

Absentee Voting Checks and Balances in Wisconsin

American elections serve as a model for the world, thanks to our rigorous system of checks and balances and our neighbors serving as election workers faithfully carrying out those duties.

Working in teams made up of people from both parties, poll workers and election officials count, canvass, and audit votes – whether they are cast in-person, by mail, or by service members overseas. These election workers verify voters' identities. They inspect ballots. They resolve errors. They confirm that every legal ballot is counted as voters intended them.

When these checks and balances are complete, then the final phase of our election process happens: certification. This is the straightforward step in the process where election officials declare the winners.

This memo outlines the numerous safeguards in Wisconsin that assure only eligible absentee votes are counted, from rigorous voter verification at the application stage to bipartisan teams reviewing ballots when they are returned. For greater detail about the post-election process and a detailed timeline, please [visit the rest of our series on checks and balances in Wisconsin elections](#).

Finally, this is nonpartisan educational research intended for 501(c)(3)-compliant purposes only. It is *not* to be used for any partisan, political, or electioneering activities by any organization.

All Wisconsin Voters are Eligible to Vote by Absentee Ballot

Mail voting is called "absentee voting" in Wisconsin. All voters are eligible to vote early by casting an absentee ballot.¹

Generally, voters will need to submit an application for a ballot for each election, but voters who are confined because of age, physical illness or infirmity, or are disabled for an indefinite period, may request an absentee ballot for all elections indefinitely with a single application.² The application for a single election and the application to join the permanent absentee voting list are the same.³

All Absentee Voters are Verified Before Being Sent a Ballot

A voter must already be registered to vote to request an absentee ballot. The voter registration application must include the voter's name, registration address, a mailing address (if different), prior registration information (if any), proof of residence, either a Wisconsin driver's license or ID number

¹ Wis. Stat. § 6.85(1)

² Wis. Stat. § 6.86(2)

³ https://www.rfcity.org/DocumentCenter/View/5025/EL-121-Application-for-Absentee-Ballot-Fillable_0-1

or the last four digits of a Social Security number, and a signature.⁴ To apply for an absentee ballot, the voter must provide a copy of their photo ID (or present one in person), except in specific circumstances.⁵

The clerk reviews the application and verifies that the voter has provided proof of identity and that the name on the identification matches the name on the application. The clerk also verifies that any photograph on the document reasonably resembles the voter.⁶

If the clerk approves the ballot application, then they will mail the voter an absentee ballot at their registered address.⁷

Returned Ballots are Verified by Teams of Professionals and Volunteers

Voters can return their ballots by mail, to a drop box, by hand to a clerk's office, to early voting locations, and to Election Day polling places or central count locations.⁸ All absentee ballots must be received by 8 p.m. on Election Day or in time for the clerk to deliver the ballot to the polling place or central count location by 8 p.m. in municipalities where absentee ballots will be counted there.⁹

Wisconsin law requires that a voter have a witness observe them voting. That witness must sign the absentee ballot envelope and write down their address. The voter must also sign the envelope.¹⁰

If an absentee ballot is returned with an incomplete or missing certificate, clerks may, but are not required to, return the ballot to the voter for correction whenever there is time to do so before ballots must be returned.¹¹

Once an absentee ballot has been returned to a designated location, the clerk will enclose it, unopened, in a carrier envelope which will be securely sealed and endorsed with the name and title of the clerk and a disclaimer that the envelope contains an absentee ballot that must be opened in the same manner as other ballots.¹²

Ballot processing must begin at any time between the opening and closing of polls on Election Day. In municipalities that have adopted an ordinance establishing an alternative process for canvassing absentee ballots, ballot verification must begin between the opening of polls and before 10 p.m. on Election Day.¹³ During processing, election inspectors open the carrier envelope and announce the

⁴https://elections.wi.gov/sites/default/files/legacy/2020-06/EI-131%2520Voter%2520Registration%2520App_Fillable-%2520%2528REV%25202020-06%2529_0.pdf

⁵ Wis. Stat. § 6.86(1)(ac), (ar)

⁶ Wis. Stat. § 6.86(1)(ac), (ar)

⁷ Wis. Stat. § 6.86(1)(ac), (ar)

⁸ Wis. Stat. § 6.87(3)(a), (4)(b); Wis. Stat. § 6.855(1); Election Administration Manual for Wisconsin Municipal Clerks, at 112; Statement to Clerks by the Wisconsin Election Commission, July 11, 2024, regarding drop boxes; *Priorities USA et al. v. Wisconsin Elections Commission et al.*, No. 2024AP164 (Wis. July 5, 2024).

⁹ Wis. Stat. § 6.87(6)

¹⁰ Wis. Stat. § 6.87(2)

¹¹ Wis. Stat. § 6.87(9)

¹² Wis. Stat. § 6.88(1)

¹³ Wis. Stat. § 6.88; Wis. Stat. § 7.52, Wis. Stat. § 6.87(9), "What Procedures Must Be Followed by the Clerk", Absentee Ballots, Wisconsin Elections Commission, Inbound and Outbound Absentee Ballot Considerations, Wisconsin Elections Commission.

name of the voter. If the inspector finds that the envelope certification has been properly executed, then they enter an indication on the poll list next to the voter's name indicating that they voted on an absentee ballot. Then the inspector opens the envelope containing the ballot and ensures that all required information has been provided.¹⁴

Voters Can Confirm Ballot Status through Online Ballot Tracking

While not required under existing law, Wisconsin provides online ballot tracking information as part of its online ballot application system, [MyVote Wisconsin](#). Voters can use the system to determine: if their ballot request has been received or processed; if their ballot has been sent; if their returned ballot has been received; if there was an issue with their returned ballot; when their ballot must be returned if it has not been returned already; and the options they have to return their ballot.¹⁵

Additional Steps Ensure Ballots Counted as Voters Intended

There are a number of additional checks and balances that apply to absentee and in-person ballots in Wisconsin. These include:

- Election officials test tabulation equipment prior to the election to make sure it is working correctly;
- Bipartisan teams of election workers tabulate ballots at polling places or central counting locations; and
- The bipartisan county board of canvassers conducts the county canvass at a meeting open to the public.

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¹⁴ Wis. Stat. § 6.88(3)(a)

¹⁵ <https://myvote.wi.gov/en-us/Track-My-Ballot>