

State of Wisconsin\Government Accountability Board

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An Examination of Early Voting in Wisconsin

Executive Summary

The Government Accountability Board (G.A.B.) has examined the feasibility of implementing early voting in Wisconsin. True early voting allows the elector to complete and cast a ballot immediately by placing it in a tabulation machine. Early voting would significantly reduce the need for absentee applications and envelopes. Benefits and challenges to the implementation of early voting are summarized below.

Objectives

Increase voter satisfaction by reducing lines, maintain integrity of the vote-counting process, relieve the workload of local elections officials, and control costs.

Challenges

Some obvious challenges include identifying funding sources to:

- Maintain municipal-level control of elections while extending early voting to electors uniformly across the state;
- Acquire new tabulating machines that can accommodate multiple ballot styles from an entire city or county, instead of a few wards; and,
- Compensation for additional staff, implementation of electronic poll lists, or a workable substitute.

Background and Best Practices

A study of early voting in other states has produced best practices that should be considered for implementing early voting in Wisconsin. These include:

1. Time Period: Begin early voting about 20 days before an election. End at least 3 days before an election so officials may prepare for Election Day.
2. Hours: Set minimum hours at permanent early vote locations that can be extended at the discretion of election officials. Some Saturday hours should be required and Sunday hours should be optional.

3. Staff: Staff early voting locations similarly to that of polling place locations on Election Day, with a minimum of two election officials.
4. E-Poll List: Electronic poll lists are very helpful because they allow poll workers to immediately mark the poll list when an early vote is cast; thereby, preventing any duplicate voting.
5. Voting Equipment: Studies suggest the best practice is to use Direct Recording Equipment (DRE) systems because they can hold a multiple number of ballot styles, and there is no need for a printed ballot. However, early voting can be adapted to optical scan systems currently in use.
6. Other: Accessibility requirements, electioneering, election observer, and ballot challenges should follow the same rules as on Election Day.

Recommendations

Based on a review of other states' early vote best practices, G.A.B. has identified three viable options to consider for changing pre-Election Day (absentee) voting in Wisconsin.

- **Option A - Regional Districts conduct early voting**: Provides for regional districts consisting of counties and/or municipalities that would offer early voting at designated locations. Municipal, county, or state staff members would organize the machines, staff and supplies necessary. This would provide uniform access for voters interested in early voting, but it would change Wisconsin's tradition of municipal-level control of elections.
- **Option B - Municipalities may opt into early voting as desired**: The municipality's governing body could opt into early voting instead of offering no-excuse absentee voting in the municipal clerk's office. Clerks may choose one or more early voting locations. This would provide maximum flexibility for municipalities, but would not lead to statewide uniformity. With this option, traditional methods of absentee voting will continue, such as by mail, hospitalized, military, and permanent absentee voting for indefinite confined electors.
- **Option C - No true early voting, but absentee voting process is streamlined**: Wisconsin does not change to true early voting, but instead alters and streamlines its absentee requirements. No absentee application would be required. Instead of placing the ballot in an envelope, the ballot would be placed in a secure carrier, to be fed into a voting machine and tabulated on Election Day.

Pilot Program

G.A.B. recommends a pilot early voting program for the April 2010 election. A demonstration would provide valuable information on strategies that work well in Wisconsin's highly decentralized electoral process, and which approaches do not. Pre-testing the early vote concept in select municipalities would also invite voluntary participation by local elections officials and help ameliorate the cost of required equipment and staff.

A pilot program would be based on one of the aforementioned options described. A wide variety of municipalities would be included, i.e., large/small, urban/rural, cities/counties, and towns/villages, etc. G.A.B. staff would oversee the early voting demonstration process, evaluate results, make significant changes to the Statewide Voter Registration System software to facilitate early voting, and based on the results, recommend changes as necessary. Depending on whether Options A, B, or C was selected, the estimated costs could range between \$398,040 and \$449,100. The details of the fiscal impacts are delineated in the in-depth review and analysis of early voting in Wisconsin.

Dissemination/Communication Plan

G.A.B. will broadly disseminate this examination of early voting and continue to gather input from local election officials and others, including clerks representing large and small populations and a diversity of demographics. G.A.B. will also communicate with elected officials, community partners, and voters directly. Communications will include face-to-face meetings with groups such as the Wisconsin Republican, Democratic, Green, Independent, and Libertarian political parties, the League of Women Voters, the Wisconsin Counties and Towns Associations, and Disability Rights Wisconsin, and others.