

Checks And Balances In Wisconsin: The Post-Election Day Process

American elections are run by local and state officials alongside tens of thousands of our friends and neighbors from both political parties. These bipartisan teams count, canvass, and audit every ballot — whether in person or by mail — verifying identities, inspecting ballots, and ensuring each is counted as intended. This rigorous process leads to the final step: certification. This is the straightforward phase of the process, in which election officials declare the winners.

This memo outlines the checks and balances in Wisconsin that ensure all state and local rules are followed. Importantly, 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.

Counting: Technology and Bipartisan Oversight Work to Triple-check Results for Accuracy

Wisconsin law mandates specific processes for counting votes. Each of these processes requires participation by a team of bipartisan election officers and includes equipment testing and periodic reconciliation of results.

Quality-Tested Technology Leads to Trustworthy Results

Election workers count ballots using automatic tabulation equipment at each polling location or at a central counting location.¹ Ten days or fewer before the use of the tabulation machines, the equipment must be publicly tested for correctness and accuracy; the equipment must return an error-free count for the equipment to be used in the election.² Automatic tabulation at a polling location is performed immediately after polls close.³ The tabulation equipment totals the results and provides a results tape, or vote tally, that election inspectors must record on multiple official forms.⁴

¹ Wis. Stat § 5.84(1)

² Ibid.

³ Wis. Stat § 7.51(1)

⁴ Wis. Stat § 7.51(2)(g)

Both Parties Participate Throughout the Process

Polling places and central count locations must have a presiding chief election inspector with at least five other inspectors supporting the location.⁵ The two major political parties both submit nominees for election inspectors, and whenever two or more election inspectors are required to complete a task, the team is required to include an equal number of inspectors from each party.⁶

Upon completion of the vote tally, the bipartisan team of election inspectors completes an "inspector's statement," stating any discrepancy between the number of votes and the number of voters.⁷ A bipartisan group of at least three election inspectors publicly announces the results from the statement.⁸

The election inspectors must report the election results to the municipal clerk, seal their statement, and deliver all ballots, statements, tally sheets, and other election materials to the municipal clerk.⁹ Within two hours of completing the tally, the municipal clerk must then report the election results to the county clerk and deliver all ballots, statements, tally sheets, and other election materials to the county clerk.¹⁰ On election night, the county clerk posts all returns by ward or reporting unit on a website no later than two hours after receiving the returns.¹¹

Transparent Processes Instill Confidence

Any member of the public may observe the counting process.¹²

All municipalities with a population of 7,500 or more are required to use voting machines or electronic voting systems in every ward in the municipality at every election.¹³ However, any municipality may elect to use paper ballots and voting booths instead when certain conditions are met or if the municipality petitions to do so for a specific election.¹⁴

When paper ballots are used, they are deposited in a separate box and must be counted at that polling place.¹⁵ State law does not specify how hand counts must occur, but the Wisconsin Elections Commission (WEC) provides election officials with a recommended best practice.¹⁶ WEC recommends that one election official should read each ballot while a second election official observes, and two other election officials mark the votes on the

⁵ Wis. Stat § 7.30(1)(a)

⁶ Wis. Stat § 7.30(2)(a), § 7.30(4)(b)

⁷ Wis. Stat § 7.51(2)

⁸ Wis. Stat § 7.51(4)(a)

⁹ Wis. Stat § 7.51(5)(a)

¹⁰ Wis. Stat § 7.51(4)(c), § 7.51(5)(b)

¹¹ Wis. Stat § 7.60(1)

¹² Wis. Stat § 7.41

¹³ Wis. Stat § 5.40(1)

¹⁴ Wis. Stat § 5.40(3), § 5.40(5m)

¹⁵ Wis. Stat § 7.51(1), § 7.51(3)(c)

¹⁶ [2026 Election Law and Administration in Wisconsin: Manual for Statutory Requirements and Best Practices](#), pp. 171-172.

official tally sheets.¹⁷ At the end of the hand count, tally sheets are compared for accuracy and totals documented for each candidate.¹⁸

Canvassing: Results Checked and Compiled at Three Levels

Canvassing is the process of compiling vote totals reported in returns from throughout a jurisdiction. In Wisconsin, canvassing occurs at the municipal, county, and state level. The canvass statement is the official determination of the outcome of the election.¹⁹

Municipal Canvass: Accuracy Ensured at Each Polling Place

The municipal board of canvassers meets publicly after each election — regardless of whether any municipal offices or referenda were on the ballot — to canvass the results from each of the municipality’s precincts and make the official determination of the election. When a municipality only has one polling place, the election inspectors can serve as the municipal board of canvassers.²⁰ If a municipality has more than one polling place, then the municipal board of canvassers consists of the municipal clerk and two qualified voters of the municipality appointed by the clerk.²¹ In cities of over 500,000 people, the board of election commissioners serves as the municipal board of canvassers.²²

Absentee ballots may not be opened or counted until after polls open.²³ In municipalities with one polling place, if there are no provisional ballots or absentee ballots to be canvassed, the board completes and signs the canvass statement on election night.²⁴ If there are provisional ballots to be canvassed, the board must reconvene no later than 9 a.m. on the Monday after the election.²⁵ In municipalities with more than one polling place, the municipal board of canvassers may begin canvassing once all returns are received on election night and no later than 9 a.m. on the Monday after the election.²⁶ Upon completion of the canvass, the municipal clerk publicly reads the candidate that won each position and the number of votes tallied.²⁷

County Canvass: Bipartisan Determination of County Results

The county canvass is conducted by the county board of canvassers, which is composed of the county clerk and two qualified electors of the county who are appointed by the clerk, with one being from a different political party than the clerk.²⁸

¹⁷ 2026 Election Law and Administration in Wisconsin, p. 172.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Wis. Stat. § 7.53(1)-(2)

²⁰ Wis. Stat. § 7.53(1)(a)

²¹ Wis. Stat. § 7.53(2)(a)(1)

²² Wis. Stat. § 7.53(2)(c)

²³ Wis. Stat. § 6.88(3)(a)

²⁴ Wis. Stat. § 7.53(2)(a)(d)

²⁵ Wis. Stat. § 7.53(1)(a)

²⁶ Wis. Stat. § 7.53(2)(d)

²⁷ Wis. Stat. § 7.53(1)(a)

²⁸ Wis. Stat. § 7.60(2)

No later than 9 a.m. on the Tuesday after each election, the county board of canvassers publicly examines the returns and reviews the tally sheets and inspectors' statements from the municipal clerks.²⁹ The county board of canvassers prepares statements showing the total numbers of votes cast in the county for the offices of state officials, U.S. senators and representatives, state legislators, and others, including president and vice president in presidential election years.³⁰ With each statement, the board includes a tabulation of the votes cast at each election district, ward, or combination of wards in each county.³¹ Additionally, the county board of canvassers prepares a written determination, providing the names of anyone elected to county office.³² Each statement and determination is signed by each canvasser and provided to the county clerk or board of election commissioners.³³

State Canvass: Election Commission Publicly Examines All County Results

The state canvass is conducted by the state elections commission chairperson or their designee.³⁴ The chairperson publicly examines the county canvass statements and makes statements of the number of votes cast for each office.³⁵ The chairperson must canvass the returns and make the certifications on or before: the second Tuesday after a spring primary; May 15 after a spring election; the third Wednesday after a partisan primary; and December 1 after a general election.³⁶ The state canvass must be completed within 10 days after its commencement.³⁷

Certification: The Voters Have Spoken

Immediately after the county canvass, the county clerk delivers a certified copy of each statement of returns for the president, vice president, state officials, senators, representatives in Congress, state legislators, and others to the state elections commission.³⁸

The county clerk must deliver the original certified statement to the state elections commission no later than nine days after each primary (except the August partisan primary), no later than 10 days after the partisan primary and any other election except the general election, and no later than 14 days after the general election.³⁹

After the certified statements and returns are received, the chairperson of the state elections commission canvasses the statewide results. After the time to file a recount has passed, the chairperson certifies the winners of each state and national office.⁴⁰

²⁹ Wis. Stat § 7.60(3)

³⁰ Wis. Stat § 7.60(4)

³¹ Wis. Stat § 7.60(4)(c)

³² Wis. Stat § 7.60(4)(b)

³³ Wis. Stat § 7.60(4)(b) and (d)

³⁴ Wis. Stat § 7.70(3)(a)

³⁵ Wis. Stat § 7.70(3)(a), (b), and (d)

³⁶ Wis. Stat § 7.70(3)(a)

³⁷ Wis. Stat § 7.70(3)(c)

³⁸ Wis. Stat § 7.60(5)(a)

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Wis. Stat § 7.70(3)(b) and (g); §7.70(5)

Immediately after the time has expired to file for a recount, the municipal and county clerks also issue certificates of election to each person who is elected to municipal or county office.⁴¹ The issuing party does not need to wait for the time to expire if there is no aggrieved party.⁴²

The state elections commission must also prepare a similar certificate addressed to the U.S. House of Representatives, signed by the commission administrator, stating the names of all elected persons to the U.S. House of Representatives. The commission must also send a certificate of election, signed by the governor, to the president of the U.S. Senate stating the names of those elected.⁴³ For presidential electors, the commission also sends a certificate to the U.S. administrator of general services, signed by the governor, showing the determination of the results of the canvass and the names of those elected.⁴⁴ The governor also prepares and sends six duplicate originals of the certificate and delivers them to one of the presidential electors on or before the first Monday after the second Wednesday in December.⁴⁵

Secure Democracy Foundation is a nonpartisan, 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization building stronger elections, state by state. Our work is state-focused, informed by election policy insights from a national perspective, and realized by seizing common ground.

⁴¹ Wis. Stat § 7.60(6)

⁴² Wis. Stats § 7.60(6), 7.70(5)

⁴³ Wis. Stat § 7.70(5)(a)

⁴⁴ Wis. Stat § 7.70(5)(b)

⁴⁵ Ibid.