

Comments on the 2008 November Elections -- A Summary of Election Clerk Interviews by Local Leagues in Wisconsin

According to most voters in Wisconsin the election in November 2008 ran smoothly. There were lines, particularly at the opening of the polls, but they moved fairly smoothly. There seemed to have been few machine or ballot problems. There seemed to be minimal challenges and accusations of election fraud.

But what about Wisconsin's election officials? Wisconsin's municipal and county clerks administer probably the most decentralized election system in the country, yet those clerks the local Leagues interviewed felt that this election went fairly smoothly.

Statewide Voter Registration System

The majority of clerks felt that the Statewide Voter Registration System (SVRS) had worked well, particularly after the initial glitches and bugs were worked out. Most concerns were with the speed of the system when entering the names of new registrants. Although it has improved since the Spring 2008 election it still needs more speed. In particular, the system is slow when assigning a registration number to the new voter; after entering a new voter's data, the clerk must wait for the state to provide that number. One staff member clocked the time at one to three minutes to enter each new registrant.

In Milwaukee, the election commission hired a temp agency with experience with the SVRS and still needed additional time to enter all the election day registrants. Other clerks reported twelve-hour days prior to the election. Speed of the system seemed to present challenges from the smallest jurisdictions to the largest.

Accuracy presented problems primarily when names were struck from the list inappropriately because of similarity to a name elsewhere in the state. That resulted in some cases of longtime voters having to reregister on election day.

Those clerks reporting considerable voter use of the Voter Public Access site (vpa.wi.gov) said it did seem to cut down on last minute calls to their offices but also had people reporting trouble with the need for an exact match to the voter's name to check on registration status. Less trouble was found with voters checking the location of polling places by address.

Matches

When dealing with the new registrations that didn't match with the motor vehicle or Social Security data, most election officials found that the problems were minor and frequently their entry errors. Many records could be corrected in smaller municipalities. . However, about 40,000 to 50,000 letters were sent out to city of Milwaukee non-matches for the new registrations from August 2008 to election day. If the city had been required to do the follow-up on the new registrations back to January 2006, it would have been a huge challenge and a significant burden. Because the state GAB staff can process the

matches in batches as opposed to the one-at-a-time processing required for a municipality, it does look as though the state will do that processing.

Absentee Ballots

No doubt about it. More people cast absentee ballots in 2008 than did in 2004. At least twice as many. There was also a drastic reversal in the percentages of those votes that were cast as in-person absentees vs. mail-in ballots when comparing those two presidential elections. Not only were the numbers so much higher, but in-person absentee ballots were at least 80% of the absentee ballots cast.

To handle the pressures of increased in-person absentee voters, municipalities set up separate places to keep the lines out of clerks' offices, offered longer hours, and hired extra personnel. About 15 – 20% of the people casting in-person absentee ballots were also registering or re-registering. In fact, some clerks reported urging people who came into the office to register to go ahead and vote to make things simpler for them and for the clerks.

Obviously, there were some complaints about the long lines. Some voters complained that there was not the privacy they were used to at regular polling places. Others expressed concern that their ballot was not run through the machine and counted on the spot. That would have been true "early" voting, which is not yet a choice in Wisconsin. As to what might be required to get to true "early" voting, the clerks discussed machine, security and personnel needs.

Poll Workers

The municipal election officers mostly felt that they were adequately staffed in November 2008 as a result of varied campaigns to recruit poll workers. Among the more successful recruitment techniques were media requests including cable and public access, repeated requests at meetings of civic organizations, press releases, accepting internet applications, recruiting in other city departments and using high school students. High school students or other untrained volunteers frequently acted as greeters making lines move smoothly.

Milwaukee was particularly pleased with the relationship with Alverno College. Classes at Alverno were suspended on election day and pre-election training sessions for poll workers were arranged on campus to encourage their working at the polls. A few corporations were also very encouraging to poll workers including not requiring a day of vacation to be spent by working at the polls. They also made good use of managers in other city departments, although they reported no luck in recruiting either county or state employees.

Election Day Activities

Most clerks reported adequate ballots at polling places, and anywhere from no problems to less than 2% problems with voting machines. All clerks interviewed had done the required public test of each voting machine to be used. The only audits reported were those required by the state GAB.

Election day registration and re-registration totals appeared to be down slightly in 2008 as compared to 2004. This could be the result of the many strong, pre-election registration drives. It could also be a reflection of the high number of in-person absentee voters including many who were also registering at that time.

Election observers were a presence mostly in larger communities. Some of the observers objected to the new rules promulgated by the GAB, particularly the sign-in requirement. Those communities without election observers still appreciated the new, more stringent GAB rules.

Generally the election proceeded much more smoothly than the 2004 election, helped by measures such as dividing the poll lists alphabetically, using greeters, adequate staffing and an improved SVRS.

Some General Observations

When asked for other comments or suggestions for future League study and action, clerks talked about speeding up the SVRS, getting more poll workers including urging business cooperation, as well as a number of problems with paid special registration deputies. The problems with fraudulent registrations occurred only with organizations that paid the registrars. There were no problems, for instance, with League of Women Voters or other volunteer registrars. Proposals that would call for some sort of universal voter registration are worth study and might very well be the future. There was also talk about proposals for improved early voting that would involve votes being counted when cast.

If local Leagues would like more discussion of clerk interviews, particularly those done in Spring 2008, ask for a copy of an excellent report of their Election Administration Study prepared by the Stevens Point League. It is dated November 2008. They interviewed 26 (out of 30) of the election clerks and deputy clerks in Portage County. They also conducted an excellent forum on Voting Rights and Election Administration on September 18th. Their summary report makes good reading!