is not eligible to vote.

Referenda

Reference Number: CTAS-871

For a referendum to be held, it must be authorized or mandated by statute. The county legislative body does not have a general power to submit questions; the body has power only to submit questions to the voters that have been granted by general law or private act. Certain questions are required by law to be submitted to the people in referendum for their approval or disapproval. In a referendum election held by a local government, any question submitted to a vote of the people shall be printed on the ballot followed by the words "yes" and "no." The law requires that the language of the question must be worded on the ballot so that a "yes" vote indicates support for the measure and a "no" indicates opposition to the measure. T.C.A. § 2-5-208.

Generally, if the law does not provide otherwise, referendum elections submitted to the people are to be held on dates set by the county election commission but not less than 75 days or more than 90 days after the county election commission is directed to hold the election. However, resolutions, ordinances or petitions requiring the holding of elections on questions submitted to the people that are to be held with the regular August election, the regular November election or the presidential preference primary shall be filed with the county election commission not less than 75 days prior to that election. T.C.A. § 2-3-204. If the date set for a referendum falls within 90 days of an upcoming regular election or primary, the election commissions of the counties involved may reset the date of the referendum to coincide with the regular general or primary election. All other dates dependent on the election date will be adjusted accordingly. If the referendum is to be held in more than one county, the election commissions for both counties must meet and set a date jointly. T.C.A. § 2-3-204. Uniform procedures for the filing and acceptance of petitions in governmental entities that allow for recall, referendum, or initiative elections pursuant to terms of the charter of that government can be found in T.C.A. § 2-5-151.

Source URL: <https://www.ctas.tennessee.edu/eli/procedure-elections>