Michigan Election Observation Project Preliminary Statement on Midterm Elections 2026

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Detroit, MI, Nov. 5, 2026 – On November 3, the Michigan Election Observation Project (MEOP) deployed 223 nonpartisan observers to 234 polling places in 15 counties. MEOP observers found a credible, well-administered Election Day: polls opened on time, voting was calm, and voter ID rules were followed. Observers also documented frequent tabulator jams, ministerial departures from closing and chain-of-custody procedures, and limits on observer access that prevented independent verification of some aspects of the process.

On Election Day, MEOP deployed its observers as poll watchers to polling places in the following 15 counties: Antrim, Berrien, Genesee, Ingham, Kalamazoo, Kent, Leelanau, Macomb, Marquette, Muskegon, Oakland, Ottawa, St. Joseph, Washtenaw, and Wayne. MEOP selected these counties to reflect Michigan's geographic and demographic diversity, including urban and rural communities and politically diverse jurisdictions.

This statement focuses on Election Day; MEOP observers remain in the field, including to observe the county canvasses where results will be certified. Once these post-election stages are complete, MEOP will publish a comprehensive final report with recommendations for strengthening the administration of Michigan's elections.

Opening & Transparency

Observers were able to watch pre-opening procedures in 188 polling places. All observers with a clear view of election equipment reported that tamper-evident seals on tabulators and Voter Assist Terminals (VAT) were intact prior to opening; in one location in Antrim County there was a lock rather than a seal on the ballot container and the election inspector showed the ballot container was empty prior to opening. However, due to limited visibility in some locations, observers were unable to determine whether inspectors verified that seal serial numbers matched with the numbers recorded in clerk preparatory certificates. In all but one location where observers could confirm, they reported that the inspectors appropriately verified the seal numbers.

Observers generally reported that zero tapes were printed before voting began. The majority of those observers were also able to verify that the zero tape showed zero votes recorded by

the tabulator before voting began. Observers reported that polls opened on time in nearly all locations observed; every location was open within 10 minutes of 7:00 AM.

In two locations, the precinct chair did not permit observers to enter the polling place before 7:00 AM. A lack of administrative guidance on poll watcher access contributed to confusion about whether observation during opening should be permitted. Access and visibility limitations do not mean that required procedures were not followed; only that they could not be independently verified. Clear, consistent guidance and practical viewing arrangements would strengthen observation while protecting voter privacy and orderly administration.

Voting & Equipment Performance

Observers watched voting take place at 234 polling places. The voting process was largely calm and peaceful in all locations observed. Observers reported that voter identification procedures were followed in accordance with the law, including inspection of voter ID and affidavit procedures. In some places, minor issues were noted with electronic pollbooks used to check in voters; however, observers reported that inspectors routinely switched to physical pollbooks as appropriate to ensure that there were no adverse effects and voting was not interrupted.

Most observers reported that voters were able to mark their ballots in secrecy. In some cases, observers noted that polling places were set up in a way that did not fully ensure vote secrecy, often due to space restrictions. In a few polling locations, observers noted election inspectors taking steps to rearrange furniture and adjust privacy dividers to ensure voters were able to mark their ballot outside the view of other voters. Observers in nearly all locations reported that VATs were readily available for use by voters upon request. However, in one location in Wayne County, an access code problem rendered the terminal unavailable for more than a half-hour and one voter who asked to use it was forced to mark a regular ballot. In another case in Marquette County, a VAT headphone issue forced a voter who wanted to use the VAT to rely on bipartisan election inspector assistance.

Tabulator difficulties, primarily due to jamming, were a recurring operational issue at nearly half of polling places observed. Observers reported the majority of problems were resolved efficiently, resulting in a minor effect on the process. In most cases, backup protocols were followed, with voters placing their ballots in auxiliary bins for later tabulation. In other cases, voters had to wait briefly to cast their votes while tabulator issues were resolved. However, in two locations – one in Wayne County and one in Marquette County - observers reported a small number of voters left the polling places without casting ballots because backup protocols were not being implemented by election inspectors.

Closing and Custody of Materials

Observers watched precinct closing and canvass procedures in 186 polling places. Where observers were present, reports confirmed that all voters in line before close of polls were

permitted to cast their ballots. In the majority of locations observed, observers reported that procedures for ballot reconciliation, results documentation, and securing of election material were largely adhered to. A small number of reports described discrepancies or departures from prescribed canvass procedures. In Wayne County, an observer reported that inspectors did not appear to resolve or document a case in which one more ballot was tabulated than the number of voters who had been issued a ballot. In Leelanau County, an observer reported that tabulation had stopped and would not be completed that night.

Bipartisan transport of sealed election materials to the local receiving board was confirmed in most locations. However, some observers reported incidences where materials were not transported by two inspectors from different parties at the end of the day. While these cases merit further clarification as they suggest a deviation from ministerial protocol, the overall chain of custody can and should still be verified during county canvass.

Incidents

Throughout the day, observers reported a few instances of emergency interruptions. In one location in Wayne County, a fire alarm at a polling place caused an approximately 20-minute evacuation, during which an observer assessed that some voters left before completing voting. In Marquette County, power outages were reported at two locations, resulting in brief interruptions, but there was no adverse effect on voting because backup power generators were activated. And in Leelanau County, a poll worker's fall prompted an emergency medical response and a brief interruption, with no voter delays reported.

Preliminary Recommendations

In the spirit of cooperation, MEOP offers the following recommendations to strengthen electoral processes:

- Reinforce election inspector training to move to back-up procedures in cases where tabulator issues could adversely impact the ability of voters to exercise their right to vote;
- Ensure consistency and adherence to procedures concerning secure transport of materials to local receiving boards following precinct canvass;
- Clarify administrative guidance on poll watcher access and incorporate such guidance into election inspector trainings; and
- Local clerks should take into account spatial limitations and venue layout requirements when selecting voting locations to enhance visibility of all aspects of the process.

About the Michigan Election Observation Project

MEOP is a locally led, nonpartisan project that observes key election activities to build public trust when elections are well conducted, detect and deter potential fraud and manipulation, and offer evidence-based recommendations for reform. Sponsored by The Carter Center and implemented in partnership with Veterans for All Voters, it draws on the Carter Center's decades of nonpartisan election observation experience.

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