

Absent Voter Ballot Application and Ballot Processing: Signature Verification and Voter Notification

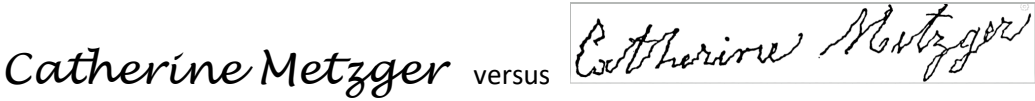
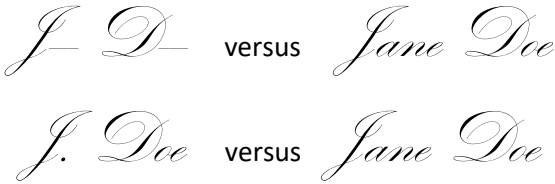
The Michigan Election Law requires absent voter (AV) ballot applications to be signed for an AV ballot to be issued. It also requires election workers to verify that the signature on an AV ballot envelope matches the voter’s signature in the Qualified Voter File (QVF) or the voter’s signature on the AV ballot application for the ballot to be tabulated.



The Bureau of Elections is providing this document in response to questions about these procedures. It includes tools and guidance for signature evaluation based on standards used to validate signatures on petitions filed with the Bureau. This document also provides guidance on the timing of evaluating signatures and notifying the voter of missing or mismatched signatures. The Bureau will be providing additional guidance on these issues following the March 10, 2020, presidential primary.

Signature Review

Signature review begins with the presumption that the voter’s AV application or envelope signature is his or her genuine signature.

1. If there are any redeeming qualities in the AV application or return envelope signature as compared to the signature on file, treat the signature as valid. Redeeming qualities may include but are not limited to similar distinctive flourishes, more matching features than nonmatching features, and Examples 1-5 in the chart below.
2. A voter’s signature should be considered questionable only if it differs in multiple, significant and obvious respects from the signature on file. Slight dissimilarities should be resolved in favor of the voter whenever possible.

#	Defects in AV application or AV envelope signature	Result
1.	Signature appears as if voter’s hand is trembling or shaking, possibly due to a health condition or advancing age: 	Valid signature
2.	Only part of the signature matches the signature on file such as only the first letters of the first and last name match, but rest of signature does not match: 	Valid signature

#	Defects in AV application or AV envelope signature	Result
3.	Signature is partially printed but at the same time, partially matches the signature on file: <i>Alice Robinson</i> versus <i>Alice Robinson</i>	Valid signature
4.	Signature is a recognized diminutive of the voter's full legal name: <i>Bill Smith</i> versus <i>William Smith</i>	Valid signature
5.	Signature style has changed slightly over time: <i>Lucinda Jones</i> versus <i>Lucinda Jones</i>	Valid signature
6.	Signature is entirely printed but signature on file is entirely written in cursive: JAMES DAVIS versus <i>James Davis</i>	Questionable signature
7.	Signature differs in multiple, significant and obvious respects:  versus 	Questionable signature

Procedures for Signature Verification

Voters should be encouraged to sign AV ballot applications and AV ballot return envelopes in a way that reasonably resembles the signature given for driver's license/state ID or voter registration purposes, but it is not necessary for the voter's signature to perfectly match the signature on file. Clerks should presume that a voter's AV application or envelope signature is his or her genuine signature, as there are several acceptable reasons that may cause an apparent mismatch.

Legitimate Explanations for Nonmatching Signatures. The following list includes some possible explanations for signatures that do not match exactly, but keep in mind that other legitimate reasons may exist.

- The ballot application or return envelope signature may be written on an uneven surface, such as on top of other papers, a tablecloth, or other partially covered surface, which may cause the signature to appear creased or cause breaks or pauses in a cursive signature.

- The ballot application or return envelope signature or electronic signature on file could have been written in haste.
- The voter's medical condition or advancing age may cause the signature to be different.
- The electronic signature on file may be smaller or larger than the signature given on an AV ballot application or AV return envelope.
- The signature may have been written using a pen with a finer tip or one with fading ink as compared to the signature on file.
- Any other plausible reason given by the voter that satisfies the clerk when following up on a questionable signature.

Timing of Signature Review and Notification

Clerks should review absent voter ballot applications and absent voter ballot envelopes immediately upon receipt to determine whether a signature has been provided and whether the signature matches. If an AV ballot or application is missing a signature, or if you determine that an AV ballot or application signature does not match, inform the voter immediately using any and all contact information available. If you have a phone number or e-mail address for the voter, call and e-mail the voter in addition to mailing the voter a notice informing the voter of the signature deficiency and the need to cure.

Up to Wednesday before the election, notify the voter by end of the next business day following receipt. **Starting Thursday before the election, attempt to reach the voter as soon as possible, especially by phone and email**, in addition to other methods of communication. It's important to try to reach the voter immediately starting Thursday because critical deadlines begin to pass on Friday.

For **AV applications**, if the application is received near a deadline, inform the voter of the need to cure the signature deficiency and the voter's options for doing so:

- Cure by mail/e-mail/fax/in person **by 5 p.m. Friday** for a timely mail application.
- Cure in person **by 4 p.m. Monday** for a timely in person application.
- Vote at the precinct on Election Day if **after 4 p.m Monday**.

For **AV ballots**, if an application is received near the election:

- **Up to Saturday at 2 pm before election day**, if a ballot is returned with a missing or mismatched signature, the voter should be informed that he or she can visit the clerk's office to provide the omitted signature or corrected signature, or have a new AV ballot issued immediately.
- **After 2 pm Saturday and through election day**, if a ballot is received without a signature or if the signature does not match, the voter should be informed that he or she has until 8pm on election day office to sign the return envelope or provide a corrected signature.