

Government Accountability Board

State of Wisconsin

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G.A.B. Recommends Changes to Absentee Voting

MADISON, WI – The Government Accountability Board today recommended changes to streamline Wisconsin’s in-person absentee voting process, including moving up the deadline for most in-person absentee voters from Monday to the Friday before the election.

The Board voted to adopt a staff report on early voting, prepared in response to the growing percentage of Wisconsinites who vote in local clerks’ offices before Election Day. Statewide, more than 21 percent cast absentee votes in the November 2008 election, compared to 6 percent in 2000.

Following the November 2008 general election, Kevin J. Kennedy, director and general counsel of the G.A.B., directed staff to study the issue and gather public feedback about options for early voting in Wisconsin. The staff recommended changes to absentee voting procedures designed to improve the process while at the same time maintaining the integrity of the ballot.

The Board took its action after hearing testimony from dozens of local election officials who pleaded for a change in the deadline for voting in the clerk’s office. Board staff had not recommended changing the deadlines. Many clerks said they were overwhelmed by the number of people voting early on the Monday before the November 2008 election, which affected their ability to adequately prepare for the election on Tuesday.

“I’m pleased the Board has listened to the public and local election officials in considering changes to absentee voting procedures in Wisconsin,” said Kennedy. “We believe the Board’s recommended changes to the Legislature will make absentee voting more efficient, more secure and more convenient for voters, while also easing the burden on our partners, Wisconsin’s 1,850 municipal clerks.”

Highlights of the Board recommendations:

- Moving the start of in-person absentee voting from 30 to 20 days before the election;
- Moving the deadline for no-excuse in-person absentee voting from 5 p.m. the Monday before the election to 5 p.m. the Friday before the election. Voters could still vote absentee until 5 p.m. Monday if they sign an affidavit stating they are unable to make it to the polling place on Election Day. Until 2000, all absentee ballots applications required an excuse.
- Allowing for multiple in-person absentee voting locations outside of – or in addition to – the municipal clerk’s office;

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- Replacing the absentee application with a sign-in sheet for in-person absentee voters;
- Removing the certification and signature requirements for the in-person absentee envelope, while implementing the use of a simplified ballot security envelope.

“Comments from the public greatly influenced the outcome of this process,” said Nathaniel E. Robinson, Elections Division administrator. “I’m very proud of the staff’s efforts in studying this issue and involving the public in the process.” Robinson said the report and recommendations were the product of intense staff research and many forums held around the state over this past spring and summer to engage the public and local election officials and solicit initial reaction.

The recommendations adopted by the Board to change current voting procedures will require approval by the Legislature and the Governor before implementation.

The Board’s final report will be posted by the end of December on its web site, <http://elections.state.wi.us/>.