

Election Administration Discussion/Consensus Guide (Amended) January 13, 2009

With the November 2008 Presidential Election behind us, many questions and suggestions have surfaced. Based on your own experiences, on the information you have obtained from your clerks, from poll workers, and your own readings, consider the following questions:

Early Voting Vs. Absentee Voting

When faced with the lines and other problems with the in-person absentee voting in the days before the election, a number of officials have suggested that Wisconsin move to an early voting system.

In true early voting the voter checks in to verify her/his registration (or registers then), obtains and marks a ballot, and inserts it in the optic scanner machine to be counted. If there is any problem with the ballot the machine rejects it so that the voter can correct the problem. This is a shorter process than checking registration, applying for an absentee ballot, obtaining and marking the ballot, filling out and checking the envelope for the absentee ballot (with signatures of both voter and election official) and the sealed envelope being checked against the poll list.

Then, of course, there is the process of counting the absentee ballots. In November twenty municipalities counted absentee ballots in a central location. The rest were delivered to their proper ward to be counted there whenever voting volume allowed. In each case, the name on the absentee ballot envelope is read aloud, the ward on the ballot is verified with the ward on the outside of the envelope, a voter number is written on the envelope and on the ballot and checked off the list of numbers, ballot is straightened and inserted in the machine to be counted. If the machine rejects the ballot, two or three persons must attempt to determine the intent of the voter and reconstruct the ballot if possible using the same number.

Proponents of early voting believe it will reduce the administrative work, increase accuracy and reduce lines both during early voting and at the polls on election day. There are concerns about added costs to municipalities for new machines and for staffing. How would the running totals be protected from leaks or tampering? How would an early voter be kept from voting again on election day? Government Accountability Board director Kevin Kennedy has started a review of best practices in other states with early voting.

For additional opinions you may wish to read "A Better Vote," NY Times 11/9/08 and "Voting Alone," Washington Post 11/5/08.

DISCUSS: What are the advantages and disadvantages of early voting vs. in-person absentee voting?

CONSENSUS: Should Wisconsin move to a true early voting system? _____

If so:

What precautions should be included? _____

Should the state provide additional resources to municipalities for early voting, possibly based on the percentage of absentee/early voters in the last presidential election?

Expanding Access to the Polls

Review the paper the state League provided in the spring and decide what measures would be the most effective and suitable to Wisconsin to expand access to the polls. Rate the following in preferential order:

- expanding voting hours _____
- weekend voting _____
- school holiday election day _____
- election day state holiday _____
- internet voting _____
- voting by mail _____
- early voting _____

Statewide Voter Registration System (SVRS) Matching, Non-matches and Purging

Thanks to the Attorney-General Van Hollen pre-election lawsuit, there has been much discussion of matching the new registrations on the SVRS with their driver's license or social security information. On August 6, 2008 the software was in place to match new voter registrations against the Department of Transportation or Social Security lists. On August 23rd the checking process became mandatory for all new voter applications entered into the system.

Since then, local municipalities have "run" the matches and made efforts to clear up the non-matches. Many were found to be data entry errors or simple differences like a middle initial missing, or name format and spacing differences. The purpose of the HAVA check process is to improve the quality of the data in the SVRS. It was never intended to determine a voter's eligibility to vote.

Fortunately, in Wisconsin, if a name was improperly struck from the registration list and the voter arrived at the polls and found her name missing from the registration list, she had the option to re-register and vote.

The Government Accountability Board is in the process of setting standards, procedures and a timetable for the **state** to run all the retroactive checks for new registrations from January 1, 2006 to the date the checks were started. It is felt that having the state do the checks will assure uniformity, efficiency (municipalities can only check one name at a time), and reduce a significant burden on local officials. Final action on this process was postponed by the GAB at its December 17, 2008 meeting. Check the GAB website for updates: www.elections.state.wis.gov.

DISCUSS: Should the authority for setting these procedures remain with the Government Accountability Board or should it be a function of the legislature?

At their December 17, 2008 meeting the GAB decided to have the state rather than the local municipalities do the Four-Year voter record maintenance required by Wisconsin statutes – purging the registration lists of those who have not voted in four years. After checking the SVRS for non-voters, the state would send a notice to the voters asking if they wish to continue on the rolls. If the person does not respond in thirty days, the name will be marked “inactive – 4 year maintenance” in the SVRS and the name will not appear on the poll lists. The League should stay attentive so that this process does not unnecessarily eliminate voters from the registration lists.

DISCUSS: It IS current law, but should not voting in four years remove you from the voting list?

CONSENSUS: Should the use of the HAVA checks of new registrations against other state databases remain a function of improving the quality of the Statewide Voter Registration lists? Yes_____ No_____

Or should it be used to determine voter eligibility resulting in purging names from the SVRS? Yes_____ No_____

COMMENTS:

Additional issues the League should address?

Thank you for getting the local League responses to the state office by February 20, 2009