City of Salisbury Electoral Reform

An Analysis of Alternative Election Models

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Purpose and Scope of the Analysis

The Structural Challenge

Salisbury's first-past-the-post model allows a candidate to win by receiving the most votes, even when preferences are split among multiple candidates.

Majority Consensus Gap

In multi-candidate races, it is possible for a winner to take office without securing a true majority (>50%) of the vote.

Incentive Structure

This dynamic can encourage candidates to appeal to narrow constituencies rather than the electorate as a whole.

Purpose of This Analysis

To examine alternative electoral models (e.g., Primaries, Ranked Choice, Runoffs) and assess how different institutional designs may influence the extent to which municipal election outcomes reflect broad voter preferences.

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Salisbury Demographics and Civic Profile

Demographic & Socioeconomic Profile

29.9

Younger Population:
Salisbury's median age is **29.9,** substantially lower than Maryland's median of **39.8** (34,000 residents).

25.7%

High Renter Share:
Only **25.7%** of housing units are owner-occupied, meaning **74%** of residents are renters (vs. **~65%** nationally).

24.8%

Elevated Poverty Rate:
The poverty rate is **24.8%**, more than double the statewide rate of ~**9.5%**.

Context: This unique demographic mix-students, renters, and lower-income residents — creates a specific context for analyzing voter engagement and turnout patterns.

Source: Census Reporter (ACS 2019–2023); U.S. Census Bureau, QuickFacts (Salisbury City, MD)

Electoral Structure & Participation

System Design

Candidates run in a non-partisan general election where the top vote-getter wins (plurality), with no runoff required if no one secures 50%.

Turnout Disparity

Municipal elections frequently see turnout in the low to mid teens, whereas presidential election turnout in the city often exceeds ~70%.

2023 Election Outcome

The most recent mayoral election illustrates the plurality outcome, where the winner secured the seat with 36.2% of the total vote.

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

Source: WBOC News (2023, November 17); City of Salisbury Election Board, Unofficial 2023 Municipal General Election Results

Election Timing & Participation Correlations

Current Schedule

Salisbury holds municipal elections in odd-numbered years ("off-cycle"), separate from state and federal voting cycles.

Timing Effect

National research identifies election timing as a strong predictor of voter participation levels.

Impact of Alignment

Data indicates that moving local elections "on-cycle" (aligned with federal dates) can significantly increase turnout—in some studies nearly tripling participation from ~25.5% to ~75.8%.

Demographic Reach

"On-cycle" elections are associated with broader representation, often drawing higher participation from younger voters and renters compared to standalone local contests.

Source: Common Cause California (analysis of 54 cities shifting elections on-cycle)

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Alternative Electoral Models

Primary Election Formats

Primaries determine **who can vote** and **which candidates** move on to the general election.

Format	Who Can Vote	Key Features
Closed Two-Party Primary	Only registered party members	Independents cannot vote; party chooses nominees internally
Semi-Open Primary	Party members + unaffiliated voters	Unaffiliated voters can pick one party to vote in; each voter gets one ballot
Open Primary	All voters, regardless of registration	Voters choose any party's primary on election day; cross-party participation allowed

- **Closed primaries** give registered partisans full control over nominee selection.
- **Semi-open primaries** expand access without letting voters vote in multiple primaries.
- **Open primaries** allow the widest voter participation and encourage candidates to appeal broadly.

Voting Methods & Winner Determination

These systems determine **how voters express preferences** and **how winners are chosen**.

Method	How It Works	Key Features
Ranked-Choice Voting (RCV)	Voters rank candidates in order of preference	If no one gets a majority, the candidate with the fewest votes is eliminated and votes are redistributed; repeat until a candidate gets >50%
Runoff Elections	Two-round system	If no candidate wins a majority in the first election, the top two candidates go to a second election; the majority winner of the runoff wins the seat

- **RCV** avoids a separate runoff while capturing broader voter preferences.
- **Runoff elections** guarantee a majority winner but require a second election round.
- Both methods encourage candidates to appeal to a wider range of voters.

Comparison of Electoral Models

Factor	Closed Primary	Semi-Open Primary	Open Primary	RCV	Runoff
Majority Support Alignment	Low	Low	Low	High	High
Administrative Complexity	Low	Medium	Medium	High (upfront)	High (ongoing)
Cost	Low	Low	Medium	Medium	High
Impact on Candidate Behavior	Narrow	Moderate	Broad	Coalition-oriented	Strategic consolidation
Voter Participation	Neutral	Neutral	Positive	Neutral	Negative

***Administrative complexity** reflects setup requirements, staffing and logistics, cost, and number of election events.

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

Key Takeaways from the Comparison Matrix

1. **Closed primaries** are simplest to administer but may favor candidates appealing only to the party base.
2. **Open and semi-open primaries** broaden participation and encourage wider candidate appeal, while reducing strict party control.
3. **RCV and runoff elections** both align outcomes more closely with majority voter preferences, but they do so through different administrative paths.
4. **RCV** concentrates complexity upfront (ballot design, programming, voter education) while operating as a single election.
5. **Runoffs** shift complexity over time, requiring a second election day with added staffing, logistics, and cost.
6. Simpler primary systems are easier to run, but tend to reward candidates who focus on narrower voter bases rather than broad coalitions.

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Comparative Analysis of Municipal Electoral Systems

Why Look at Other Cities?

01 Salisbury is not unique in facing low municipal turnout

02 Many similar cities encounter comparable challenges

03 Other cities have tried different electoral systems and formats

What Do These Cities Have in Common?

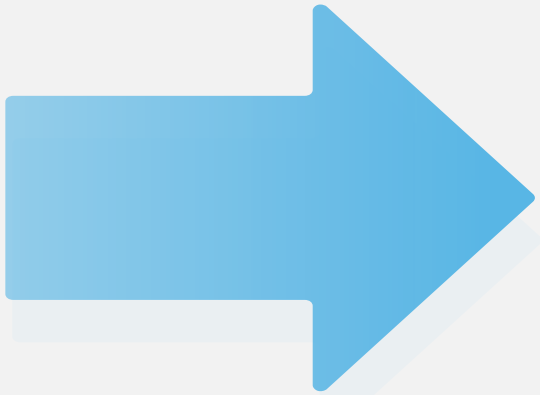
- Small to mid-sized municipalities (10k - 90k people)
- Mayor - council forms of local government
- Shared regional context and largely similar state legal frameworks (mostly Maryland)

City	Population
Salisbury, MD	33k
Dover, DE	40k
Cumberland, MD	19k
Bel Air, MD	11k
Takoma Park, MD	18k
Hagerstown, MD	44k
Annapolis, MD	41k
Frederick, MD	90k

A Key Distinction:

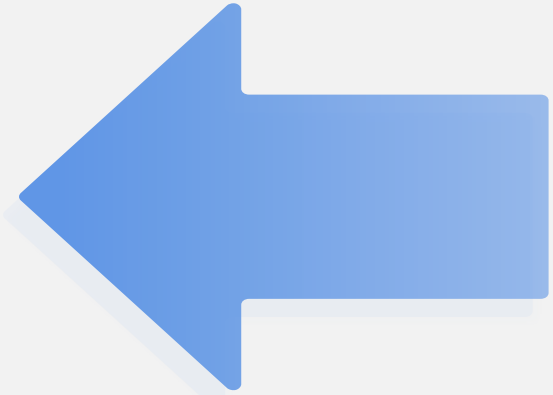
When Elections Are Held?

Some cities hold municipal elections on **standalone dates**



Lower voter participation

Higher turnout



Other cities align municipal elections with **state or national elections**

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	2023	84% / 14.89%	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.

What This Comparison Tells Us?

Election timing is closely associated with voter turnout levels

Cities with similar populations can have very different turnout patterns

Institutional structure matters more than city size or income

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Stakeholder, Voters, and Institutional Constraints

Stakeholder Landscape in Salisbury Municipal Elections

Local Party Actors

Maintain informal influence despite nonpartisan elections; cautious about rule changes.

Independent / Unaffiliated Voters

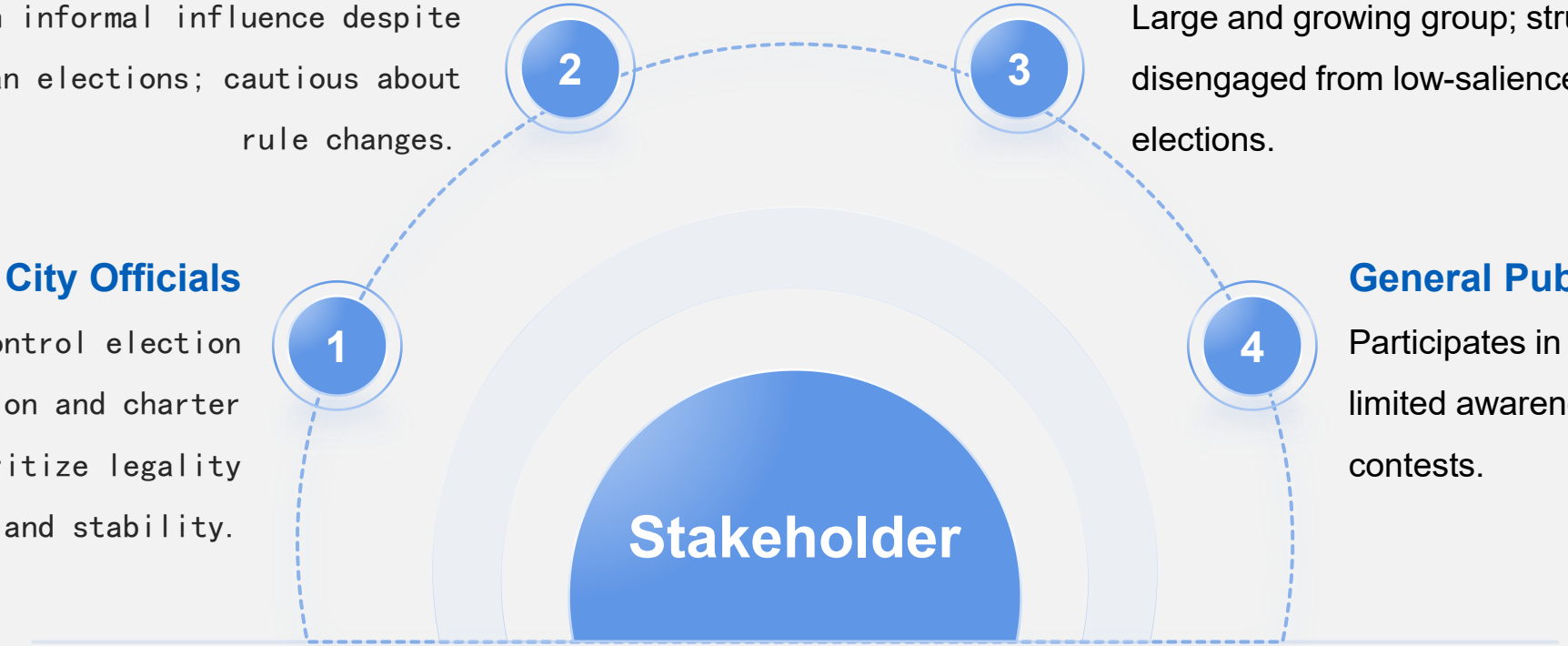
Large and growing group; structurally disengaged from low-salience elections.

City Officials

Control election administration and charter changes; prioritize legality and stability.

General Public

Participates in national elections; limited awareness of municipal contests.



Key Insight:

No stakeholder group is actively pushing for reform; overall engagement is low.

Nonpartisan Elections & Participation Outcomes

Significant Independent Presence

Independents/unaffiliated voters account for roughly 27-31% of registered voters nationwide

Maryland Trend

More than 22% of registered voters in Maryland are classified as unaffiliated

Rising Among New Voters

In 2025, more than 36% of newly registered Maryland voters chose to register as unaffiliated

Source: Goshen News; Independent Voters of Maryland

Local vs Statewide Participation

Salisbury Municipal Elections

- 2023 Salisbury municipal general election: 18.2% turnout
- 2019 municipal election: 17.6% turnout
- 2015 municipal election: ~12% turnout

VS

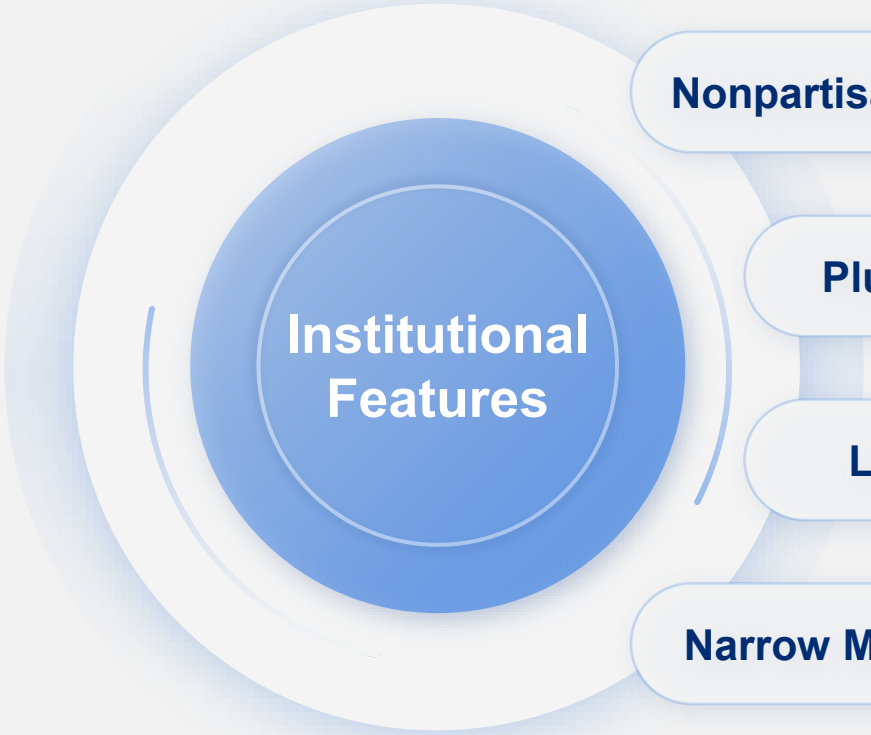
Presidential election

2020 Presidential Election: approximately 60–70% turnout among registered voters

Low Local Engagement: Salisbury's low turnout reflects the low visibility of municipal elections, not general voter apathy.

Source: Salisbury City – "Voter Turnout Percentages (2023)"; Maryland State Board of Elections – "Official Registration by Party and County (2020)"

Institutional Features of Salisbury Municipal Elections



Nonpartisan Races — All municipal elections are officially nonpartisan.

Plurality Voting — Winners are decided by simple majority; no runoff is required.

Low Turnout — Participation has stayed below **20%** for over a decade.

Narrow Mandates — Winning candidates often represent a small fraction of registered voters (2023 mayor elected with **36.2%** of votes cast, ~**6.5%** of registered voters).

Source: Salisbury City – "Voter Turnout Percentages (2023)"; WBOC – "Final Votes Tallied: Randy Taylor Elected Mayor of Salisbury (2023)"

Fiscal Constraints and the Cost of Special Elections

1

High Per-Voter Costs

- Special elections are significantly more expensive than consolidated general elections
- Alameda County: ~$23–25 per voter(special) vs. ~$5–7 (general)

2

Large Aggregate Costs

- Repeated special elections can generate substantial cumulative expenses
- New York City: spent ~$13 million on special elections over eight years.

3

Cost Burden on Small Jurisdictions

- Smaller municipalities often face election costs in the tens of thousands per cycle, straining limited budgets.

Source: Alameda County Registrar of Voters; New York City Independent Budget Office

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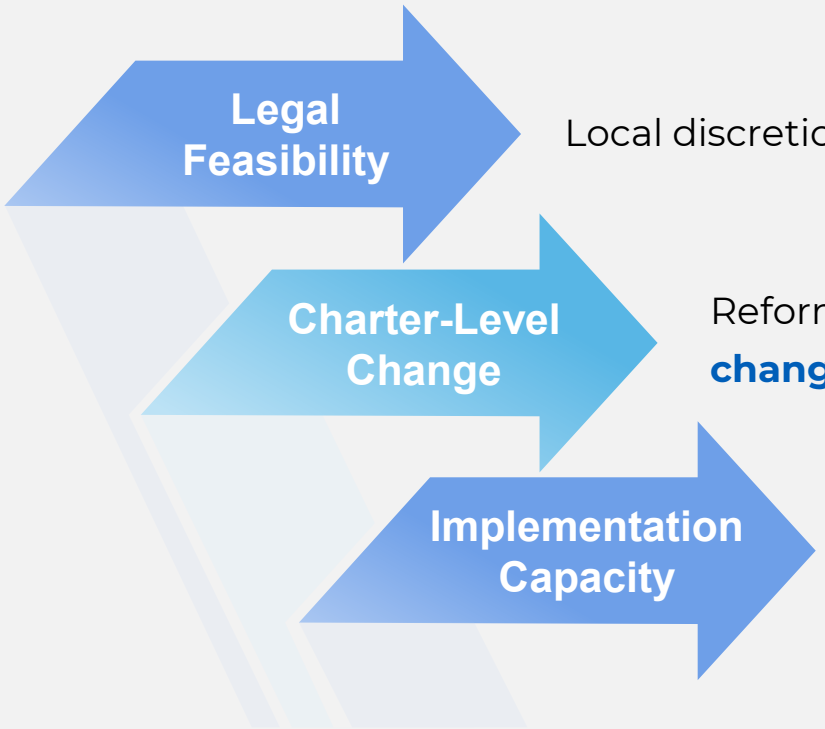
Legal, Procedural, and Implementation Constraints

Boundaries of Electoral Reform in Salisbury

Electoral reform in Salisbury is legally feasible, but its scope and pace are determined by procedural requirements and implementation capacity.



Local discretion exists, but **within state-level election law**

Reform is not an administrative adjustment, it is a **Charter-level change**

Feasibility depends on **law, procedure, and implementation capacity**

State-Level Legal Constraints: Maryland Election Law

01 State Control of Municipal Elections

- Municipal elections are administered by **county boards of elections**
- Oversight provided by the **Maryland State Board of Elections**

02 State-Regulated Components

- Voter eligibility
- Party registration
- Primary election structure
- Election administration procedures

03 Implications for Reform Design

- Primary election reforms are tightly bound to **state law** and **party systems**
- They carry **higher legal and institutional risk**
- **General election changes** are comparatively more feasible

City-Level Procedural Constraints: Salisbury City Charter

Dual Approval Requirement

Changes to voting methods, vote-counting rules, or electoral structure must pass:

- **City Council approval**
- **Citywide referendum (Charter Amendment)**

Implications for Reform

- City government consensus alone is insufficient
- **Direct voter authorization** is required
- Political feasibility and public understanding are critical to successful implementation

Time, Capacity, and Cost

Time

- Reforms must align with fixed election cycles
- Complex systems require extended preparation and voter education

01

Cost

- Runoff elections replicate full election administration costs
- Ranked-Choice Voting (RCV) concentrates costs upfront for system changes and education
- Costs involve coordination across city, county, and state agencies

02

Administrative Capacity

- Current infrastructure is designed for single-choice voting
- Complex systems increase demands on vote counting, staff training, and oversight

03

Key Insight: In Salisbury, reform is legally feasible; implementation success depends on time, cost, capacity, and public outreach.

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An Analysis of Alternative Election Models

Scan the QR code to access the complete report.
Access detailed findings, data, and recommendations.

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