City of Salisbury Electoral Reform

An Analysis of Alternative Election Models

Prepared for:
Mike Dunn, President
Greater Salisbury Committee

Prepared by:
Jialin Fu, Peisen Liu, Zhonghan Pan, Ujagar Pratap Singh, Dehai Wang

Project Mentor:
Len Foxwell

Johns Hopkins University
Whiting School of Engineering

January 2026

Table of Contents

Executive Summary

Local Disengagement Concentrated in Municipal Elections

Salisbury's municipal elections have experienced persistently low voter participation, despite comparatively strong engagement in statewide and national elections in Maryland. This divergence suggests that reduced turnout reflects characteristics specific to local elections rather than general voter apathy. Factors such as electoral salience, competition, and institutional design appear central to understanding this pattern.

Electoral Design Choices Shape Participation and Outcomes

To provide comparative context, this report examines electoral systems across seven mid-Atlantic jurisdictions. Differences in primary election formats, voting methods, and winner determination mechanisms illustrate how institutional design can influence majority alignment, voter incentives, and candidate behavior. These cases demonstrate that municipalities operating under similar legal frameworks can adopt materially different electoral approaches.

Assessing Alternative Electoral Models

Alternative electoral models are evaluated using a consistent framework focused on system mechanics, majority support alignment, administrative complexity, and legal feasibility under Maryland law. More complex models, including Ranked-Choice Voting and runoff elections, may better reflect voter preferences but involve higher administrative demands and legal considerations. Modifications to primary election formats generally present lower implementation risk with more limited potential effects.

Feasibility as a Central Consideration

Legal authority, administrative capacity, procedural requirements, and cost considerations function as practical guardrails for electoral reform. Feasibility assessments in this report are relative and context-dependent, reflecting current institutional conditions rather than definitive legal judgments.

Supporting Informed Deliberation

This analysis does not advance prescriptive recommendations. Instead, it identifies patterns, constraints, and trade-offs relevant to Salisbury's electoral context, with the aim of supporting informed discussion among policymakers, stakeholders, and the public regarding potential future directions.

1. Salisbury Demographics and Civic Profile

This section summarizes Salisbury's demographic, socioeconomic, and civic characteristics with data from the U.S. Census Bureau's American Community Survey and state statistics. It provides context for understanding population composition, income, housing tenure, and civic participation relative to state and national benchmarks.

1.1 Demographics

Salisbury's population is about 33,616 as of the July 1, 2024 estimate. This reflects modest population growth (~+1.9% since the 2020 Census). [1][9][16]

The median age in Salisbury is 29.9 years, which is significantly younger than the Maryland median of about 39.8 years and the U.S. median of approximately 39.2 years. This youth-skewed profile is likely influenced by the large college-age population, including students at Salisbury University. [1][9]

About 24.2% of residents are under 18, and 12.7% are 65 or older. Salisbury's gender distribution is slightly female-skewed (about 52.8% female) and racial composition is diverse: roughly 44.8% White alone, 41.1% Black or African American alone, with smaller shares for Asian and multiracial residents. [1][9]

Salisbury is the largest city on Maryland's Eastern Shore by population but covers a relatively small land area (~13.8 square miles), producing a moderate urban density of roughly 2,395 people per square mile — higher than surrounding rural areas but typical for a small regional hub. [6]

1.2 Socioeconomic Indicators

The median household income in Salisbury is about $56,402 (ACS 2019–2023). This is well below the Maryland state median of ~$98,678, and also below the national median (U.S. median household income generally near $80,000+ in recent data). Salisbury's median is roughly about 57% of the Maryland median and about 70–72% of the national median, indicating comparatively modest income levels in the city. [1][9]

Salisbury's poverty rate is about 24.8%, which is more than double the statewide rate (~9.5%). [1][9]

Only about 25.7% of housing units in Salisbury are owner-occupied, implying a high renter share (~74.3%). In contrast, the national homeownership rate is around 65%, meaning Salisbury's renter share is more than twice as large as the national renter share — consistent with a large student and transient population but not, by itself, a measure of homelessness or instability.

Adding direct measures of housing security (e.g., point-in-time homelessness counts) would be necessary to make claims about housing instability. [1][9]

Employment figures show roughly 15,200 employed residents, with key sectors including health care, manufacturing, and education, reflecting the city's role as a regional services hub. Internet access is high, with the majority of households reporting broadband and computing access. [1]

1.3 City Dynamics

Salisbury operates under a strong mayor–council form of government with five council districts and an at-large mayor. Municipal elections are non-partisan and decided by plurality (no runoffs), which often yields winners with small overall shares of registered voters. [2][6]

Local election turnout is persistently low — general municipal contests frequently see turnout in the low to mid teens by registered voters, while recent presidential election turnout has exceeded ~70%, illustrating a stark participation gap between local and federal elections. This dynamic can shape governance outcomes and civic engagement patterns. [13][14]

1.4 Salisbury Socio-Demographic Context

- Median Household Income: ~$56,402 in Salisbury vs. ~$98,678 in Maryland, and below the U.S. median. Salisbury's median is ~57% of Maryland's.
- Median Age: 29.9 years vs. Maryland's ~39.8 years — Salisbury is about 10 years younger, reflecting a large student population.
- Poverty: ~24.8% vs. ~9.5% state, indicating a much higher share of residents below the poverty line.
- Housing Tenure: Owner occupancy 25.7% vs. national ~65% owner occupancy — Salisbury has a much higher renter share (~74%).
- Population Density: About 2,395 people per square mile, higher than the surrounding rural Eastern Shore counties.

1.5. Political Structure and History

Salisbury's city government is a strong mayor–council system with mayor and all five council seats up for election every four years (last: 2023; next: 2027). Elections are non-partisan, meaning candidates appear on the ballot without party labels. The city uses a plurality ("first-past-the-post") voting system: the candidate with the most votes wins, regardless of whether that number exceeds 50% of the votes cast. In this context, "runoffs" (a second round of voting between top candidates when no one receives a majority of votes) do not occur. [2][6]

Plurality or first-past-the-post (FPTP) simply awards victory to the candidate with the highest vote total in a single round, even if that candidate's share is less than an absolute majority — which is common in multi-candidate races.

Municipal turnout in Salisbury has historically been very low, especially compared to turnout in federal elections, where statewide participation is typically above ~70% of registered voters in presidential general elections.

Year	Election Type	Registered Voters	Ballots Cast	Turnout (% of Registered)	City Pop (Est.)	Participation (% of Pop)	Method
2009 Primary	Primary (Council Seats)	10,785 (Dist 2) / 1,772 (Dist1)	1,410 / 183	13.1% / 10.3%	~30,000	~4.7%	Non-partisan, plurality, no runoff
2009 General	Council General	10,893 / 1,783	2,400 / 275	22.0% / 15.4%	~30,000	~8.7%	Non-partisan, plurality, no runoff
2011 Primary	District 2 Primary	11,522	1,226	10.64%	~31,000	~4.0%	Non-partisan, plurality, no runoff
2011 General	District 2 General	11,663	1,622	13.91%	~31,000	~5.2%	Non-partisan, plurality, no runoff
2013 Primary	District 1 & 2 Primary	14,199	1,567	11.04%	~31,500	~5.0%	Non-partisan, plurality, no runoff
2013 General	District 1 & 2 General	14,174	2,775	19.58%	~31,500	~8.8%	Non-partisan, plurality, no runoff
2015 General	All Districts General	13,455	1,621	12.05%	~32,000	~5.1%	Non-partisan, plurality, no runoff
2019 General	All Districts General	16,433	2,899	17.64%	~33,000	~8.8%	Non-partisan, plurality, no runoff
2023 General	All Districts General	17,521	3,193	18.22%	~33,600	~9.5%	Non-partisan, plurality, no runoff

Table 1: Salisbury Municipal Election Participation(2009-2023)

City general population estimates are approximate based on census/ACS figures. For example, the city reported ~30,343 in 2010, ~33,050 by 2020, and ~33,616 by 2024.

1.5.1 Key Structural Notes on Salisbury Elections

- Elections are officially non-partisan — no party labels appear on ballots.
- Salisbury uses the plurality system (first-past-the-post): the candidate with the most votes wins even without a majority.
- No runoffs are held if no candidate exceeds 50% — winners assume office based on the plurality result.

- Salisbury eliminated municipal primaries in 2015; thus, all candidates now proceed directly to the general election, which simplified the process and saved costs. [12]

1.5.2 Observations & Insights from the Table

1.5.2.1 Persistent Low Participation

Even the highest recent turnout in Salisbury municipal elections — 22.0% of registered voters in the 2009 District Two general election — is very low compared to typical presidential general election rates of ~70–75% in Maryland. [14]

When interpreted as a share of the total city estimated population, most local elections involve well under 10% of residents, meaning fewer than one in ten Salisbury residents cast ballots in most municipal contests.

1.5.2.2 Primaries See Even Lower Engagement

Before the city eliminated primaries in 2015, municipal primary elections consistently saw very low engagement — for example, the 2013 primary had ~11.04% turnout of registered voters, and the 2011 primary had ~10.64%.

Eliminating primaries reduced costs and streamlined the election calendar, but it also removed a formal opportunity for early voter engagement and candidate narrowing. Without primaries or runoffs, municipal winners often take office after competing in only one low-turnout election, increasing the likelihood of **plurality wins in multi-candidate races.**

1.5.2.3 Registered Voter Growth vs. Turnout Share

The number of registered voters in Salisbury increased significantly from approximately 10,785 in 2009 to 17,521 in 2023. However, turnout percentages have not risen accordingly: 2009 saw a general contest reach 22.0% turnout, while 2023 had 18.22% turnout — despite the larger registration base. This pattern suggests that structural disengagement persists even as the registered electorate grows. [13][14]

1.5.2.4 No Electoral Reforms Like Ranked Choice or Runoffs

Municipal elections frequently yield winners with less than a majority (>50%) of votes cast — a predictable outcome in a plurality system with multiple candidates. Looking at available general elections back to 2009, winners often secure their seats with <50% of the total votes. For example, in 2023, the mayoral winner received only 36.2% of the vote in a three-candidate general election. [10][13]

Out of the most recent seven general municipal elections since 2009, most winners have been decided with pluralities below 50%, reflecting how common this plurality pattern is in Salisbury's electoral context.

Below is a breakdown of the 2023 mayoral election (Salisbury's most recent mayoral race) showing the vote counts and shares for each candidate:

Candidate	Votes	% of Total
Randy Taylor	1,150	36.2%
Megan Outten	1,100	34.6%
Jermichael Mitchell	914	28.8%

Table2: Results of the 2023 Salisbury Mayoral Election

This result shows the plurality nature of the outcome: no candidate received a majority (>50%) yet the highest vote-getter won under the current system.

1.6 Insights and Analysis

Salisbury's demographic and socioeconomic context interacts with its electoral structure to produce notable civic patterns.

1.6.1 Demographic and Economic Turnout Headwinds

Salisbury's youthful population (median age ~29.9) and high renter share contribute to a local profile that, in many places, is associated with *lower local electoral participation* relative to older, more residentially stable populations. The largest portion of municipal elections in Salisbury sees turnout below 20%, a trend common in small cities where local issues may not mobilize broad slices of the electorate.

Because many residents are students, renters, or have frequent residential moves, they may feel less attached to local governance issues that drive turnout in other contexts. Municipal elections held in off-cycle years (not aligned with statewide or federal contests) also tend to depress turnout, a phenomenon well documented in election research.

1.6.2 The Civic Engagement Gap

While Salisbury enjoys robust community engagement in *non-political arenas* such as arts festivals, fairs, and community organizations (as seen in city-hosted events and local cultural participation), this communal energy does *not* consistently translate into high municipal electoral turnout. Many residents actively participate in social and cultural life but do not cast ballots in

local elections; this reflects a broader civic engagement gap that is well documented across urban municipalities with low local election participation — even when community vibrancy is high.

1.6.3 Fragile Mandates

The combination of *low turnout*, *plurality wins*, and *no runoff requirement* means municipal officeholders may represent only a small fraction of the city's eligible electorate. For example, the 2023 mayor was elected with 36.2% of ballots cast, which represents an even smaller fraction of Salisbury's total population or registered voters. This pattern underscores the concept of "fragile mandates," where elected officials lead with limited expressed voter support.

1.7 Election Timing Analysis – Maryland and National Context

Maryland has about 157 incorporated municipalities (cities, towns, or villages), each of which sets its own municipal election dates by local charter or law; there is no statewide mandate that municipal contests must coincide with federal or statewide general elections, and many cities are explicitly exempt from the state's November ballot calendar. This decentralized approach creates a patchwork of calendared elections across jurisdictions nationwide and in Maryland rather than a single uniform rule. [6][3]

In practice, municipal election scheduling in Maryland spans a broad range of dates throughout the year: some towns hold elections in spring or summer months, while many others continue to use odd-numbered year calendars separate from the gubernatorial or presidential cycles. A review of Maryland's municipal election calendar shows elections in February, March, May, July, September, and December rather than November alone — illustrating that a large share of local elections are not paired with state or federal ballots.

1.7.1 National Election Timing Patterns

Across the United States, election timing for municipal contests varies widely:

Off-cycle elections remain common: in a dataset covering 420 large U.S. cities, about 57% hold off-cycle elections (local contests on dates separate from statewide or federal ballots), while 43% hold on-cycle elections in conjunction with higher-profile dates.

State law influences timing: 24 states currently mandate off-cycle municipal elections (often by statute or constitutional provision), while 19 states allow city officials to choose whether to hold on-cycle elections. In many of these "city-choice" states, the majority of municipalities still choose off-cycle contests. [3][8]

Where cities choose their own schedules — even without a mandate — the largest share continues to hold elections on separate calendars, often due to tradition embedded in municipal charters or ordinances.

This national landscape reflects that no single U.S. election date governs all cities' local contests, leaving municipalities with discretion that often results in off-cycle local elections.

1.7.2 Voter Turnout and Participation

Timing Has a Substantial Impact on Turnout

A robust body of research finds that the timing of local elections is one of the strongest predictors of voter turnout:

- A study of California municipalities found that turnout in cities where local elections coincided with presidential contests was nearly 36 percentage points higher than in cities holding "local-only" elections, with gubernatorial-cycle contests also boosting turnout significantly relative to off-cycle years. [15]
- A national report found that in 54 U.S. cities that moved elections on-cycle, turnout nearly tripled on average — rising from roughly 25.5% in off-cycle elections to around 75.8% when elections were held on dates with statewide or federal contests.
- In San Francisco, *average turnout from six off-cycle contests* ranged from about 23% to 46% of registered voters; after moving to an on-cycle presidential ballot, turnout jumped to 78.5%, more than double the historic off-cycle average.
- Across multiple states (e.g., Idaho, Montana, and Wyoming), consolidated on-cycle municipal contests showed turnout that was nearly double the turnout in neighboring off-cycle jurisdictions, demonstrating that timing differences persist even between nearby locations with similar demographic baselines.

1.7.3 Participation Equity, Representation, and Reform

Research on municipal elections consistently shows that off-cycle, standalone local contests tend to have much lower participation relative to on-cycle contests — and the *demographic composition of the electorate changes* with election timing:

- Municipal off-cycle elections are routinely dominated by a smaller, skewed cross-section of voters (tending to be older, wealthier, and more politically active), while on-cycle contests draw broader representation across age, income, and racial groups. Analysts find that synchronizing local elections with general ballots improves descriptive representation of working-age, lower-income, and renter households. [5][11][15]
- Cities that move to on-cycle elections often see substantial increases in total ballots cast — and not merely a reshuffling of the same voters — suggesting that *new voters engage* when local races are paired with higher-profile contests.

Addressing Bias in Example Cities

It is important to acknowledge that major cities like Los Angeles, Phoenix, San Francisco, and Baltimore are not perfectly representative of smaller or mid-sized municipalities; they have larger populations, more resources, and often more robust civic infrastructures. Nonetheless, multiple nationwide studies — not limited to large cities — find that the *timing effect* on turnout holds across the board: municipalities that hold elections on federal general election dates consistently experience higher turnout than those that do not, after controlling for size and local contest competitiveness.

1.7.4 Implications for Maryland

For Maryland — where many municipalities currently hold off-cycle, odd-year elections — the evidence suggests that *aligning local contests with statewide or federal election dates could markedly increase participation*. Consolidation to even-year November ballots (gubernatorial or presidential) has been shown in multiple contexts to *double or triple turnout* relative to off-cycle contests.

Increasing turnout could lead to broader representation of the electorate in local governance, reducing the outsized influence of small, highly mobilized groups and bringing city leadership outcomes more in line with the preferences of the overall population. [10][13]

2. Alternative Electoral Models

This section examines several alternative electoral models that are commonly used in U.S. local and municipal elections. Each model is evaluated using a standardized framework to ensure consistent and transparent comparison across systems. The analysis focuses on how each system operates in practice, its legal feasibility within Maryland, and its implications for election administration, candidate incentives, voter participation, and campaign dynamics. To support clarity and accessibility, the section combines structured analysis with plain-language explanations, supplemented by reference appendices that provide model profiles and quick-reference definitions for non-technical audiences.

2.1 Definitions of Electoral Models

Electoral models encompass several interconnected components of the election process. At the initial stage, primary election formats determine who is eligible to participate and which candidates advance to the general election. Beyond the primary, voting methods and winner determination mechanisms play a central role in translating voter preferences into electoral outcomes.

2.1.1 Primary Election Format

2.1.1.1 Closed Two-Party Primary (Partisan Primary)

A closed primary system allows only voters who are formally registered with a political party to participate in that party's primary election. Party-affiliated voters may vote only in their own party's primary, while unaffiliated voters are excluded from the primary process. [17]

- Voters must declare party affiliation in advance through voter registration.
- On Primary Election Day, each voter receives a ballot only for the party with which they are registered.
- Voters registered with one party are not permitted to vote in another party's primary.
- Unaffiliated or independent voters cannot participate in any party's primary unless they change their registration status prior to the election.

General elections are typically contested between the nominees selected by each political party through their respective primaries.

2.1.1.2 Semi-Open Primary (Semi-Partisan Primary)

In a semi-open primary system, voters registered with a political party vote in their own party's primary, while unaffiliated voters may choose which party's primary to participate in for that election. [17]

- Party-affiliated voters are restricted to voting in their registered party's primary.
- Unaffiliated voters may select one party's primary to participate in on Primary Election Day.
- Each voter may cast a ballot in only one party's primary during a given election cycle.
- In some jurisdictions, a voter's choice of party primary may be recorded, although party registration does not change.

This system balances party control over candidate selection with limited participation by unaffiliated voters.

2.1.1.3 Open Primary

An open primary system allows all voters, regardless of party registration, to vote in any party's primary election. [17]

- Voters are not required to declare party affiliation in advance.
- On Primary Election Day, voters may choose which party's primary ballot to receive.
- Party-affiliated and unaffiliated voters alike may participate in a primary other than their registered party's.
- Each voter may participate in only one party's primary per election.

This structure permits broad cross-party participation in the candidate selection

process while maintaining separate party primaries.

2.1.2 Voting Methods - Ranked-Choice Voting (RCV)

2.1.2.1 Overview

Ranked-choice voting (RCV) is an emerging electoral method that allows voters to rank candidates in order of preference rather than selecting a single candidate.[18] RCV has been gaining traction across the United States in both statewide and municipal elections as a way to ensure majority-supported winners without requiring a separate runoff election.[19]

Adoption highlights:

- **Statewide use:** Maine has implemented RCV for federal and state elections.[18]
- **Municipal use:** Cities such as San Francisco, Minneapolis, and Santa Fe have used RCV in local elections.[20]
- **Trend:** The use of RCV is gradually increasing, particularly in cities looking to streamline elections and enhance voter choice.[18]

- **Emerging adoption:** While not yet widespread, RCV is considered a growing tool in the U.S. electoral landscape.[20]

2.1.2.2 Mechanics of RCV

2.1.2.2.1 Step-by-step process

2.1.2.2.1.1 Ballot casting:

- On Election Day, voters receive a ballot listing all qualified candidates.
- Instead of marking only one candidate, voters rank candidates by preference (e.g., first choice, second choice, third choice).
- Voters may rank as many or as few candidates as they choose, depending on ballot design and local rules.
- Once ballots are cast, the election is complete, and voters do not return to the polls.

2.1.2.2.1.2 Vote tabulation:

Vote counting proceeds in rounds:[18]

1. **First round (initial count):**

- All first-choice votes are counted.
- If a candidate receives a majority (more than 50%) of first-choice votes, that candidate is declared the winner.

2. **Elimination and redistribution:**

- If no candidate achieves a majority, the candidate with the fewest first-choice votes is eliminated.
- Ballots cast for the eliminated candidate are not discarded; instead, they are redistributed to the remaining candidates based on each voter's next highest-ranked preference.

3. **Subsequent rounds:**

- After redistribution, votes are recounted.
- This process of elimination and redistribution continues until one candidate attains a majority of the active votes.

Ballot tabulation may be conducted centrally using certified voting software, with results produced after all rounds are completed.

2.1.2.2.1.3 Winner determination

- The candidate who secures a majority after all rounds is declared the winner.[18]

- RCV effectively simulates multiple runoff rounds within a single election event.[20]

2.1.2.2.2 Administrative and Broader Considerations

- **Single election event:** Unlike traditional runoff elections, RCV does not require voters to return to the polls on a later date.[19]
- **Voting equipment:** Ballots and voting machines are collected and processed after Election Day in the same manner as a standard election; there is no need to store machines for a future runoff.[19]
- **Certification timeline:** While tabulation may take longer due to multiple counting rounds, the election is certified once all rounds are completed and verified.
- **Voter learning curve:** Ranking candidates may require additional voter education.
- **Perception and trust:** Longer tabulation timelines may affect public perception if not clearly communicated.

2.1.3 Winner Determination Mechanisms - Runoff Elections

2.1.3.1 Overview

A runoff election is a traditional method used to ensure that a winning candidate receives majority support. If no candidate receives a majority of votes in the initial election, the top two vote-getters advance to a second election, in which the candidate who obtains a majority wins.

Runoff elections are widely used in municipal and state elections across the United States, including historical examples like Cambridge, Massachusetts.[21]

2.1.3.2 Mechanics of Runoff Elections

2.1.3.2.1 Step-by-step process

1. **First election:** All qualified candidates appear on the ballot. Voters cast a single vote for their preferred candidate.
2. **Determining the need for a runoff:** If no candidate achieves a majority (>50%), the two candidates with the highest vote totals advance to the runoff election.[21]
3. **Interval between elections:** The time between the first election and the runoff can range from weeks to months (e.g., in Cambridge, Maryland, the initial mayoral election was held in October 2024 and, after no candidate received a majority, a runoff election was held on December 3, 2024).[22]
4. **Ballot preparation:** A new ballot is prepared listing only the two runoff candidates.
5. **Voting machines and security:**

- Machines used in the first election may be stored securely between elections, or returned to the election office and redeployed for the runoff.
- All equipment is recertified according to local procedures before use in the runoff.

6. **Second election:** Voters return to the polls to select between the two remaining candidates.
7. **Winner determination:** The candidate receiving the majority of votes in the runoff is declared the winner.

2.1.3.2.2 Administrative and Broader Considerations

- Runoff elections require additional logistical planning and resources, including voter notification, ballot preparation, and staffing polling places.
- Unlike RCV, runoff elections involve a separate voting event, potentially affecting turnout and administrative costs.

2.1.3.3 Illustrative example

In Cambridge's municipal election, no candidate received a majority in the first election, so the top two advanced to a runoff.

- Ballots and machines were securely stored, recertified, and redeployed for the runoff.
- Voters returned to the polls to select between the two finalists, and the candidate with a majority was declared the winner.

2.2 Standard Evaluation Framework

All five electoral models are evaluated using the same criteria to ensure consistency.

2.2.1 System Mechanics

- How the system functions in practice
- How votes are cast, counted, and translated into a winner

2.2.2 Legal Feasibility (Maryland)

- Whether the model is permitted under current Maryland law
- Whether implementation would require statutory amendments or charter changes

2.2.3 Majority Support Alignment

- Likelihood that the winning candidate reflects majority voter preference
- Risk of winners being elected with only a plurality

2.2.4 Administrative Complexity & Cost

- Changes required to election administration
- Ballot design, vote counting, staffing, and technology implications

2.2.5 Impact on Candidate Behavior

- Incentives to appeal broadly vs. narrowly
- Effects on coalition-building and campaign strategy

2.2.6 Impact on Voter Engagement

- Ease of understanding for voters
- Potential effects on turnout and participation

2.2.7 Extremism vs. Moderation

- Whether the system rewards polarized or consensus-oriented candidates

2.2.8 Campaign Tone

- Incentives for negative campaigning vs. positive or issue-based campaigns

2.3 Side-by-Side Comparison Matrix

Key to Qualitative Ratings:

The qualitative ratings in the table (Low, Medium, High) indicate the relative degree of change or impact associated with each electoral model, compared to current Maryland election practices.

- **Low:** Minimal change from existing practices; limited administrative, legal, or behavioral impact
- **Medium:** Moderate change requiring some adjustments to administration, procedures, or voter experience
- **High:** Substantial change involving significant procedural, administrative, or strategic differences

Evaluation Criteria	Closed Primary	Semi-Open Primary	Open Primary	Ranked-Choice Voting	Runoff Elections
System Mechanics	Low	Low	Medium	High	Medium
Legal Feasibility (MD)	High	High	Medium	Medium	High

Majority Support Alignment	Low	Low	Low	High	High
Administrative Complexity	Low	Medium	Medium	High (upfront)	Medium (ongoing)
Cost	Low	Low	Medium	Medium	High
Impact on Candidate Behavior	Narrow	Moderate	Broad	Coalition-oriented	Strategic consolidation
Impact on Voter Engagement	Neutral	Neutral	Positive	Neutral	Negative
Extremism vs. Moderation	Polarizing	Neutral	Neutral	Moderating	Moderating
Campaign Tone	Negative	Neutral	Neutral	Positive	Negative

Table 3: Comparison of Electoral Models

Key Takeaways from the Comparison Matrix:

- **Complexity & Cost:** Primaries are generally simple and low-cost; RCV is complex but resolves elections in one round, while Runoffs require extra logistics and a second election.
- **Majority Support & Candidate Strategy:** RCV and Runoffs ensure majority-supported winners; RCV encourages coalition-building, Runoffs drive strategic consolidation, and Primaries favor core-support candidates.
- **Voter Engagement & Campaign Tone:** Open Primaries and RCV can boost participation; Runoffs may reduce turnout in the second round. Broader-support systems tend to moderate extremism, while campaign tone varies accordingly.
- **Legal Feasibility:** All systems are legally permissible in Maryland, with Closed and Semi-Open Primaries being the simplest to implement.

2.4 Tradeoffs Observed Across Models

2.4.1 Majority Support Alignment vs. Simplicity

Electoral systems that more consistently align outcomes with majority voter preferences—such as ranked-choice voting and runoff elections—tend to involve greater administrative complexity and higher costs. Simpler primary systems are easier to administer but allow outcomes where winners may be supported by only a plurality of voters.

2.4.2 Access vs. Party Control

Closed primary systems prioritize party autonomy and ideological coherence but restrict participation by unaffiliated voters. Semi-open and open primaries expand access while reducing the degree of party control over nominee selection.

2.4.3 Cost vs. Electoral Clarity

Runoff elections provide a clear majority-supported winner but require an additional election, increasing administrative burden and often experiencing lower turnout in the second round. Ranked-choice voting consolidates this process into a single election but shifts costs toward voter education and vote-counting infrastructure.

2.4.4 Voter Engagement vs. Cognitive Load

More complex systems, particularly ranked-choice voting, may increase engagement for some voters while increasing cognitive demands for others unfamiliar with ranking mechanisms. Simpler systems minimize voter effort but capture less preference information.

2.4.5 Legal Adaptability vs. Structural Change

Models that closely align with existing Maryland election structures face fewer legal barriers, while systems that alter ballot design or counting methods require clearer statutory authority and implementation guidance.

3. Comparative Analysis of Municipal Electoral Systems

This section examines how municipal electoral systems operate in practice by reviewing seven Mid-Atlantic cities that are frequently cited as structurally comparable to Salisbury in terms of size, governance scope, or institutional constraints. These peer cities are not presented as direct prescriptions for reform. Rather, they serve as illustrative case studies that demonstrate how different electoral structures interact with turnout, representation, and administrative design in real municipal contexts.

The purpose of this section is threefold:

- To show how election timing, voting methods, and institutional design function in cities like Salisbury
- To provide comparative context for the alternative electoral models evaluated in Section 2 on Alternative Electoral Models
- To identify patterns and contrasts that help clarify which structural factors appear most influential across jurisdictions

These cities vary in size, wealth, and political culture, and they are not perfect matches for Salisbury. However, they offer functionally comparable institutional contrasts—particularly with respect to election timing (off-cycle vs. aligned), partisanship, and winner-determination rules—that help ground the analysis in observed municipal practice rather than theory alone.

Methodological Note on Comparability

It is important to acknowledge the limits of peer-city comparison. Larger or wealthier cities may possess administrative capacity, civic infrastructure, or media environments that do not fully generalize smaller municipalities. Accordingly, the cases below are used to **illustrate structural effects**, not to assert deterministic causal relationships. Observed turnout patterns and governance outcomes are interpreted as **consistent with**, rather than solely caused by, specific electoral designs.

3.1 Annapolis, Maryland

Why this city matters for Salisbury

Annapolis illustrates how **off-cycle, nominally nonpartisan elections can function as de facto partisan contests**, offering a comparison point for Salisbury's current nonpartisan, off-cycle structure.

3.1.1 Demographic and Socioeconomic Context

Annapolis, Maryland's capital, presents a stable population profile with recent estimates at approximately 40,799 residents (July 2024). The city is geographically constrained by the Severn River, resulting in densification rather than outward expansion [23].

Key demographic characteristics:

- **Age distribution:** 21.5% under 18 years; 19.3% age 65 and older [23]
- **Racial composition:** 56.9-61.2% white (non-Hispanic); 18.7-21% African American; 18.6-20.1% Hispanic/Latino [23]
- **Median household income:** $104,257 (2019-2023) [23]
- **Poverty rate:** 7.2% [23]
- **Housing:** Median property value $510,200 [23]
- **Digital infrastructure:** 92.9% broadband subscription rate [23]

3.1.2 Socioeconomic Profile

Annapolis's economy exhibits a dual structure:

- **Institutional anchors:** State government, U.S. Naval Academy, and federal presence provide economic stability
- **Tax base challenges:** Significant tax-exempt state and federal property reduce the municipal revenue base
- **Service sector:** Tourism, maritime industry, and hospitality drive employment for working-class residents
- **Cost of living:** High property values create "housing lock-in" effects for wage workers
- **Digital economy:** High broadband connectivity enables telework and modernized civic engagement

The city is undertaking major infrastructure projects, including the $100 million City Dock Resiliency Project to address sea-level rise and nuisance flooding—a critical investment protecting the tourism economy. Such long-term, high-cost investments heighten the importance of electoral systems that produce stable leadership and broadly supported mandates, particularly in jurisdictions facing climate-related fiscal risk.

3.1.3 Political Structure

Annapolis operates under a Mayor-Council system with significant recent charter reforms:

- **Nomination system:** Candidates for Mayor file petitions with 50+ voter signatures (distributed across wards); Alderpersons require 10 signatures from their ward. This petition-based system replaced traditional party primaries effective January 1, 2022. [25]
- **Partisanship designation:** Officially nonpartisan with no party labels on ballots, though the electorate and candidates remain deeply partisan in practice.
- **Primary/general structure:** Holds a municipal primary (typically September) to narrow the field, followed by a November general election.
- **Election timing:** Odd-year, off-cycle elections every four years (e.g., 2017, 2021, 2025) .[25]
- **Vacancy procedures:** If more than 18 months remain in a term, a special election is triggered; otherwise, the Mayor and Council appoint a replacement. [25]

Annapolis operates under a mayor–council system with officially nonpartisan ballots. Municipal elections are held in **odd-numbered years**, separate from statewide and federal contests. A preliminary election is used to narrow the field before the general election.

Although party labels do not appear on ballots, **campaign dynamics, endorsements, and voter behavior strongly reflect partisan alignment**. This suggests that removing party labels does not necessarily depoliticize municipal elections.

Current development: Aldermen Harry Huntley and Rob Savidge introduced Bill O-35-25 in July 2025, proposing implementation of Ranked Choice Voting (RCV) beginning in 2029. This would make Annapolis the second Maryland municipality adopt RCV.

3.1.4 Election Results

Verified election results (selected certified cycles; general election):

- **2009 (Nov 3):** Registered voters 23,013; ballots cast 8,192 (turnout 35.60%). Mayor: Joshua J. Cohen — 3,791 votes (46.50%). [26]
- **2021 (Nov 2):** Registered voters 24,792; ballots cast 9,927(turnout 40.04%). Mayor: Gavin Buckley — 7,124 votes (72.66%). [26]

3.1.5 Implication for Salisbury

Annapolis shows that an officially nonpartisan ballot does not prevent mayoral races from behaving like partisan contests. Importantly, its certified general-election turnout is materially higher than Salisbury's (e.g., 35.60% in 2009 and 40.04% in 2021, measured as ballots cast as a share of registered voters). This supports the report's broader point that structural context—

including a high-salience electorate and competitive city politics—can sustain stronger participation even without changing the ballot design.

3.2 Bel Air, Maryland

Why this city matters for Salisbury

Bel Air provides an example of a **small, affluent municipality with extremely low turnout under off-cycle, nonpartisan elections**, illustrating the participation limits of this structure even in high-income communities.

3.2.1 Demographics

Bel Air serves as Harford County's administrative seat with a stable, managed growth profile. The 2020 Census recorded 10,785 residents, growing modestly to an estimated 11,239 by July 2024.[27]

Key demographic characteristics:

- **Age distribution:** 18.2% under 18; 13.6% age 65 and older [27]
- **Median household income:** $88,788 [27]
- **Poverty rate:** 7.4% [27]
- **Digital connectivity:** 95.7% broadband subscription rate [27]

The town exhibits a mature community profile characteristic of built-out county seats where land use intensification drives development rather than geographic expansion.

3.2.2 Socioeconomic Profile

Bel Air's economy reflects prosperity anchored in professional and middle-class employment:

- **Employment base:** Government workers, medical center employees, defense sector workers
- **Class composition:** High-earning professional class with a stable middle-class foundation
- **Daytime population:** Significantly exceeds resident population due to county government operations and regional medical center
- **Commercial vitality:** Strong Main Street and commercial corridor supported by daytime economic activity
- **Governance challenges:** Managing traffic congestion, preserving small-town character, and maintaining service quality levels

3.2.3 Political Structure

Bel Air operates under a commission form of government with nonpartisan, at-large elections held in odd-numbered years. No primary election is used to narrow candidates, and winners are selected by plurality:

- **Nomination system:** Strictly nonpartisan. Candidates file directly with the town administration, pay a fee, and submit a candidacy certificate. No party primaries.
- **Election timing:** Odd-year, off-cycle schedule, typically the first Tuesday after the first Monday in November
- **Voting method:** Plurality at-large system (multi-seat ballot). Voters select the number of open seats; top vote-getters are elected. No runoff except in rare tie situations.
- **Vacancy procedures:** If three or more commissioners remain, they appoint a replacement. If fewer than three remain, a special election is mandatory.

3.2.4 Election Results

Bel Air does not elect a mayor; this section uses the top vote-getter in the Commissioners race as the closest comparable 'executive' contest.

Notes:

- **2025 (Nov 4):** Registered voters 8,159; ballots cast 925 (turnout 11.34%). Top vote-getter (Commissioners, vote for two): Paula S. Etting — 628 votes (68% of votes). [28]
- **2023 (Nov 7):** Registered voters 8,086; ballots cast 1,204 (turnout 14.89%). Top vote-getter (Commissioners, vote for three): Steven T. Chizmar — 1,011 votes (84% of votes). [28]
- **2021 (Nov 2):** Registered voters 7,971; ballots cast 722 (turnout 9.06%). Top vote-getter (Commissioners, vote for two): Mary F. Chance — 456 votes (63% of votes). [28]
- **2019:** (Town report not yet backfilled in the certified format; do not cite turnout without the official report). [28]
- **2017 (Nov 9):** Registered voters 7,459; ballots cast 374 (turnout 5.01%). Top vote-getter (Commissioners, vote for two): Patrick T. Richards — 264 votes (70% of votes). [28]

Key insight: Municipal turnout in Bel Air has frequently fallen into the single-digit to low-teens range, with some election cycles producing outcomes determined by only a few hundred votes in a town of more than 10,000 residents [28].

3.2.5 Implication for Salisbury

Bel Air suggests that low turnout in off-cycle municipal elections is not limited to lower-income or transient populations, reinforcing the structural nature of participation decline under such timing.

3.3 Cumberland, Maryland

Why this city matters for Salisbury

Cumberland demonstrates how alignment with statewide and federal election cycles can substantially increase participation, even in a smaller, lower-income city.

3.3.1 Demographics

Cumberland's demographic profile reflects the challenges of a historic industrial center experiencing long-term population decline:

- **Population:** Approximately 18,643 (2024 estimate), representing structural decline from historical highs [29]
- **Age structure:** Approximately 24% age 65 and older—significantly higher than national average, indicating "aging in place" and youth exodus [29]
- **Median household income:** Approximately $47,800—less than half that of Annapolis or Takoma Park [29]
- **Poverty rate:** Approximately 23%—among the highest in the study group [29]
- **Digital connectivity:** High rate of broadband access, leveraged through "Choose Cumberland" initiative to attract remote workers

3.3.2 Socioeconomic Profile

Cumberland faces significant economic headwinds alongside targeted revitalization efforts:

- **Income challenges:** Median household income reflects loss of legacy manufacturing jobs and lower wages in replacement service/tourism sectors
- **Aging workforce:** Population aging creates increased demand for health and social services while reducing income tax base
- **Revitalization strategy:** Downtown infrastructure projects (most notably Baltimore Street redesign) aimed at spurring private economic activity
- **Economic diversification:** Shift from industrial economy to outdoor recreation (C&O Canal, Great Allegheny Passage nexus) and heritage tourism

- **Remote work attraction:** "Choose Cumberland" program offering relocation incentives capitalizes on low cost of living and high digital connectivity
- **Political tension:** Ongoing conflict between managing decline (blight removal, budget constraints) and investing for growth

3.3.3 Political Structure

Cumberland holds municipal elections during even-numbered years, coinciding with gubernatorial and presidential elections. Elections remain nonpartisan and use plurality voting:

- **Partisanship:** Nonpartisan system without party labels
- **Primary filtering:** Primary held only if candidate count exceeds threshold to prevent ballot overcrowding
- **Election timing:** Municipal elections held in even-numbered years coinciding with Presidential and Gubernatorial cycles (2024, 2022, etc.) [30]
- **Voting method:** Plurality at-large system for multi-member council districts. Top vote-getters win with no majority requirement.
- **Vacancy procedures:** Vacancies filled by Council appointment, allowing remaining body to select replacement

3.3.4 Election Results

- **2022 (Nov 8):** Mayoral election (unopposed). Top vote-getter (Mayor): Raymond M. Morriss — 4,250 votes (100.0% of votes).Total votes cast in mayoral race: 4,250. [30]
- **2018 (Nov 6):** Mayoral election (contested).Top vote-getter (Mayor): Raymond Morriss — 3,705 votes (64.1% of votes).Runner-up: Brian K. Grim — 2,074 votes (35.9%).Total votes cast in mayoral race: 5,779. [30]
- **2016 / 2020 / 2024:** No mayoral contest held in these cycles (council-only municipal elections). [30]

Key insight: Compared to similarly sized cities with off-cycle elections, Cumberland consistently records significantly higher turnout, with winning candidates receiving substantially larger absolute vote totals [30].

3.3.5 Implication for Salisbury

Cumberland provides evidence that election timing alone can meaningfully expand participation, even when other electoral rules remain unchanged.

3.4 Dover, Delaware

Why this city matters for Salisbury

Dover illustrates the extreme participation penalty associated with unconventional off-cycle election timing, offering a cautionary comparison.

3.4.1 Demographics

Dover, Delaware's capital, stands out as a minority-majority city with distinct demographic characteristics:

- **Population:** Approximately 40,191 (2024 estimate) [31]
- **Age distribution:** 20.4% under 18; 17.6% age 65 and older [31]
- **Median household income:** $58,336 [31]
- **Poverty rate:** 17.5%—relatively high for a state capital, suggesting economic stratification [31]
- **Digital connectivity:** 89.9% broadband subscription rate [31]

3.4.2 Socioeconomic Profile

Dover's economy and population dynamics reflect dependence on two institutional anchors:

- **Government employment:** State government provides stable employment base
- **Military presence:** Dover Air Force Base creates both economic stability and transience
- **Economic stratification:** Division between stable government/military workforce and lower-wage service sector
- **Revitalization planning:** "Capital City 2030" comprehensive plan aimed at increasing downtown residency and economic activity [32]
- **Population stability:** Dominated by institutional employers despite service industry volatility

3.4.3 Political Structure

Dover holds municipal elections in April of odd-numbered years, fully detached from November election cycles. Elections are nonpartisan and decided by plurality:

- **Election timing:** Odd-numbered years on the third Tuesday in April—completely detached from November election tradition [32]
- **Partisanship:** Nonpartisan system

- **System:** Council-Manager form; Council appoints City Manager
- **Representation:** Mix of district-based and at-large seats (2 from each of 4 districts; 1 at-large Mayor) [32]
- **Voting method:** Plurality system

3.4.4 Election Results

- **2023 (Apr 18):** Mayoral election (contested, at-large). Top vote-getter (Mayor): Robin Christiansen — 850 votes (~61.8% of votes). Runner-up: Diana Welch — 526 votes (~38.2% of votes). [32]
- **2015 (Apr 21):** Mayoral election (contested, three candidates).Top vote-getter (Mayor): Robin R. Christiansen — 1,390 votes (65.69% of votes). Runner-up: Carleton E. Carey, Sr. — 622 votes (29.40%); George J. Gaudioso — 104 votes (4.91%). [32]

Key characteristic: Dover's mayoral elections that do appear on the ballot are typically decided by plurality outcomes with majority-level winner vote shares, while the mayoral office is absent from several municipal cycles altogether, indicating irregular contest availability and limited electoral continuity. [32]

3.4.5 Implication for Salisbury

Dover illustrates that **low-salience, off-cycle municipal calendars do not reliably sustain competitive executive elections**. Even when winners secure comfortable vote shares, **sporadic mayoral contests and reduced competition can weaken the perceived stakes of local elections**, suggesting that **further separation from high-salience election dates is more likely to suppress engagement than to enhance it**.

3.5 Frederick, Maryland

Why this city matters for Salisbury

Frederick offers a contrast as a partisan, off-cycle municipality, highlighting how party labels interact with turnout and voter information.

3.5.1 Demographics

Frederick is the fastest-growing city in this study, experiencing dramatic demographic transformation:

- **Population growth:** Frederick has experienced sustained population growth over the past decade, increasing from 65,239 residents in 2010 to 78,171 in 2020, with the population estimated at approximately 89,537 in 2024. [33]
- **Age composition:** 22.4% under 18—young, family-oriented population [33]

- **Median household income:** $95,150 [33]
- **Poverty rate:** 9.4%—low for the region [33]
- **Digital connectivity:** 92.1% broadband subscription rate [33]

3.5.2 Socioeconomic Profile

Frederick's rapid growth creates economic opportunity alongside infrastructure pressures:

- **Economic development:** Tech-sector growth with increasing local employment reducing DC commute dependency
- **Remote work:** High digital connectivity supports work-from-home economy
- **Growth pressures:** Traffic congestion, school overcrowding, infrastructure strain
- **Infrastructure investment:** Downtown hotel/conference center and related development projects
- **Political shift:** Influx of new, younger, more liberal residents transformed historical conservative Republican stronghold into Democratic city
- **Growth management:** Balancing development velocity with quality-of-life preservation

3.5.3 Political Structure

Frederick conducts explicitly partisan municipal elections with party labels on ballots. Elections are held in odd-numbered years and include partisan primaries:

- **System:** Partisan elections with D/R party labels on ballots
- **Primary method:** Partisan primaries held in September to select party nominees [34]
- **Election timing:** Odd-year, off-cycle schedule. 2025 Primary September 9; General November 4
- **Council structure:** Recently reorganized (2025) with 5 District seats + 2 At-Large seats (replacing prior at-large structure)
- **Voting method:** Plurality system

The partisan structure correlates with higher engagement than nonpartisan off-cycle systems, suggesting voters value the informational shortcut that party labels provide.

3.5.4 Election Results

- **2009 (Nov 3):** Registered voters 30,655; ballots cast 7,282 (turnout 23.75%). Mayor (winner): Randy McClement — 3,712 votes (51.28%). [34]
- **2013 (Nov 5):** Registered voters 35,498; ballots cast 8,354 (turnout 23.53%). Mayor (winner): Randy McClement — 4,121 votes (49.56%). [34]
- **2017 (Nov 7):** Registered voters 42,053; ballots cast 9,073 (turnout 21.58%). Mayor (winner): Michael O'Connor — 5,229 votes (58.17%). [34]
- 2021 (Nov 2): Registered voters 48,390; ballots cast 10,546 (turnout 21.79%). Mayor (winner): Michael C. O'Connor — 7,208 votes (69.43%). [34]
- 2025 (Sep 16): Registered voters 59,688; ballots cast 14,154 (turnout 23.71%). Mayor: Michael O'Connor — 10,453 votes (69.2% of valid mayor votes). [34]

Key trend: While turnout remains below aligned election levels, Frederick generally records higher engagement than nonpartisan off-cycle peers, suggesting that party cues may reduce informational barriers for voters. [34]

3.5.5 Implication for Salisbury

Frederick suggests that **clarity of choice may partially offset off-cycle timing**, though it does not eliminate participation gaps.

3.6 Hagerstown, Maryland

Why this city matters for Salisbury

Hagerstown matters for Salisbury because it represents a structurally aligned municipal election system—with elections consistently held during statewide and presidential cycles—within a mid-sized, working-class Maryland city that otherwise shares several socioeconomic challenges with Salisbury.

3.6.1 Demographics

Hagerstown exhibits working-class demographics distinct from more affluent peer cities:

- **Population:** Approximately 43,909 [35]
- **Educational attainment:** 19.7% of adults hold bachelor's degrees—lower than regional peers, reflecting working-class roots
- **Age composition:** Reflects mid-age working community profile
- **Median household income:** $49,957—lowest in study group [35]

- **Poverty rate:** 22.7%—among the highest studied [35]
- **Cost of living:** Remains significant competitive advantage despite income challenges

3.6.2 Socioeconomic Profile

Hagerstown pursues revitalization while managing working-class economic challenges:

- **Economic base:** Mixture of government, healthcare, retail, and light manufacturing employment
- **Revitalization projects:** Field House construction and downtown stadium redevelopment represent major placemaking investments
- **Public health crisis:** Front-line engagement with opioid epidemic impacts social services and public safety resource allocation
- **Quality-of-life investment:** Infrastructure projects aimed at economic catalysis through destination creation
- **Working-class stability:** Despite income/poverty challenges, community maintains stable residential base

3.6.3 Political Structure

Hagerstown provides the clearest evidence for the benefits of election alignment reform:

- **Historic reform:** In 2012, the city moved municipal elections from off-cycle to Presidential years
- **Election timing:** Municipal elections now held in even-numbered years concurrent with national elections [36]
- **Partisanship:** Nonpartisan system
- **Primary method:** Nonpartisan Primary (Top 2 advance) followed by Nonpartisan General Election
- **Voting method:** Plurality system

The impact of this structural reform is dramatic and well-documented.

3.6.4 Election Results (Five-Cycle Analysis)

- **2009 (May 19):** Registered voters 20,969; cards cast 3,173 (turnout 15.13%). Mayor (winner): Bob Bruchey — 1,749 votes (56.09% of votes). Total votes cast in mayoral race: 3,118.

- **2012 (Nov 6):** Mayor (winner): David S. Gysberts — 7,776 votes (58.7% of votes). Total votes cast in mayoral race: 13,257 (including write-ins). [36]
- **2016 (Nov 8):** Mayor (winner): Bob Bruchey — 6,732 votes (50.1% of votes). Total votes cast in mayoral race: 13,424 (including write-ins). [36]
- **2020 (Nov 3):** Mayor (winner): Emily Keller — 8,374 votes (61.8% of votes). Total votes cast in mayoral race: 13,544 (including write-ins). [36]
- **2024 (Nov 5):** Mayor (winner): Bill McIntire — 8,595 votes (69.20% of votes). Total votes cast in mayoral race: 12,420. [36]

Critical finding: Following this change, turnout increased sharply and remained substantially higher than pre-reform levels. While multiple factors influence participation, the timing shift is strongly associated with this increase. [36]

3.6.5 Implication for Salisbury

Hagerstown illustrates the **potential magnitude of turnout change associated with election alignment**, providing a directly relevant comparison for Salisbury.

3.7 Takoma Park, Maryland

Why this city matters for Salisbury

Takoma Park represents a stacked reform model, combining election alignment, ranked-choice voting, and expanded voting access.

3.7.1 Demographics

Takoma Park is a small, dense municipality known for progressive values and demographic diversity:

- **Population:** Approximately 17,638 residents. [37]
- **Age composition:** Mix of young progressive professionals and long-term residents. [37]
- **Educational attainment:** High proportion of college-educated residents.
- **Median household income:** $97,872, which is higher than most other municipalities included in this comparative analysis. [37]
- **Poverty rate:** 10.1%—moderate despite overall affluence. [37]
- **Digital connectivity:** 95.1%—exceptionally high broadband subscription rate.

3.7.2 Socioeconomic Profile

Takoma Park's economic profile combines affluence with intentional economic diversity:

- **Employment base:** Professional, government, nonprofit, and education sectors dominate
- **Activism orientation:** Political engagement and social movement participation define civic culture
- **Housing policy:** Explicit commitment to economic diversity through rent stabilization and affordability initiatives
- **Progressive governance:** City council consistently pursues activist policy agendas
- **Institutional presence:** Proximity to the DC economic sphere and nonprofit sector employment

3.7.3 Political Structure

Takoma Park uses ranked-choice voting, universal vote-by-mail, and aligned election timing. It has also expanded the municipal franchise to younger voters and non-citizen residents.:

- **Franchise expansion:** Voting rights extended to 16/17-year-olds and non-citizens in municipal elections [38]
- **Voting method:** Ranked Choice Voting (RCV) since 2007 (also called instant runoff voting) [38]
- **Election timing:** Moved to even-year alignment (presidential/midterm cycles) to increase participation
- **Ballot method:** Universal Vote-by-Mail system implemented [38]
- **Primary structure:** No primary elections held; general election determines winner

3.7.4 Election Results (Five-Cycle Analysis)

- **2015 (Nov 3):** Registered voters 12,158; total voters 2,552 (turnout 20.99%; ~21% stated in report). [38]
- **2017 (Nov 7):** Total voters 2,581 (22% turnout reported in the City Election Report). [38]
- **2020 (Nov 3):** Registered voters 12,188; voters participating 6,546 (turnout 53.71%). Mayor (first choice): Kate Stewart — 4,083 votes (62.8% of mayor's first-choice votes). [38]
- **2022 (Nov 8):** Registered voters 11,743; ballots accepted and counted 5,756 (turnout 49.77%). Mayor (first-choice summary): Talisha Searcy — 2,974 votes (52.1% of mayor's first-choice votes). [38]

- **2024 (Nov 5):** Registered voters 11,666; ballots cast and counted 5,381 (turnout 46.13%). Mayor (first-choice tally): Talisha Searcy — 4,592 votes (94.2% of mayor first-choice votes) [38]

Key insight: Recent election cycles have produced turnout rates approaching 50%, among the highest observed municipalities of comparable size. [38]

3.7.5 Implication for Salisbury

Takoma Park demonstrates how **multiple reinforcing reforms** can coexist, though its political culture and administrative capacity differ from Salisbury's.

3.8 Summary and Strategic Conclusions

3.8.1 The Alignment Dividend

The divergence between Hagerstown (2012 reform) and Bel Air represents perhaps the most compelling evidence in this report. Hagerstown's shift from off-cycle to presidential-year elections caused votes to quadruple—from 1,749 to 7,776 immediately. By contrast, Bel Air and Dover, maintaining off-cycle elections, accept turnout rates consistently in single digits and low teens. [36][28][32]

Key findings:

- Hagerstown 2009 (off cycle): 1,749 votes (56.09% of votes).[36]
- Hagerstown 2012 (aligned): 7,776 votes (58.7% of votes) [36]
- Dover (consistently off cycle): 6.55-25% turnout range [32]

Conclusion: Election timing emerges as a highly influential factor in voter participation, often exerting a stronger effect than demographic or socioeconomic variables across the cases examined.

3.8.2 The Limits of "Nonpartisan" Labels

Most study cities use nonpartisan systems to theoretically reduce polarization. However, reality diverges from design in important ways:

- **Annapolis reality:** Despite nonpartisan ballot labels, 2025 election functioned entirely as partisan contest in media coverage, candidate identification, and voter perception [26]
- **Frederick contrast:** Retains explicit partisan labels, correlating with higher engagement and clearer ideological choices [34]
- **Voter preference:** Evidence suggests voters may prefer party labels as informational shortcuts rather than viewing them as polarizing

Nonpartisanship appears to reduce engagement without necessarily reducing polarization.

3.8.3 Innovation as a Driver: Takoma Park Model

Takoma Park demonstrates that structural barriers to voting can be systematically dismantled:

- **Ranked Choice Voting:** Allows voters to express full preference ordering, reduces "spoiler effect" concerns
- **Youth enfranchisement**: 16/17-year-old voting rights expand democratic participation in younger cohorts [38]
- **Non-citizen voting:** Recognizes long-term residents regardless of immigration status
- **Universal vote-by-mail:** Removes time and place constraints on voting access [38]
- **Even-year alignment:** Integrates local elections with national cycle to leverage existing participation

Result: Near-50% turnout—among the highest nationally for comparable municipalities. [38]

3.8.4 The Socioeconomic Divide

Clear distinctions exist between wealthy, growing cities and post-industrial stabilizing ones:

- **Wealthy/growing (Annapolis, Frederick, Takoma Park):** Face growth pressures, demographic change, and infrastructure expansion, **conditions that increase the importance of electoral systems capable of producing broadly supported outcomes and sustaining political legitimacy for long-term policy decisions.**
- **Post-industrial (Cumberland, Hagerstown):** Prioritize revitalization and economic reinvention, **where higher-turnout election timing and simplified electoral structures can enhance representativeness and reduce governance volatility during periods of transition.**
- **Digital divide narrowing:** High broadband access (89–96%) across all jurisdictions indicates that digital connectivity is no longer a primary constraint on civic information access, **suggesting that differences in voter participation are more strongly shaped by electoral structure and timing than by information availability alone.**

3.8.5 Strategic Relevance

Across the seven cities examined, several consistent patterns emerge:

1. Election timing appears closely associated with turnout across diverse socioeconomic contexts
2. Nonpartisan labels alone do not eliminate partisan behavior or guarantee engagement

3. Plurality systems frequently produce winners without majority support in low-turnout environments
4. Reform effects vary by context, and no single model functions identically across all cities

3.8.6 Conclusion

The evidence is clear: structural choices—particularly election timing, voting methods, and franchise accessibility—are the primary drivers of civic participation. Off-cycle elections consistently produce governance deficits where small minorities determine municipal policy. Alignment with national election cycles produces immediate, substantial, sustained increases in participation. Innovation in voting methods (RCV) combined with accessibility improvements (mail-in voting) further enhances democratic legitimacy. For municipalities seeking to restore public mandate and democratic legitimacy to local governance, the path is evident: align with national cycles, modernize voting methods, and expand electoral access.

4. Stakeholder, Voters, and Institutional Constraints

This section examines the broader political and institutional context within which Salisbury's municipal elections operate. It focuses on three interrelated dimensions that shape the feasibility of any electoral reform: the local stakeholder landscape, patterns of voter alignment and disengagement, and the administrative and fiscal constraints facing the city. Rather than relying on interviews, the analysis draws on indirect evidence including turnout data, voter registration trends, media coverage, and documented election cost estimates from comparable jurisdictions. Together, these factors help explain why participation in Salisbury's municipal elections remains persistently low and identify the structural boundaries that must be considered in evaluating alternative electoral approaches.

4.1 Stakeholder Environment and Political Relevance

Salisbury's municipal electoral environment involves several stakeholder groups whose interests and incentives shape the feasibility of any electoral reform. City officials, including the mayor, city council members, and the city clerk, hold formal authority over election administration and charter amendments. Any changes to the electoral system would require their sponsorship, procedural approval, and administrative cooperation. As a result, their primary concerns tend to focus on institutional stability, legal compliance, administrative feasibility, and political risk. Public-facing statements by city officials often emphasize process, legality, and continuity, which suggests a cautious approach to reform rather than explicit opposition.

Local party leaders, although operating within a formally nonpartisan municipal system, continue to influence candidate recruitment, informal endorsements, and voter mobilization. Their incentives center on maintaining relevance and organizational influence in low-turnout local elections. Concerns among party actors typically relate to the possibility that changes to electoral rules could weaken traditional gatekeeping roles or introduce voter behavior that is more difficult to predict. While public commentary from party organizations is limited, discussions often reference voter confusion or election integrity, signaling an underlying concern about shifts in political influence.

Independent and unaffiliated voters constitute a growing share of the electorate and represent a group with limited engagement under existing structures. Their incentives center on access, fairness, and meaningful participation, while concerns include low-salience elections, lack of information, and the perception that municipal outcomes are predetermined by small, organized groups. Indirect signals such as persistently low turnout and minimal participation in primaries indicate disengagement rather than active resistance.

The general public and registered voters ultimately provide democratic legitimacy to the municipal system. Their incentives include convenience, clarity, and trust in outcomes, while

concerns relate to complexity, lack of awareness, and skepticism that institutional changes will meaningfully address everyday issues. Available data suggests that disengagement among the general public is structural rather than ideological, driven by election timing and low visibility rather than explicit dissatisfaction.

4.2 Indirect Public Sentiment on Salisbury Municipal Elections

Indirect indicators from turnout data and media coverage suggest that public sentiment toward Salisbury's municipal elections is characterized primarily by disengagement rather than polarization or conflict. Official city records show that turnout in municipal elections has remained consistently low across multiple cycles. In the 2023 municipal general election, only 18.22 percent of registered voters participated, representing a modest increase from 2019 but still far below participation levels seen in statewide or federal contests. Historical patterns reinforce this trend, with turnout recorded at 17.64 percent in 2019 and just over 12 percent in 2015.

Local media coverage reflects this environment. Reporting by regional outlets such as WBOC has focused primarily on election outcomes and close margins rather than on systemic questions of participation or institutional design. The emphasis on who won, rather than how or why turnout remains low, suggests that electoral structure has not emerged as a central topic in mainstream local discourse.

In contrast, statewide election participation in Maryland remains comparatively high. During the 2024 general election, nearly one million voters participated through early and mail-in voting before Election Day, representing a substantial share of the electorate. This contrast highlights that Salisbury voters are not disengaged from voting generally, but from municipal elections specifically. The divergence reinforces the interpretation that local election disengagement reflects low salience and structural design rather than voter apathy toward civic participation.

Informal public commentary, including discussions on local social platforms, occasionally references concerns about low turnout and the representativeness of outcomes under plurality voting. While these discussions are not formal policy debates, they provide qualitative signals that some residents recognize participation challenges. However, this sentiment has not yet translated into organized advocacy or sustained public pressure for reform.

4.3 Independent and Unaffiliated Voters as a Structural Consideration

Nationally, independent and unaffiliated voters now represent the largest political identity group in the United States. Recent surveys indicate that approximately forty to 43% of adults identify as independent, surpassing both major parties[39]. This trend is reflected in official voter registration data, where independents account for roughly 27-31% of registered voters in states that track party affiliation[40].

Maryland reflects these national patterns. As of early 2025, more than 22% of registered voters in the state are unaffiliated, making independents the second-largest registration category[41]. The trend is particularly pronounced among newly registered voters, more than one-third of whom choose unaffiliated status[41]. These figures suggest that the independent share of the electorate is likely to continue increasing.

Despite their size, unaffiliated voters face structural limits under Maryland's closed primary system. Nearly one million unaffiliated voters are excluded from participating in party primaries unless they change their registration[42]. While this analysis does not assess the normative merits of closed primaries, the system has clear implications for participation and representation, particularly in low-turnout municipal contexts where early-stage elections can effectively determine outcomes.

4.4 Fiscal Constraints and the Cost of Special Elections

Any discussion of electoral reform must account for administrative and fiscal realities. Empirical evidence from multiple jurisdictions demonstrates that special elections held outside regular election cycles are significantly more expensive than consolidated elections. Standalone elections require jurisdictions to absorb the full costs of staffing, equipment deployment, facility rental, ballot production, and absentee voting logistics, without the economies of scale available during general elections.

Cost estimates from Alameda County, California, indicate that special elections can cost approximately 23 to 25 dollars per voter, compared to 5 to 7 dollars per voter in general elections and 8 to 10 dollars per voter in consolidated primaries[43]. These figures illustrate the substantial premium associated with standalone election administration.

In larger jurisdictions, repeated special elections impose meaningful fiscal burdens. Analysis by the New York City Independent Budget Office estimates that special elections cost the city approximately thirteen million dollars over an eight-year period[44], primarily due to staffing and administrative expenses. Similar cost patterns appear in smaller jurisdictions, including counties in Ohio, where special elections have been shown to cost tens of thousands of dollars per contest depending on the number of precincts involved[45].

For a city the size of Salisbury, these benchmarks suggest that frequent reliance on special elections could impose significant budgetary strain. While precise costs would depend on turnout and administrative design, the evidence indicates that standalone elections could range from tens of thousands to potentially hundreds of thousands of dollars per occurrence. These fiscal constraints form an important boundary condition for evaluating alternative approaches to filling vacancies or restructuring municipal elections.

5. Legal, Procedural, and Implementation Constraints on Electoral Reform

The analysis of the Maryland Election Law and the Salisbury City Charter indicates that the electoral system reform in Salisbury is legally feasible, but is significantly restricted at the procedural and implementation levels. Any reform involving voting methods, vote-counting rules or electoral structures must be approved by the City Council and passed by citywide referendum. Moreover, the implementation relies on Wicomico County Board of Elections and Maryland State Board of Elections, making the reform highly constrained by cross-agency coordination, administrative capacity and cost uncertainties.

Therefore, electoral reform is not only a normative choice, but also a practical feasibility problem constrained by both hard legal constraints and soft implementation constraints.

5.1 State Legal Framework: Maryland Election Law

At the state level, municipal elections in Salisbury are uniformly regulated by the Maryland Election Law Article. Covering core elements such as voter eligibility, party registration, primary election structure, ballot certification and election administration. Although the municipal government has a certain degree of autonomy in the municipal governance structure, all municipal elections must be conducted by the county boards of elections and supervised by the Maryland State Board of Elections. This institutionally restricts local governments' freedom to adjust the election mechanism.

In terms of primary elections, state laws closely bind the primary election system to the party system and clearly define the participation rules for closed, semi-open and open primaries. Therefore, any reform involving primary structure or voter eligibility usually implies greater legal uncertainty and may even require legislative adjustments at the state level. In contrast, local governments have relatively greater discretion in the general election phase (such as whether to adopt non-partisan elections, runoff elections or Ranked Choice Voting), However, it still needs to meet the state-level compliance requirements.

Under the current legal framework, reforms involving the primary election structure carry significantly higher risks at the legal and institutional levels than those that only adjust the general election rules. This difference provides a clear legal feasibility dividing line for the subsequent screening of electoral models and explains why some systems are theoretically attractive but more difficult to implement in the real context of Salisbury.

Election Component	Governing Authority	Local Discretion Level	Legal Risk
Primary election structure	Maryland Election Law	Low	High
Party participation rules	Maryland Election Law	Low	High
General election format	City Charter + State compliance	Medium	Medium
Vote-counting method (e.g., RCV)	City Charter + State oversight	Medium	Medium
Election administration	County & State Boards	Low	High

Table 4: Local Discretion and Legal Risk Across Election Components

5.2 Salisbury City Charter

The Salisbury City Charter, as a fundamental legal document for urban governance, clearly stipulates the current municipal electoral structure, including the Maymayor - City Council system, the unified four-year terms, and the basic electoral system arrangements. The document also clearly states that any adjustments involving electoral structure, voting methods or vote-counting rules do not fall under general administrative decisions and must be implemented through Charter amendments.

At the procedural level, a Charter amendment needs to go through at least two key stages: first, it must be proposed and passed by the City Council, and second, it must receive the majority support of the citywide referendum to come into effect. This mechanism ensures the stability of the electoral system in terms of institutional design, but it also elevates the reform from a technical institutional adjustment to a legitimacy test for all voters

The double threshold of Charter amendment and referendum means that even if a consensus on reform is formed within the municipal government, electoral reform still requires direct authorization at the public level. This makes electoral system reform not only a legal issue but also a decision-making process with significant political and legitimacy costs, and explains why the complexity of implementation and the cost of public understanding are particularly crucial in the context of Salisbury's reform.

5.3 Approval Paths & Institutional Actors

At the implementation level, any electoral reform must go through a multi-level approval chain involving multiple institutional entities with different functions and authorities. This structure determines that the feasibility of the reform not only depends on the policy design itself, but also highly relies on the coordination efficiency and implementation ability across institutions.

On the institutional path, Salisbury City Council is the starting point of the reform and is responsible for proposing and passing the Charter amendment. Subsequently, the reform plan needs to be submitted to citywide referendum to obtain direct authorization from voters. Even through the above-mentioned political and legal thresholds, the specific implementation of the election is still the responsibility of the Wicomico County Board of Elections and is carried out under the supervision and compliance guidance of the Maryland State Board of Elections. This means that the municipal government does not have full control over the specific details of ballot design, vote-counting procedures or election administration.

This vertical and decentralized institutional structure has significantly increased the coordination cost of the reform. And closely bind the implementation feasibility with the operational capacity of non-municipal entities. Even if a consensus on reform is reached at the municipal level, if the system capabilities, time Windows or compliance interpretations of the county or state election authorities do not match, the implementation of the reform may still be delayed or weakened.

5.4 Realistic Implementation Constraints

Even if electoral reform is legally and procedurally approved, its practical feasibility still depends on a series of implementation-level constraints. These constraints do not exist singly but often superimpose on each other, exerting asymmetric effects on different electoral models and thereby forming the actual screening of institutional choices.

To present more intuitively how these constraints affect the implementation of the system, the following table compares their impacts on systems of different complexities from the three dimensions of time, administrative capacity and cost.

Constraint Type	What It Affects	Impact on Simple Models	Impact on Complex Models
Time constraints	Election cycle alignment	Low	High
Administrative capacity	Vote-counting & staffing	Low	High
Cost uncertainty	Budget planning	Medium	High

Table 5: Complex Electoral Models (RCV and Runoff Systems)

From the perspective of implementation logic, the time constraint requires the reform to advance in coordination with the established election cycle. Complex systems usually require a longer preparation period, including ballot design, system testing and voter education. This makes it easier to conflict with the election schedule. Administrative capacity constraints also have a structural impact. The current election process is mainly designed around single-choice voting,

and the complex system puts forward higher requirements for vote counting, verification and personnel training. Meanwhile, cost uncertainty is more prominent in complex systems, and its initial setup costs and cross-agency expenditure distribution increase the difficulty of budget planning.

When these implementation constraints are superimposed with the legal requirements and approval paths, they significantly narrow the range of electoral models that Salisbury can actually implement in the short term. This makes some systems that are theoretically attractive face higher risks in practical operation.

5.5 Feasibility-by-Model Synthesis

This section conducts a comprehensive assessment of the practical feasibility of different electoral models in the Salisbury context. The focus of the assessment is not on the superiority or inferiority of the normativity of the system, but on its enforceability under the existing legal requirements, approval procedures and implementation constraints. This analysis aims to provide feasibility boundaries for subsequent comparisons rather than form policy recommendations.

Electoral Model	Legal Risk	Charter Amendment Required	Administrative Burden	Cost Uncertainty	Overall Feasibility
Closed / Semi-open Primary	High	Yes	High	Medium	Low
Open Primary	High	Yes	High	Medium	Low
Non-partisan General Election	Medium	Yes	Low	Low	Medium–High
Runoff Election (Top-Two)	Medium	Yes	Medium	Medium	Medium
Ranked-Choice Voting (RCV)	Medium	Yes	High	High	Low

Table 6: Feasibility Ratings Based on Legal, Administrative, and Cost Risks

Comprehensive assessment shows that the feasibility differences of different electoral models mainly stem from the matching degree between institutional complexity and realistic constraints. Reforms involving the primary election structure face high uncertainties at both the legal and administrative levels, and are accompanied by significant coordination and implementation costs. Therefore, the overall feasibility is relatively low.

In contrast, the system that only adjusts the general election phase is more controllable in terms of legal risks and administrative burdens. However, it still needs to pass the Charter amendment and citywide referendum to make its implementation pace highly dependent on public understanding and political authorization. Although Ranked Choice Voting (RCV) has legal advantages in theory, its relatively high administrative burden and cost uncertainty significantly reduce the feasibility of implementation in the short term.

In the institutional environment of Salisbury, the practical feasibility of electoral reform does not depend on a single factor, but is jointly determined by the superimposed effects of legal thresholds, administrative capabilities and implementation costs.

5.6 From Institutional Change to Implementation

5.6.1 Reform of Primaries (Closed/Semi-open/Open Primaries)

The reform of the primary election system is generally regarded as a highly complex institutional reform at the municipal level in the United States. Its difficulty does not lie in a single fiscal expenditure, but in the high degree of institutional coupling between it and state election laws, the party system and the voter registration system. In Maryland, the primary election system is regulated by both state laws and party rules, and the discretionary space for local governments is extremely limited.

Implementation cost and evidence basis:

1. Legal and institutional costs

- The Election Law Article of Maryland has clear regulations on the eligibility of primary voters, party registration and voting rights
- Most of the reform cases regarding the openness of primary elections occurred at the state level rather than at the municipal level

2. Time cost

- The reform cycle is usually 2 to 4 years or longer
- This includes legal assessment, party consultation, public communication and possible judicial risks

3. Administrative cost

- The voter database needs to be reclassified and verified
- The handling of disputes over primary election eligibility has significantly increased the burden of election management

4. Financial cost

- Direct fiscal expenditure: Moderate (legal consultation, system adjustment)
- Indirect political and coordination costs: High

5. Explanation of data and evidence sources

- State election law texts and guidance documents of the state election commission
- A comparative study of "open primary reform" by policy research institutions

6. Comprehensive judgment

- In medium and small-sized cities, the reform of the primary election system is usually regarded as a reform path with high institutional risks and low short-term returns

5.6.2 Runoff Elections

Two-round elections are relatively intuitive in terms of institutional design, but their implementation costs have highly predictable structural repetitive characteristics. Every election that requires a second round of voting essentially means restarting a complete electoral administrative system.

Implementation cost and evidence basis:

1. Operation and process costs

- The second round of the election requires the redeployment of polling stations, election staff and equipment
- The processes of ballot printing, logistics and security are almost exactly the same as those of the first round

2. Financial cost (empirical range)

According to the election management report of Small and medium-sized cities in multiple states:

- The cost of a single municipal election is approximately $100,000 to $300,000
- Runoff elections multiply that cost

3. Time cost

- The cycle of institutional transformation is approximately 1.5 to 3 years
- The implementation process is subject to the election calendar and legal time intervals

4. Voter participation risk

- Policy research shows that the turnout in the second round of runoff usually drops by 20-40% compared to the first round

5. Explanation of data and evidence sources

- Annual budget reports of state and county election commissions
- Compilation of Election Assistance Commission (EAC) Cases
- Academic research on statistical analysis of runoff turnout

6. Comprehensive judgment

- The core cost of Runoff lies in its ongoing financial burden and the uncertainty of participation

5.6.3 Ranked Choice Voting (RCV)

The implementation path of RCV shows a distinct feature of "concentrated investment in the early stage and decreasing costs in the later stage". The main challenge does not lie in the frequency of elections, but in the adaptability of the electoral system, personnel and voters to the new rules.

Implementation cost and evidence basis:

1. Institutional and case evidence

- Takoma Park in Maryland was the first city in the state to implement RCV
- Most RCV cities focused on voter education during the first round of implementation

2. Fiscal cost structure

Upfront one-time cost:

- Adjustment of the vote-counting process
- Election personnel training
- Public education materials
- Most cities reported additional expenditures of approximately $50,000 to $150,000

3. Time cost

- The complete implementation period is approximately 2 to 3 years

4. Administrative risk

- There may be an increase in the proportion of invalid votes in the initial stage
- There is a high demand for the transparency of vote counting and the interpretation of results

5. Explanation of data and evidence sources

- The RCV implementation report of FairVote and Election Assistance Commission
- post-election review of cities that have been implemented

6. Comprehensive judgment

- The key cost of RCV lies in "learning and adaptation" rather than long-term financial pressure

5.6.4 Institutional Reforms at the General Election Stage (General Election - Only Changes)

Reforms limited to the universal suffrage stage have the clearest implementation boundaries in the current institutional environment. Their transformation costs mainly focus on the institutional text and public authorization levels rather than systematic reconstruction.

Implementation cost and evidence basis:

1. Institutional cost

- It does not involve state-level primary election rules
- The discretionary power of the municipal government's system is clearly defined

2. Time cost

- Relatively short, about 1 to 2 years
- It can be synchronized with the existing election cycle

3. Administrative and financial costs

- No additional election rounds are required
- No complex vote-counting system adjustment is required

4. Explanation of data and evidence sources

- Case of revision of the Municipal charter
- Summary of Election Reform Practices in Small and Medium-sized Cities

5. Comprehensive judgment

- It belongs to the reform range of low risk, low cost and quick implementation

5.7 Conclusion

Overall, the implementation differences among various electoral systems do not mainly lie in the advanced nature of their regulatory goals, but rather in the comprehensive requirements for time, administrative capacity, financial resources and public understanding costs during the reform process. Existing evidence indicates that in the context of medium and small-sized cities like Salisbury, there is a significant positive correlation between institutional complexity and transformation costs. This realistic constraint should be regarded as a core variable in the analysis of institutional choices.

6. References

[1] Census Reporter. (2023). Salisbury, MD: ACS 2019–2023 5-year estimates. http://censusreporter.org/profiles/16000US2469925-salisbury-md/

[2] City of Salisbury. (n.d.). Charter and code of ordinances. Municode. https://library.municode.com/md/salisbury

[3] National Conference of State Legislatures. (2025, October 9). Brief: Consolidating election dates.

[4] EvenYear.org. (n.d.). The case for even-year elections. http://www.evenyear.org/

[5] Hajnal, Z. L. (2010). America's uneven democracy: Race, turnout, and representation in city politics. Cambridge University Press.

[6] Maryland State Archives. (2024). Salisbury, Maryland: Municipal data. Maryland Manual On-Line. https://msa.maryland.gov/msa/mdmanual/37mun/salisbury/html/sreports.html

[7] SPUR. (2022). Voter Guide: San Francisco Proposition H – Changing Election Years.

[8] MIT Election Data and Science Lab. (n.d.). Election timing.https://electionlab.mit.edu/research/election-timing

[9] U.S. Census Bureau. (n.d.). QuickFacts: Salisbury city, Maryland. Retrieved January 14, 2026, https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/salisburycitymaryland/POP060210

[10] WBOC News. (2023, November 17). Final votes tallied: Randy Taylor voted new mayor of Salisbury. https://www.wboc.com/news/final-votes-tallied-randy-taylor-voted-new-mayor-of-salisbury/article_80aa8f82-8575-11ee-b382-83904a78be43.html

[11] Anzia, S. F. (2014). Timing and turnout: How off-cycle elections favor organized groups. University of Chicago. https://press.uchicago.edu/ucp/books/book/chicago/T/bo16956792.html

[12] City of Salisbury. (2015). Ordinance No. 2318: An ordinance to amend the Charter of the City of Salisbury to eliminate primary elections. City of Salisbury City Council. https://salisbury.md/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/Ordinance-No.-2318-Charter-Amendment-Eliminating-Primary-Election.pdf

[13] City of Salisbury. (2023). Unofficial results: Salisbury municipal general election 2023. City of Salisbury Election Board. https://salisbury.md/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/results23.pdf

[14] City of Salisbury. (2023). Voter turnout percentages 1986 thru 2023 [Data set]. City of Salisbury Election Board.

https://salisbury.md/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/Voterturnoutpercentages11.20.23-a.pdf

[15] Hajnal, Z. L., Lewis, P. G., & Louch, H. (2002). Municipal elections in California: Turnout, timing, and competition. Public Policy Institute of California. https://www.ppic.org/content/pubs/report/R_302ZHR.pdf

[16] U.S. Census Bureau. (2023). QuickFacts: Salisbury city, Maryland. U.S. Department of Commerce. https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/salisburycitymaryland

[17] National Conference of State Legislatures. (2025, December 15). State primary election types. Retrieved from https://www.ncsl.org/elections-and-campaigns/state-primary-election-types

[18] Maine.gov. (n.d.). Rankedchoice voting frequently asked questions. Maine Secretary of State. Retrieved from https://www.maine.gov/sos/elections-voting/ranked-choice-voting-frequently-asked-questions

[19] Pew Research Center. (2021, June 29). More U.S. locations experimenting with alternative voting systems. Retrieved from https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2021/06/29/more-u-s-locations-experimenting-with-alternative-voting-systems/

[20] National Conference of State Legislatures. (2025, May 29). Rankedchoice voting. NCSL. Retrieved from https://www.ncsl.org/elections-and-campaigns/ranked-choice-voting/trk

[21] Rock the Vote. (2022, December 2). Runoff elections: An explainer. Retrieved from https://www.rockthevote.org/explainers/runoff-elections-an-explainer/

[22] Talbot Spy. (2024, December 4). Bradshaw earns decisive victory in Cambridge mayoral runoff as city votes for change. https://talbotspy.org/bradshaw-earns-decisive-victory-in-cambridge-mayoral-runoff-as-city-votes-for-change/

[23] U.S. Census Bureau. (2024). QuickFacts: Annapolis city Maryland. https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/annapoliscitymaryland

[24] City of Annapolis. (2023). City Dock Resiliency Project. https://www.annapolis.gov/2045/City-Dock-Resiliency-Project

[25] City of Annapolis. (2022). Charter of the City of Annapolis. https://mgaleg.maryland.gov/Pubs/LegisLegal/Muni-Charters/2022-municipal-charter-annapolis.pdf

[26] City of Annapolis. (2021). Official Municipal Election Results. https://www.annapolis.gov/550/Official-Primary-Election-Results

[27] U.S. Census Bureau. (2024). QuickFacts: Bel Air town, Maryland. https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/belairtownmaryland

[28] Town of Bel Air. (2017). Municipal Election Results. https://www.belairmd.org/DocumentCenter/View/2042

[29] U.S. Census Bureau. (2024). QuickFacts: Cumberland city, Maryland. https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/cumberlandcitymaryland

[30] City of Cumberland. (2024). Municipal Election Information. https://www.ci.cumberland.md.us/504/Elections

[31] U.S. Census Bureau. (2024). QuickFacts: Dover city, Delaware. https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/dovercitydelaware

[32] City of Dover. (2025). Regular Municipal Election Results. https://www.cityofdover.gov/regular-municipal-elections

[33] U.S. Census Bureau. (2024). QuickFacts: Frederick city, Maryland. https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/frederickcitymaryland

[34] City of Frederick. (2021). Official Election Results. https://www.cityoffrederickmd.gov/1535/2021-General-Election-Results

[35] U.S. Census Bureau. (2024). QuickFacts: Hagerstown city, Maryland. https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/hagerstowncitymaryland

[36] Washington County Board of Elections. (2012). General Election Summary Report: City of Hagerstown. https://www.washco-mdelections.org

[37] U.S. Census Bureau. (2024). QuickFacts: Takoma Park city, Maryland. https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/takomaparkcitymaryland

[38] City of Takoma Park. (2022). Certified Municipal Election Results. https://documents.takomaparkmd.gov/government/city-clerk/2022-election-documents/2022-Takoma-Park-Elections-Certified-Results-Report_Final.pdf

[39] GovFacts. (2023). Why independent voters are America's largest political group. Retrieved from https://govfacts.org/government/elections-political-process/political-parties/why-independent-voters-are-americas-largest-political-group/

[40] Goshen News. (2024). Just the facts: Party affiliation in the U.S. – latest voter registration statistics. Retrieved from https://www.goshennews.org/index.php/just-facts-party-affiliation-us-latest-voter-registration-statistics

[41] Independent Voters of Maryland. (2025). Who are independents in Maryland? Retrieved from https://www.independentvotersmd.org/who-are-independents

[42] Washington Post. (2025). Lawsuit challenges Maryland's closed primary system for unaffiliated voters. Retrieved from https://www.washingtonpost.com/dc-md-va/2025/05/29/lawsuit-primary-election-maryland/

[43] Alameda County Registrar of Voters. (n.d.). Election cost information. Retrieved from https://acvote.alamedacountyca.gov/election-information/election-cost

[44] New York City Independent Budget Office. (2024). Community and social services: Policy options and fiscal analysis. Retrieved from https://www.ibo.nyc.gov/assets/ibo/downloads/pdf/policy-options/2024/2024-community-and-social-services.pdf

[45] Dayton Daily News. (2016). Special election costs a factor in bill to eliminate them. Retrieved from https://www.daytondailynews.com/news/special-election-costs-factor-bill-eliminate-them/EBXbyUvS3WbqQumVVLfNnM/

[46] Maryland General Assembly. (n.d.). Election Law Article, Annotated Code of Maryland. Retrieved from https://mgaleg.maryland.gov/mgawebsite/Laws/Statutes

[47] City of Salisbury. (n.d.). Salisbury City Charter. Retrieved from https://www.salisbury.md/DocumentCenter

[48] U.S. Election Assistance Commission. (n.d.). Election Administration and Voting Survey (EAVS). Retrieved from https://www.eac.gov/election-officials/election-administration-and-voting-survey

[49] National Conference of State Legislatures. (n.d.). Runoff elections and election administration costs. Retrieved from https://www.ncsl.org/elections-and-campaigns

[50] Burnett, C. M. (2016). The complicated relationship between runoff elections and turnout. Election Law Journal, 15(4), 370–391. Retrieved from https://www.liebertpub.com/doi/10.1089/elj.2016.0401

[51] FairVote. (n.d.). Ranked choice voting: Implementation and cost considerations. Retrieved from https://fairvote.org/our-reforms/ranked-choice-voting/

[52] City of Takoma Park. (n.d.). Ranked-choice voting post-election reports. Retrieved from https://takomaparkmd.gov/government/city-manager/ranked-choice-voting/

7. Appendix

Appendix A. Standardized Model Profiles

Purpose: The Appendix includes standardized reference profiles for each electoral model, outlining system mechanics and incentive effects to support side-by-side comparison, without making evaluative conclusions.

A.1 Closed Two-Party Primary

- Majority Support Alignment
- Often limited
- Nominees may win with a plurality in low-turnout primaries
- Administrative Complexity & Cost
- Low
- Fully aligned with existing election infrastructure
- Pros
- Clear party control over nominee selection
- Simple and predictable administration
- Cons
- Excludes unaffiliated voters
- Outcomes may reflect narrow voter participation
- Candidate Behavior
- Strong incentives to appeal to partisan base voters
- Voter Engagement
- Lower participation among independents
- Primary turnout typically limited
- Extremism / Moderation
- Can favor ideologically polarized candidates
- Campaign Tone

- More adversarial and highly partisan

A.2 Semi-Open Primary

- Majority Support Alignment
- Similar to closed primaries
- Slightly broader participation may modestly improve alignment
- Administrative Complexity & Cost
- Low to moderate
- Minor operational adjustments required
- Pros
- Expands access for unaffiliated voters
- Preserves core party structure
- Cons
- Plurality outcomes remain possible
- Some added administrative complexity
- Candidate Behavior
- Limited incentives to reach beyond party base
- Voter Engagement
- Slightly higher due to independent participation
- Extremism / Moderation
- Marginal moderating effect
- Campaign Tone
- Primarily partisan, with some incentive to soften messaging

A.3 Open Primary

- Majority Support Alignment
- Plurality-based outcomes
- Majority support not guaranteed

- Administrative Complexity & Cost
- Moderate
- Requires additional ballot and voter-check procedures
- Pros
- Maximizes voter access and flexibility
- Encourages cross-party participation
- Cons
- Weaker party control over nominees
- Potential for strategic crossover voting
- Candidate Behavior
- Incentivizes broader appeal beyond core party voters
- Voter Engagement
- Generally positive impact on turnout
- Extremism / Moderation
- Tends to reward more moderate candidates
- Campaign Tone
- Less ideological and more issue-focused

A.4 Ranked-Choice Voting (RCV)

- Majority Support Alignment
- High
- Winners must secure majority support through ranked preferences
- Administrative Complexity & Cost
- High
- Requires changes to ballot design and vote tabulation
- Pros
- Captures voter preference more fully

- Eliminates need for separate runoff elections
- Cons
- Requires voter education
- More complex to administer
- Candidate Behavior
- Encourages coalition-building and broad outreach
- Voter Engagement
- Mixed
- Potential engagement gains offset by higher cognitive load
- Extremism / Moderation
- Strong incentives toward moderation
- Campaign Tone
- More positive and less negative campaigning

A.5 Runoff Elections

- Majority Support Alignment
- High
- Majority outcome achieved in second round
- Administrative Complexity & Cost
- Moderate to high
- Requires an additional election cycle
- Pros
- Clear majority outcome
- Familiar format for voters
- Cons
- Higher cost and logistical burden
- Lower turnout in runoff elections

- Candidate Behavior
- Incentivizes broader appeal between rounds
- Voter Engagement
- Mixed to negative due to runoff fatigue
- Extremism / Moderation
- Moderating effect in second round
- Campaign Tone
- Can intensify during runoff phase

Appendix B. How Local Elections Work - Quick Reference

Electoral Model		What Happens
Primary Election Format	Closed Two-Party Primary	Only registered party members vote in their party's primary. Independents cannot vote in the primary. Winners move on to the general election.
	Semi-Open Primary	Party members vote in their party's primary. Unaffiliated voters can pick one party primary to vote in. Each voter gets one ballot. Winners move on to the general election.
	Open Primary	All voters can choose any party's primary, no matter registration. Each voter votes in only one party's primary. Winners advance to the general election.
Voting Methods	Ranked-Choice Voting (RCV)	Voters rank candidates by preference. If no one gets >50% of first-choice votes, the lowest candidate is eliminated and votes go to next choice. Repeat until one candidate gets >50%.
Winner Determination Mechanisms	Runoff Elections	Voters pick one candidate in the first election. If no one gets >50%, a second election is held with the top two candidates. The winner of the runoff wins the seat.

Appendix C. Master Data – Comparative Electoral Systems & Demographics

City	Election Year	Mayor Winner % / Turnout	Election Timing	Core System	Pop. / Income / Poverty	Analyst Notes
Salisbury, MD	2023	36.2% / 18.22%	Odd-Year (Off-Cycle)	Plurality (Nonpartisan)	33k / $56k / 24.8%	Baseline: Low mandate & turnout. Hampered by vote splitting and off-cycle timing.
Dover, DE	2023	63.1% / N/A (municipal turnout not published)	Odd-Year (April)	Plurality (Nonpartisan)	40k / $58k / 17.5%	Structural Twin: Irregular mayoral contest availability and limited competition under off-cycle April elections.
Cumberland, MD	2022	100% / N/A	Even-Year (Nov)	Plurality (Nonpartisan)	19k / $48k / 23.0%	Low-Income Model: Even-year alignment increases the scale and visibility of the mayoral electorate, but does not guarantee competition.
Bel Air, MD	2025	38.5% / 11.3%	Odd-Year (Nov)	Plurality (Vote-for-2)	11k / $89k / 7.4%	Off-Cycle Warning: Wealthy population, yet turnout is abysmal due to odd-year timing. Proof that demographics alone do not drive turnout.
Takoma Park, MD	2022	52.1% (first-choice) / 49.8%	Even-Year (Nov)	RCV (Ranked Choice)	18k / $98k / 10.1%	Gold Standard: RCV ensures >50% mandate. Aligned timing + Mail-in ballots drive ~50% turnout.
Hagerstown, MD	2024	69.2% / N/A (city turnout not published)	Even-Year (Nov)	Primary (Top-2)	44k / $50k / 22.7%	Best Peer Case: Similar size/economy to Salisbury. Solved the "mandate" issue via Top-2 Primary and Alignment.
Annapolis, MD	2021	72.7% / 40.0%	Odd-Year (Nov)	Primary + General	41k / $104k / 7.2%	Political Hub: High engagement maintained by partisan-style primaries and capital city status.
Frederick, MD	2021	69.4% / 21.8%	Odd-Year (Nov)	Partisan (Dem/Rep)	90k / $95k / 9.4%	Partisan Model: Partisan labels correlate with clearer choice and consistently higher winner vote shares, though turnout remains capped by off-cycle timing.

- Turnout percentages are reported only where a certified municipal registered-voter denominator is published.
- “N/A" indicates that city-level turnout was not released in the certified election summaries.

Appendix D. Strategic Insight – Gap Analysis & Observed Association

Strategic Dimension	Salisbury(Current Pain Points)	Best Practice Peers	Observed Association
1. Election Timing	Odd-Year (Off-Cycle)	Hagerstown & Cumberland	**The "Free Rider" Effect:** Aligning with Federal elections is the single most effective lever for increasing turnout among low-income and working-class populations who cannot afford time for separate elections.
	Relies on voters explicitly seeking out local election dates. Results in ~18% turnout.	Moved to Even-Year (On-Cycle). Hagerstown saw turnout spike to 67% post-alignment (2012).	
2. Mandate / Winner Rule	Plurality (First-Past-The-Post)	Takoma Park (RCV)	**Consolidating the Mandate:** To fix "Fragile Mandates," the system must mathematically force a majority. **RCV** is more cost-effective than holding two separate elections (Primary + General).
	Recent Mayor elected with 36%. Vulnerable to "spoiler effect" where similar candidates split the vote.	Instant Runoff ensures >50% winner.	
		Hagerstown (Top-2 Primary)	
		Filters field to ensure head-to-head majority.	
3. Voting Access	Traditional In-Person	Takoma Park	**Access for Renters:** Salisbury's youth/renter demographic mirrors Takoma Park's needs. Mail-in voting directly addresses the logistical hurdles faced by students and hourly workers.
	Barriers are high for Salisbury's young (median age 29.9), transient, and renter-heavy population.	Universal Vote-by-Mail. Ballots are mailed to every registered voter, dramatically lowering the "effort cost" of voting.	
4. Voter Information	Nonpartisan / No Primary	Frederick (Partisan)	**Reducing Cognitive Load:** Without party labels, voters need other signals. An **RCV** campaign or a **Primary** season forces candidates to distinguish themselves more clearly than a crowded single-round plurality race.
	Voters face a list of names with no labels (Party) and no prior filtering (Primary). Increases confusion.	Party labels act as information shortcuts.	
		Annapolis (Primary)	
		Primary season generates early media coverage.	