

Early Voting Listening Session – Clerks’ Session
Brown County Central Library
August 4, 2009
Green Bay, WI

Notes and Feedback

Attendance: 89

- Notes and Feedback on Early Voting in General

1. Some clerks stated that they believed that same day registration was the cause of line delays in November 2008, and that eliminating same day registration would also eliminate the problem with lines. The fact that there are no other states that run voting with same day registration was pointed out as well.

2. The need for early voting was questioned several times. The low turnout for spring elections, and elections outside of the presidential and gubernatorial elections, would make early voting unnecessary in those elections. As for early voting overall, Wisconsin’s voter turnout, second-highest in the nation, was given as proof that the current system is working well. Wisconsin’s excellent ratings in voter satisfaction was also offered as proof that the current system is working well and that any changes are unnecessary.

3. A lack of voter education and the voters themselves were cited as reasons for the lines and delays in November 2008. It was felt that the large number of same day registrants was due to voters being “lazy”, and that the large numbers of voters coming into the clerks’ offices on the days right before the election was due to voter “procrastination”. It was felt that voters do not take responsibility and thus cause issues during the elections. Suggestions for improving this situation were funding voter education of the current system instead of pursuing early voting, and better publicizing the beginning of the in-person absentee voting period in order to spread out the in-person absentee voters.

4. There were concerns about the public perception of voting integrity and voter experience with satellite locations. It was stated that the clerk not being on-site to assist clerks would result in a degraded experience, and that it is unfair to entrust poll workers to deal with difficult, confusing issues without the clerk being present. It was suggested that there would have to be a clear chain-of-command

and procedure to placate interest groups and the media's worries about ballot integrity at satellite locations.

5. There were suggestions that ballots be placed in their correct machines on Monday, having been sorting the ballots as they came in, which would help with the administrative issues that early voting is seeking to solve. One clerk noted that their municipality had poll workers volunteering on Monday to come in and sort their in-person absentees, which made things much easier administratively. The suggestion was that improvements to the system be done through administrative "baby steps" instead of dramatic overhauls.

6. The clerks wanted to know whether it would require legislative action to implement early voting, and if so, what the timeline for any legislation might be. Edward Edney of the G.A.B. stated that early voting would require legislative action, but that currently there is no timeline for any changes, if there would even be any changes at all.

- Notes and Feedback on SVRS, E-poll Lists, Technology

1. General concerns about the reliability and usability of SVRS were expressed, particularly in terms of using SVRS as an e-poll list. One municipal clerk noted that SVRS does not allow their municipality to have the correct ballot styles represented in the system. Another felt that there are more pressing fixes with the current SVRS functionality that need to be made before new functionality is added. Still another said that an e-poll list sounds great, but had deep concerns about backup procedures if the system went down, as well as being able to convince voters that the system is secure.

2. One clerk stated that she thought that an e-poll list sounded great, but worried that it would be a significant or impossible challenge to print and distribute their entire municipality's poll books if they started the Friday evening before the election.

3. One clerk stated that they believed that having an e-poll list would make the current in-person absentee process faster, which would remove the need for early voting entirely.

4. It was noted that reliers do not have broadband Internet connectivity, which would mean that an e-poll list system through SVRS would not be a functional solution in their municipalities.

- Notes and Feedback on Early Voting Costs

1. The clerks felt strongly about costs that would be associated with the adoption of early voting. Some felt that they would be unable to justify the cost to their municipalities and counties, particularly when they did not feel early voting was necessary. The clerks stressed that they are cutting staffers due to budget cuts, and that they cannot take on additional expense.

2. One clerk stated that they don't have many walk-ins, but that they do have a significant number of mail-in absentee voters. This clerk wanted the G.A.B. and legislature to address ways to cut down on the expenses of the mail-in absentee voting system.

- Notes and Feedback on Option A, Regional Early Voting Districts

1. It was felt that voters would not drive farther distances to the county seat to take advantage of a regional early vote center, which would be a step backward in terms of convenience and voter satisfaction.

- Notes and Feedback on Option B, Municipalities Opt-In

1. The clerks wanted the G.A.B. to tread lightly around the word "optional", as it was felt that optional policies often become unfunded mandates.

2. Since one solution will not work for municipalities of greatly different sizes, one clerk stated that she liked the idea of early voting being based on a population threshold, instead of an opt-in/opt-out system.

- Notes and Feedback on Option C, Streamline In-Person Absentee

1. There was a feeling amongst the clerks that if there are problems with the in-person absentee system, then those problems should be addressed within the current system to see if a streamlined system would have the same issues. It was stressed that we should fix the current in-person absentee process before completely overhauling the system.

2. One clerk stated that the absentee ballot was "unnecessary" for in-person absentee voting, though they strongly supported them for mail-in absentee balloting.

3. Another clerk stated that the absentee envelope was needed for their municipality to sort ballots by ward. Putting all the ballots without envelopes into a box would make the sorting process for their municipality much harder.

4. It was suggested by one clerk that the absentee envelope be streamlined and altered so that if the envelope isn't signed, the ballot can still be tabulated on Election Day.