

Government Accountability Board

State of Wisconsin

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Wisconsin Remains among Top States in Elections

MADISON, WI – Wisconsin’s elections ranked third best in the nation in November 2012, according to the latest comprehensive study of U.S. elections by the Pew Center on the States.

“Pew’s rankings continue to reflect very well on the state of Wisconsin, its engaged voters and the thousands of local election officials who serve them,” said Kevin J. Kennedy, the state’s chief election officer. “For Wisconsin policymakers and residents, it provides a solid basis for confidence in our elections, but it also gives us a focus on areas where we can better serve our voters. These areas include adding online voter registration, improving service to military voters and to voters with disabilities.”

Pew released its first Elections Performance Index in early 2013, which ranked Wisconsin first in the nation in 2008 and eighth in 2010. The index makes it possible for all 50 states and the District of Columbia to measure how well they conducted elections compared to other states and also over time. North Dakota and Minnesota ranked first and second for 2012.

Full details of the study, including interactive graphics, are available at: www.pewstates.org/epi.

Areas Where Wisconsin Excelled

Kennedy said two factors contributed to Wisconsin’s consistently ranking as a high-performing state: having some of the highest voter turnout and registration rates in 2008 and 2012, and offering all voting information lookup tools in both years on the Government Accountability Board’s voter services website: <http://myvote.wi.gov>. Wisconsin was one of 10 states to provide full access to essential voter information on its website in 2012, including voter registration status, sample ballot information and polling place location.

Other pluses for Wisconsin are low rates of non-voting due to registration or absentee ballot problems, few provisional ballots and comparatively short wait times.

Wisconsin got high marks from Pew for its “dramatically improved” data reporting between 2008 and 2012. “The state faced tremendous barriers to collecting data from its 1,852 election jurisdictions, yet its concerted effort to create an online Web form that municipalities can use to submit data has been lauded by The Pew Charitable Trusts and by the Presidential Commission on Election Administration in its 2014 report,” Pew officials said in the report.

Areas Where Wisconsin Can Do Better

One reason Wisconsin lost points in the Pew Elections Performance Index is because the state does not have online voter registration. In 2012, 13 states including Arizona, Indiana and Utah had online voter registration. Since then, more states have added online registration, most recently Nebraska.

“Online voter registration is no longer cutting-edge. It is a well-established and essential tool for providing registration services to our voters,” Kennedy said. “We have worked with members of the Legislature on this issue, and a bill passed the Assembly this session.”

Pew also noted that Wisconsin “had a slight increase in the number of unreturned military and overseas ballots, and it had one of the highest rates in 2012. More research is needed to better understand the factors creating the increase and high rate.”

Kennedy said that in 2012 Wisconsin improved ballot delivery for military and overseas voters by allowing them to get their ballot online at <http://myvote.wi.gov>. Out of 3.08 million ballots cast in November 2012, Wisconsin issued 6,154 military ballots, and Kennedy said the next step is to find out why 1,889 of them were not returned. “We need to ensure we can properly engage our military voters,” he said.

According to Pew, another area where Wisconsin did worse in 2012 than in 2008 is disability or illness-related voting problems. The score is based on the U.S. Census Bureau’s Current Population Survey, which asks non-voters why they did not vote. This indicator captures the number of people who responded that they did not cast a ballot due to an “illness or disability (own or family’s).”

G.A.B. has a comprehensive program for assessing polling place compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act, which has been cited as a model for other states by the Presidential Commission on Election Administration.

Elections Division Administrator Michael Haas noted that while the Pew Index did not measure local control of elections, that is one attribute that likely contributed to Wisconsin’s high rankings. With 1,852 municipal clerks and 72 county clerks, Wisconsin has the most decentralized and locally-administered election system in the country. “While this structure creates some challenges in election administration, it is also a strength that in Wisconsin, for the most part, elections are run by the voters’ friends and neighbors,” Haas said.

About the Pew Elections Performance Index

Pew’s study allows states to measure election administration by looking at such indicators as wait times at polling locations, availability of voting information tools online, rejection of voter registrations, problems with registration or absentee ballots, rejection of military and overseas ballots, voter turnout, and accuracy of voting technology.

“We know common-sense solutions to improve elections exist. States are pioneering innovations that make a real difference in the efficiency and accuracy of their elections operations while also saving money,” said David Becker, director of Pew’s election initiatives project. “The Election Performance Index allows policymakers to pinpoint what’s working while also identifying areas where improvement is needed.”

Data for the study comes from public reports and academic research. Most importantly, the statistical information is consistently gathered across states and over a period of several election cycles. This enables election officials, scholars, and the general public to compare a state’s performance over time and in conjunction with other states.

For the study, Pew created an index of 17 statistical measures of election administration under the direction of Professor Charles Stewart of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, in consultation with a group of state and local election officials, academic scholars and information technology specialists. Kennedy and UW Political Science Professor Barry Burden served on the study group.

The Pew Center on the States has dedicated significant resources to evaluating and modernizing elections in the United States. Pew involves state and local election officials, noted academic scholars, and industry leaders in its efforts. The Elections Performance Index provides a look behind the curtain of this essential element of our governmental process. Now this information is readily available for members of the public to see for themselves.

Wisconsin dropped from first to eighth between 2008 and 2010 because two of the 17 statistics for which Wisconsin received high marks were not included in 2010: voting technology accuracy and voting wait times.

Kennedy said one of the benefits of the Elections Performance Index is to help all states improve by learning from examples of others. “We’d love to see 51 jurisdictions tied for first place,” he said.

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The Government Accountability Board is responsible for administration and enforcement of campaign finance, elections, ethics and lobbying laws in Wisconsin. The board is made up of six non-partisan, former judges and is supported by an agency of non-partisan staff members. Additional information about the mission of the Government Accountability Board is available by telephone at **608-266-8005**, by email at **gab@wi.gov**, or online at **<http://gab.wi.gov>**.