



Wisconsin Elections Commission

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Media Advisory: Covering the 2023 Spring Election

MADISON, Wis. – Due to heightened interest in covering Wisconsin’s April 4, 2023 Spring Election, the Wisconsin Elections Commission (WEC) staff is highlighting points from its Election Administration and Election Day Manuals. This advisory is designed to answer many frequently asked questions, provide transparency about the Wisconsin election process, and aid news media in planning and executing coverage.

At the Polling Place

Media may be inside polling places on Election Day, subject to most restrictions on other election observers. Please refer to our election observer brochure for details:

<https://elections.wi.gov/resources/brochures/wisconsin-election-observer-rules-glance-brochure>

Please note that the information found in this section, the brochure, and 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.

Media may record sound, images, and video for short periods of time inside the polling place as long as it is not disruptive. In addition to professional photo and video gear, you may use cell phones or tablets to take pictures and video, something regular observers are asked not to do. However, no media may broadcast live or tape reports (stand-ups) from within a polling place 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 them who you are and what organization you represent. The Chief Inspector keeps a list of media, but you are not required to sign in. You may not contact (interview) voters when they are in line waiting to vote. The area within 100 feet from any entrance to a polling place is an electioneering-free zone. The only people authorized to have contact with voters in this zone prior to voting are election workers. Please do not take images/video of voters’ faces as they’re going into polling places, which some voters could find intimidating. Photographing lines of voters 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 plan to ask voters questions about candidates or issues on the ballot, these discussions must take place away from voters who may be entering the polling place or waiting in line to enter so they do not hear your interview. The best sources of information about polling places are municipal clerks, who are responsible for operating them. They can let you know which location might work best for news coverage. A directory of clerks is on our website: <https://elections.wi.gov/clerks/directory>. A list of polling place locations is available here: <https://elections.wi.gov/elections>. Click on “2023 Spring Election Polling Place Listing.xlsx”.

Wisconsin Elections Commissioners

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

Administrator
Meagan Wolfe

Election Day Information and Misinformation

Wisconsin will have 3,662 polling places on April 4, not including 38 central count processing facilities. Due to the decentralized nature of Wisconsin's election system, the Elections Commission has very little real-time information about turnout or what's happening inside or outside polling places. If you get tips about problems at a polling place, or you seek turnout information, 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. For updates on how voting is going on Election Day, follow our [Twitter feed](#). We will be monitoring social media and putting out correct information if we see issues with misinformation or disinformation regarding the election. If you see or hear something questionable at polling places, or on social media, please contact the WEC so staff are made aware of any potential problems.

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

Counting and Reporting on Election Night

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 to which you can subscribe. 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>.

Polls 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. 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. The most 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.

Election Night declarations of victory by a candidate are never based on official results but instead rely on incomplete results that are available at the time. There are **three steps** to Wisconsin's certification process. The **first step** starts once all the ballots have been fed into the voting equipment and the polls are officially closed. Then, the poll workers will convene what is known as the board of local canvassers. 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. Members of the public and the media may also view or photograph the results tapes from voting equipment. 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.

Municipal clerks provide unofficial results to their county clerks, who will post them to the county's website. In some locations, unofficial results are transmitted from the polling place to the county clerk's office by the voting equipment. This is generally done via a secure, encrypted cellular telephone transmission. 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. Usually, this process takes much less time. Municipal clerks have a statutory deadline of 4 p.m. the Wednesday after the election to deliver election materials to the county clerk.

Municipalities are required to post the number of provisional ballots on the internet on Election Night. Provisional ballots are issued to voters who do not have an acceptable ID on Election Day; these numbers are usually very small. Even more rarely, voters registering on Election Day who cannot provide the number on

their driver license or state ID (if they have one) would also receive a provisional ballot. Voters who are given a provisional ballot have until 8 p.m. on Election Day or 4 p.m. on Friday, April 7 to bring an acceptable photo ID (or their DL/ID number) to the municipal clerk's office to have their vote counted.

Further Certifying the Vote

The **second step** of the certification process is at the county level. Counties must convene their boards of canvassers no later than 9 a.m. on Tuesday, April 11 to begin canvassing 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 we expect official results to come in relatively quickly the week after the election, the deadline for counties to provide certified results to the Wisconsin Elections Commission is Friday, April 14.

In the **third step** of the certification process, the WEC staff receive results from the counties, review all the counties' numbers and combine them to arrive at totals for statewide races. The statutory deadline for the Chair of the WEC to certify statewide results is Monday, May 15. Please be aware that recounts may occur and could alter some of these deadlines for certain contests.

Central Count Absentee Ballot Processing

Currently, 38 cities, villages and towns in Wisconsin count all their **absentee ballots** at a central facility. The other approximately 1,811 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.

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 is on the WEC website.

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, and the WEC has worked closely with county clerks to ensure that visitors to their websites receive 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 could 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. ***Unofficial 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.***

Recounts

Wisconsin does not have automatic recounts, even if the unofficial results are extremely close. A contest must have a margin of 1% or less between the top two candidates to qualify for a recount. A trailing state-level 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 is three business days after the

Elections Commission receives the last statement from a county board of canvassers. There is no cost to the trailing candidate if the difference between the leading candidate is 0.25% or less. If the difference is more than 0.25%, the WEC will estimate the cost, which must be paid before the recount begins. Our website has [much more information](#) about recounts.

Severe Weather

The Wisconsin Elections Commission will monitor the weather on Election Day with the help of Wisconsin Emergency Management. State law does not provide for specific weather contingencies. However, severe weather is a common contingency for which we ask local election officials to prepare. We provide a template and require contingency plans to be drafted as part of some federal subgrants. Plans include contingencies for moving a polling place or temporarily securing personnel and materials in the event of an emergency.

If a polling place were unavailable for a period of time on Election Day due to an emergency, a jurisdiction could petition their local court to extend polling hours.

Once the polls close and tabulation begins, the statutes do not allow for an adjournment and reconvening, even in an emergency. In that instance, the poll workers would have to exercise their emergency plans to secure personnel and materials or relocate during an emergency and resume as soon as they are able.

To ensure safety and security during inclement weather, we instruct clerks to monitor and be in communication with local law enforcement, emergency responders, and Chief Election Inspectors. Safety of human life is the first concern.