



Wisconsin Elections Commission

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:
Nov. 1, 2024

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Media Advisory: Covering the 2024 General Election

MADISON – Due to the high interest in covering Wisconsin’s General Election on Nov. 5, 2024, the Wisconsin Elections Commission Public Information Office is issuing this advisory and highlighting points from its Election Administration and Election Day Manuals for news reporters and photographers. This advisory is designed for planning purposes, but news media are free to quote from it as well.

In addition to this resource, please visit the WEC’s 2024 General Election Information Hub, where important resources and documents related to the election are posted: <https://elections.wi.gov/2024-general-election-info-hub>

At the Polling Place

Members of the news media may be inside polling places on Election Day, subject to most of the same restrictions as other election observers. Reports can refer to the election observer page on our website, found at <https://elections.wi.gov/poll-workers-observers/election-observers>, for details.

For specific guidelines for news media, please review the Communications Media section of the *Wisconsin Election Observer Rules-at-a-Glance Brochure*, which can be viewed at <https://elections.wi.gov/resources/brochures/wisconsin-election-observer-rules-glance-brochure>.

It states:

Observers from communications media organizations shall identify themselves and the organization they represent to the chief inspector upon arriving at the polling place. The inspector shall record the information on the EL-104, Inspectors Statement. Video and still cameras are allowed if their use is not disruptive [and] show how an elector has voted.

Please note that the information found in the above resources and in the manuals is recommended guidance for chief inspectors and municipal clerks, who may make their own decisions as to what portions of this guidance to follow. Chief inspectors are the ultimate arbiter of allowable media activities at a polling place.

As the above guidance states, media may record sound, images and video for short periods of time inside the polling place as long as it is not disruptive. However, broadcasting live or tape reports (stand-ups) from within a polling place is highly discouraged because of the potential to disrupt or distract the voting process. Extended photography or video in a polling place could also be disruptive or intimidating to poll workers and voters.

When you arrive at a polling place, find the Chief Election Inspector and notify him or her who you are and which organization you represent. The Chief Inspector keeps a list of media, but you are not required to sign in.

Wisconsin Elections Commissioners

Ann S. Jacobs, chair | Marge Bostelmann | Don M. Millis | Carrie Riepl | Robert Spindell | Mark L. Thomsen

Administrator
Meagan Wolfe

Reporters may not contact or interview voters when they are in line waiting to vote. The area inside, and then extending 100 feet from any entrance to a polling place is an electioneering-free zone. Thus, the only people authorized to have contact with voters in this zone prior to voting are the election workers. Please do not take images/video of voters' faces as they're going into polling places, which some voters find intimidating.

Photographing lines of voters generally should not be a problem. After voters have finished, you are free to ask them for interviews outside the polling place. Please do not block the exits. If you are going to ask voters questions about candidates or issues on the ballot, these discussions must take place away from other voters who may be entering the polling place or waiting in line to enter so they do not hear your interview.

Which polling places are good candidates for stories? The best sources of information about polling places are municipal clerks, who are responsible for operating them. A directory of clerks is on our website: <https://elections.wi.gov/clerks/directory>.

Election Day Information

Wisconsin will have approximately 3,611 polling places on Nov. 5, not including 42 central count processing facilities. Due to the decentralized nature of Wisconsin's election system, the Elections Commission has very little real-time information about what's happening inside or outside polling places.

Polls open at 7 a.m., and election inspectors may not process absentee ballots (open up absentee envelopes and feed ballots through tabulators) until 7 a.m. on Election Day.

You can view the entire list of polling place locations statewide at the following link: <https://elections.wi.gov/resources/reports/polling-place-list-2024-general-election>

The list of municipalities that use a central count facility to process absentee ballots is here: <https://elections.wi.gov/central-count-absentee-ballot-municipalities>

If you get tips about problems at a polling place, your best and most immediate source of information about it is likely the city, village, or town clerk's office that oversees the polling place. You can find a directory of clerk's offices with phone numbers here: <https://elections.wi.gov/clerks/directory>. It may also be helpful to contact the clerk for the county where the incident occurred, as he or she may have information to share as well.

Of course, if you see or hear something questionable, please contact the Elections Commission public information officer or electionspio@wisconsin.gov so staff are made aware of the problem.

The Wisconsin Elections Commission also does not have much real-time information about turnout during the day, other than what staff are seeing on media websites and social media accounts. Municipal clerks are much better sources for turnout throughout the day. Immediately after Election Day, the Commission does not have an official means by which to provide turnout statistics because clerks have weeks to upload their voter participation statistics into the statewide database. Also, because of how Wisconsin law is structured, do not expect the WEC to produce any official turnout statistics in the days immediately post-Election Day. Any immediate statistics that are provided by the WEC or reporters are unofficial, and likely based upon the unofficial number of votes cast in the highest-turnout contest on the ballot. Reports who want an immediate, rough estimate as to unofficial turnout statewide may consider adding up the total votes cast across all candidates in the highest-turnout contest (likely the presidential) and dividing that number by the state's estimated voting age population of 4,713,323.

A breakdown of Wisconsin's voting age population estimate is available on the Wisconsin Department of Administration's website here: https://doa.wi.gov/DIR/Final_Ests_Co_2024.pdf. Refer to the "Voting Age Estimate 2024" column.

For updates on how voting is going on Election Day, contact clerks and/or follow our Twitter feed: https://twitter.com/WI_Elections. Additionally, updates may be posted via news releases on our website at <https://elections.wi.gov/news-events/news> and sent out to the WEC's press lists.

The WEC also maintains a page dedicated to fact-checking election misinformation, and the WEC may update it with election misinformation we hear in the coming days and weeks: <https://elections.wi.gov/news-events/wisconsins-election-fact-checks>

Additionally, answers to other frequently asked election questions are available here: <https://elections.wi.gov/faq>

WEC Administrator Meagan Wolfe, who is Wisconsin's chief election official, will also be available for questions and comment at media briefings on Election Day. A separate email with times and links will be sent to media representatives.

If you are a member of the media who would like to be added to the press list, please reach out to electionspio@wisconsin.gov with the email address you would like added.

One of our big concerns is misinformation and disinformation on Election Day. We will be monitoring social media and working to put out correct information when we see inaccurate information being spread. Again, if you see something questionable, please contact the Elections Commission.

What's On The Ballot

To see what state level contests (including president, U.S. Senate, Representative in Congress, State Senate, State Assembly, and District Attorney) are on the ballot in Wisconsin jurisdictions, go to <https://elections.wi.gov/resources/reports/list-candidates-2024-general-election>

To see the list of referenda on ballots across the state, go to <https://elections.wi.gov/resources/election-notices/referenda-across-wisconsin-fall-2024>

Voters and reporters who have questions about the effect of Wisconsin's statewide referendum question can review the Type C Notice of Referendum compiled by the Attorney General, available here: <https://elections.wi.gov/resources/election-notices/type-c-notice-statewide-referendum-and-explanatory-statement-fall-2024>

The last page of the Type C Notice contains an explanatory statement prepared by the Attorney General as to the referendum.

Cyber Security

There is no evidence that Wisconsin's election systems have ever been compromised.

Wisconsin has taken extraordinary steps to enhance security of its systems and prevent interference with our statewide voter registration system and vote counting systems. We've done this by working closely with our technology and law enforcement partners in state and federal government. We have also conducted extensive security training with county and municipal clerks.

The Commission has been transparent with the public and the media about election security. Much more information about election security is available here: <https://elections.wi.gov/elections/election-security-integrity>.

Voting equipment in Wisconsin is required to be certified at the state and federal level. A list of voting equipment used in each Wisconsin municipality is available here: <https://elections.wi.gov/approved-voting-equipment>

Information on election results transmission is available here: <https://elections.wi.gov/elections/voting-equipment-wisconsin/election-results-transmission>

‘How Wisconsin is Ready for the November 2024 Election’ Report

Recently, Wisconsin Elections Commission staff published a comprehensive report detailing the preparations agency staff engaged in to deliver a secure and accurate election. The report is available at <https://elections.wi.gov/elections/how-wisconsin-ready-november-2024-election>

Polling Place Safety

The safety of polling places and voters is a top priority for Wisconsin’s election officials at the local and state levels. While we have no information to indicate a threat to safety on Election Day, election officials have worked with law enforcement partners to be prepared in case of a contingency. On Election Day, chief inspectors at polling places are the individuals responsible for calling local law enforcement if a safety issue arises at the polling place. If you hear about an incident at a polling place, local law enforcement and/or the municipal clerk is likely to have the most up-to-date information.

Electioneering

Electioneering is any activity intended to influence voting at an election. Electioneering is prohibited on public property inside of, or within 100 feet of any building entrance a voter may use to access the polling place. This does not apply to private property within the 100 feet rule. State law discusses electioneering and distributing election-related material in Wis. Stats. §§ [12.03](#) and [12.035](#). It is also discussed on page 84 of the Election Day Manual: <https://elections.wi.gov/resources/manuals/election-day-manual>

Challenges

At polling places and central count facilities on Election Day, poll workers and qualified electors may challenge a voter for cause if they believe that voter is not qualified to vote, whether they are voting in person or absentee.

A guide to elector challenges is available here: <https://elections.wi.gov/memo/elector-challenges-pamphlet-publication-available>

The documentation election inspectors use for challenges is available here: <https://elections.wi.gov/wec-form/challenge-documentation>

See also <https://docs.legis.wisconsin.gov/statutes/statutes/6/v/95> and https://docs.legis.wisconsin.gov/code/admin_code/el/9/03

Counting and Reporting on Election Night

The results that you see on Election Night and the immediate days after are unofficial, meaning they have not been fully reviewed and validated.

In accordance with state law, Wisconsin does not have a statewide system for reporting unofficial results on Election Night, and there is not a central official website where results will be reported, nor is there a feed you can subscribe to. We do have links to the 72 county clerk websites, where clerks are required to post unofficial results: <https://elections.wi.gov/wisconsin-county-election-websites>

There will be a prominent link to this page from the front page of the elections.wi.gov website on Election Day once the polls have closed.

Unofficial results are initially compiled by thousands of polling places and absentee ballot central count processing facilities across the state. Those results are then transmitted to municipal and county clerks, who then organize them according to reporting unit. The reporting unit is the smallest unit of results reporting and can sometimes include several wards. Sometimes, one polling location may include multiple reporting units. In this case, results would be available in two sets for each reporting unit.

Municipal clerks must report unofficial results to the county clerk within two hours of the results being tabulated, and county clerks must post the results within two hours of receiving them from the municipal clerk. In many locations, unofficial results are transmitted from the polling place to the county clerk's office by the voting equipment. This is done via a secure, encrypted cellular telephone transmission.

Unofficial results may not be available on the county website all at once – results may be uploaded reporting unit by reporting unit for a municipality and this can take time.

Clerks will be posting unofficial results in a few different formats, including HTML, PDF and spreadsheets. Often this will be on their websites, but some clerks will link to other file-hosting sites, including Google Docs.

A reliable and accessible source of statewide and legislative district totals is The Associated Press, which gathers information from all 72 counties and provides unofficial results to its members. Some media organizations that are not AP members also collect election results.

The polls normally close at 8 p.m. unless there are still voters waiting in line at 8 p.m. If there are still absentee ballots that have not yet been counted at 8 p.m., poll workers will continue processing them until they are finished. State law does not permit them to stop working and come back the next day.

The Certification Process

There are several steps to Wisconsin's certification process, which involves multiple levels of canvassing. Canvassing is the process by which election officials – by following specific rules and procedures – compile, review, and validate election results.

The process starts once all the ballots – those voted at the polls and absentee – have been fed into the voting tabulators and the polls are officially closed. Then, the poll workers will convene what is known as the board of local canvassers. The board of local canvassers is typically composed of the same individuals who served as poll workers from 7 a.m. to 8 p.m. This activity is a public meeting, and the media and public are welcome to attend and record what happens.

The voting equipment will be switched into reporting mode and will print a results tape, which will be read aloud, announcing the vote totals for that polling place. The poll workers will also take care of administrative work, including sealing ballot bags and filling out chain-of-custody reports required before taking everything to the municipal clerk, who will conduct the municipal canvass along with two other canvassers appointed by the clerk.

Municipal clerks have a statutory deadline of 4 p.m. the Wednesday after the election to deliver election materials to the county clerk. However, the county or state canvass may send materials back if there are any issues that need to be corrected.

Municipalities are required to post the number of provisional ballots on the internet on Election Night. Provisional ballots can be issued in two circumstances: if the voter does not have an acceptable photo ID; or if the voter registering on Election Day cannot provide the number on their driver license or state ID card, if they have one.

Voters have until 8 p.m. on Election Day or 4 p.m. on Friday, Nov. 8 to bring an acceptable photo ID to the municipal clerk's office to have their vote counted. Voters who registered on Election Day and did not present their driver license or state ID card number (if they have one) have until 4 p.m. on the Wednesday after Election Day to provide the number to the municipal clerk.

Further Certifying the Vote

The next major step of the certification process is at the county level. Counties must convene their boards of canvassers by 9 a.m. on Tuesday, Nov. 12 to begin certifying official results. The county board of canvassers is made up of the county clerk and two other people.

County clerks are elected on a partisan basis, so one of the other two members must be from the opposite party of the county clerk. While it may occur sooner, the deadline for counties to provide certified results to the Wisconsin Elections Commission is Tuesday, Nov. 19.

In the final step of the certification process, the WEC staff receive results from the counties, recheck all the counties' numbers and combine them to arrive at totals for legislative, congressional, and statewide races. The statutory deadline for the Chair of the WEC to certify statewide results is Dec. 1, 2024.

Unlike all other state-level contests that the Chair of the Commission does certify, the Chair does not certify the presidential race and there is no certificate of election in a presidential contest. Instead, the law requires that the Chair determine the result of the contest based on the certified result statements submitted by each of the 72 counties. As part of this process, a copy of the canvass determination for president and a statement of ascertainment will be sent to the Governor's office. This document is then given to the slate of presidential electors for the certified winner of the Presidential race.

Central Count Absentee Ballot Processing

Currently, 42 cities, villages and towns in Wisconsin count all their absentee ballots at a central facility. The other municipalities process their absentee ballots at their polling places on Election Day.

Central count facilities are open to public and media observation. No voting takes place at these facilities and election inspectors will be reviewing return envelopes for required information before recording these ballots in the poll book. Once a voter number is assigned to the voter, each envelope will be opened, the ballot will be removed and flattened, and the ballot will then be processed on the voting equipment.

The processing of absentee ballots (ensuring the envelope has sufficient information, opening up the envelope and running the ballot through the tabulator) cannot occur until 7 a.m. on Election Day.

Several large cities, including Milwaukee, Green Bay, Kenosha, Racine and Wausau, count their absentee ballots centrally. A full list of the municipalities which use central count can be found here:

<https://elections.wi.gov/central-count-absentee-ballot-municipalities>.

It is important for the media and the public to understand the difference between places that count absentee ballots at polling places and central locations for two reasons. First, voters in central count municipalities cannot return their absentee ballots to the polling place on Election Day. They must return them to their clerk's office or the central count location. This information is included in the instructions voters receive, but it can be challenging for election officials and the media to communicate this information broadly without potentially confusing voters.

The other important difference is that unofficial Election Night results from central count municipalities may not all arrive in the county clerk's office at the same time. This has caused some confusion in the past. County websites should have clear notices about whether the unofficial results are complete.

Unofficial election results from municipalities that use central count may be provided to the county clerks and the public in two different phases. The initial results will either be the totals from ballots cast in person at the polling place on Election Day or may be the totals from absentee ballots processed at central count. Once both results sets are available, the vote totals from absentee ballots will be added to the polling place totals and complete results sets for each ward will then be posted.

Results for each ward in the municipality, or municipalities, that use central count to process absentee ballots should not be considered as complete until all absentee totals have been added to the polling place totals.

Importantly, municipal clerks, shortly after polls close, will post the total number of returned absentee ballots for their municipality on their website, so the public will know the additional number of absentees that will be added into the municipality's totals by the end of the night.

Recount Rules for State-Level and National Contests

Wisconsin does not have automatic recounts, even if the unofficial results are extremely close. A contest has to have a margin of 1% or less of the total votes for the office between the leading and trailing candidates to qualify for a recount. A trailing candidate who wants to ask for a recount must wait until the last day a county board of canvassers meets, which is at least one week after the election. The deadline for requesting a recount for most contests is three business days after the Elections Commission receives the last statement from a county board of canvassers. However, for the presidential contest, it is one business day.

There is no cost to the trailing candidate if the difference between the leading candidate is 0.25% or less of the total votes for the office. If the difference is more than 0.25%, the WEC will estimate the cost, which must be paid before the recount begins.

More information about recounts is available here: <https://elections.wi.gov/elections/recounts>.