

The Experiences of Municipal Clerks and the Electorate in the November 2020 General Election in Wisconsin

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Executive Summary

Despite the many challenges that election officials and voters faced as a result of the pandemic and the spread of misinformation, surveys of both groups show that the 2020 general election in Wisconsin was a tremendous success.

The share of people voting by mail jumped to a record high, particularly among individuals concerned about the spread of the virus at polling places. The vast majority of municipal clerks procured adequate resources and sufficient numbers of poll workers to conduct the election, and they found ways to manage, albeit imperfectly, much higher volumes of absentee ballots. New resources such as grants to fund operations and National Guard members who served as poll workers helped to compensate for the greater demands on election officials managing massive increases in mail ballots and restrictions on polling place locations due to the pandemic. The vast majority of voters were served extremely well, although pockets of difficulty were experienced by some populations such as young people and voters with disabilities.

Perhaps reflecting their different experiences in 2020 and even before the pandemic, clerks disagree on some important policy proposals being considered in the wake of the election. They report sharply divergent views on whether it should be permissible to process absentee ballots before election day and whether drop boxes for collecting absentee ballots should be allowed. These opinions are strongly correlated with the sizes of the municipal populations that clerks serve. Among other differences, clerks from larger cities were much more likely to believe that misinformation about absentee voting was a serious problem and to favor some processing of absentee ballots before election day.

Despite the disruptions it caused, the 2020 experience did not alter the opinions of clerks about some election practices. Although most clerks support the right of people to vote by mail for any reason, a significant share believe, even after the pandemic experience, that absentee voting should be limited to a small group of voters who provide evidence that they cannot appear at their assigned polling places on election day.

Despite some pointed differences between clerks from the largest and smallest municipalities, clerks are largely in agreement on other policy proposals. Examples of consensus include not making the deadline for requesting absentee ballots to be any later than it is already, requiring photo IDs for most voters, and retaining traditional neighborhood polling places even if absentee voting continues to be common.

The 2020 election took its toll on election officials. After a long and trying election season, clerks report high levels of occupational burnout on several measures. In addition, a significant number of clerks report receiving more threatening or hostile messages than in previous presidential election cycles, especially in larger cities.

The survey shows more evidence of “status quo bias,” the tendency of officials is to keep practices as they are. Even after the tumult of the 2020 election cycles, a sizable share of clerks continue to oppose the opportunity to process absentee ballots before election day, resist handing over responsibilities to county clerks, and do not wish to do more public education.

Background and Overview

Elections held in Wisconsin in 2020 faced exceptional and unanticipated challenges. The most immediate challenge was the emergency created by the COVID-19 public health pandemic, which took hold in the state just as the April 7 presidential primary and spring election was approaching and quickly disrupted business, government, education, and social life. As the severity and understanding of the pandemic evolved throughout the calendar year, election administrators also faced additional challenges including proposed and actual changes to election practices as well as repeated allegations by public figures and media outlets about fraudulent activities and the vulnerabilities of the absentee voting system. But it was the pandemic that caused the most tangible challenges, forcing election officials to track down replacement poll workers, suitable polling places, and protective equipment, as well as motivating a large segment of the public to shift from traditional election day voting to new methods for receiving and returning absentee ballots.

The purpose of this report is to examine the experiences of both Wisconsin's municipal clerks and the electorate in the November 3 general election. That election selected presidential electors, eight members of Congress, 16 members of the State Senate, all 99 members of the State Assembly, and numerous county and municipal officials and ballot issues. Approximately 3.3 million Wisconsinites cast ballots, resulting in a voter turnout rate among the eligible population of more than 75%, one of the highest participation rates in the country and in Wisconsin history.¹ The WEC and the state's clerks processed a record number of absentee ballot requests and tabulated more absentee ballots than in any prior election.

Although it is unlikely that the state will ever again undergo a general election in such unusual and trying circumstances, it is nonetheless valuable to review the experiences of election administrators and the public. Doing so will help identify what developments from 2020 may carry over into subsequent elections and provide helpful insight to prepare for them. A review can also point to ways that the system can best prepare for elections held during other emergency situations resulting from calamities such as natural disasters or technical disruptions due to electronic system failures or malicious interference.

Research Methodology

This report relies primarily on surveys of municipal clerks and the Wisconsin electorate that were conducted in the spring of 2021. Although the experiences of the Wisconsin Elections Commission, media outlets, candidates, poll workers, and advocacy groups are also important, this report is limited to clerks and the public. The report does not focus on other elections that took place earlier in 2020 such as the April 7 spring election and presidential preference primary nor does it address directly post-election developments such as lawsuits, audits, or recounts that took place after November 3.

¹ United States Elections Project, "2020 November General Election Turnout Rates," <http://www.electproject.org/2020g>

The Wisconsin Elections Commission (WEC) has already produced helpful reports on both the April 7 election² and the November 3 general election.³ The agency also issued factual material to counter misinformation about the election.⁴ Using administrative data, those publications provide valuable documentation of how such things as the unprecedented traffic on the MyVote web site, a record number of contacts with WEC staff, and the handling of a massive increase in absentee ballots.

To complement those studies, this report draws on the firsthand experiences of the clerks who administer elections in the state's 1,850 municipalities and a representative sample of the eligible electorate in Wisconsin. The focus on the November 2020 general election rather than other statewide or regional elections that took place earlier in the year facilitates greater specificity in responses. These surveys allow the key participants in the election to express their beliefs and perspectives about a variety of topics that were newly salient in 2020.

First, the *survey of the Wisconsin electorate* was conducted via the Internet by the survey marketing firm SSRS. The survey was administered from April 1 to April 19, 2021. A total of 2,104 adult U.S. citizens residing in Wisconsin participated in the survey. Respondents were recruited through multiple online panels. Several protocols were in place to ensure high quality responses. Although not a traditional probability sample, quotas were used to ensure adequate representation of important demographic groups. In addition, post-stratification weights were applied to guarantee that the sample matched recent U.S. Census data from the 2019 American Community Survey (ACS) in the distribution of age, gender, education, race and ethnicity, and region, matched other recent Census data in terms of civic engagement, and matched actual voter turnout in the 2020 general election as reported by the Wisconsin Elections Commission. Average survey completion time was 11.5 minutes. Taking account of the nonprobability design of the survey, the approximate margin of error is plus or minus 2.7 percentage points (using a 95% confidence interval).

Second, the *survey of municipal clerks* was conducted via the Internet from April 14 to May 12, 2021.⁵ Each clerk was contacted up to three times using email addresses supplied by the Wisconsin Elections Commission. The survey asked clerks dozens of closed-ended questions about election administration and provided opportunities for verbatim open-ended comments about various election topics. The median survey completion time was 20 minutes. A total of 708 clerks participated, for a response rate of 38%. The number of responses equates to a margin of error (using a 95% confidence interval) of plus or minus 2.9 percentage points.

² <https://elections.wi.gov/sites/elections.wi.gov/files/2020-05/April%207%20Election%20Summary%20and%20Next%20Steps.pdf>

³ <https://elections.wi.gov/sites/elections.wi.gov/files/2021-01/D.%20November%202020%20Election%20Data%20Report.pdf>

⁴ <https://elections.wi.gov/sites/elections.wi.gov/files/2020-11/NR%20Elections%20-%20Top%20Misinformation%20about%20Wisconsin%27s%20Election%2011-10-20%20FINAL.pdf>

⁵ The Executive Director of the City of Milwaukee Election Commission was also included in the municipal clerk survey. The small number of clerks who administered more than one municipality were invited to complete the survey for each municipality they served.

Some of the questions in the survey are identical to items that were asked in a 2009 survey of the state’s municipal clerks that was the basis of a report to the Government Accountability Board.⁶ Repeating some of the questions permitted an analysis of change over time for the 12-year period from the 2008 to the 2020 presidential election. However, it is important to note that the 2009 survey differs in that it had a higher response rate due in part to incentives provided to participating clerks and was conducted partly by mail rather than solely online. Some variation in responses is to be expected as a result of these differences, though rough comparisons can provide evidence as to whether opinions are shifting in a particular direction over time or have remained mostly static.

The survey of the electorate and the survey of clerks were intentionally fielded at the same time, approximately six months after the November 2020 election. The surveys were designed in parallel so that they could include some identical questions, making direct comparisons between the opinions of clerks and the electorate possible.

At the same time, the side-by-side comparison of the two surveys can obscure an important difference between the two populations. Clerks are selected to serve municipalities. Because every town, village, and city in the state has a clerk,⁷ those clerks reflect the structure of municipal government in the state, but they do not accurately represent the population of Wisconsin residents. The extremely large number of municipalities with small populations means that the average clerk represents a smaller community than that of the average Wisconsinite. In other words, the clerk survey is skewed toward “small” places relative to the actual population because clerks disproportionality comes from such places as a result of how election administrators in Wisconsin are selected.

Municipalities vary tremendously in the area, demography, and living patterns of their populations, as well as in the resources devoted to election administration. Research has shown that the needs and priorities of election officials are strikingly different in more populous jurisdictions than in less populous ones.⁸

How severe is population inequality in Wisconsin? The figure below shows while the typical municipality had a Voting Age Population (VAP) of less than 1,000 people, many municipalities had only a few hundred while yet others had many thousands.⁹ The 20 largest municipalities in Wisconsin contain one-third of the state’s total population. The state’s largest municipality – the city of Milwaukee – had a VAP of 433,730, a total equivalent to the VAPs of the 976 least populous municipalities added together. Because only a small number of clerks represent a large swath of

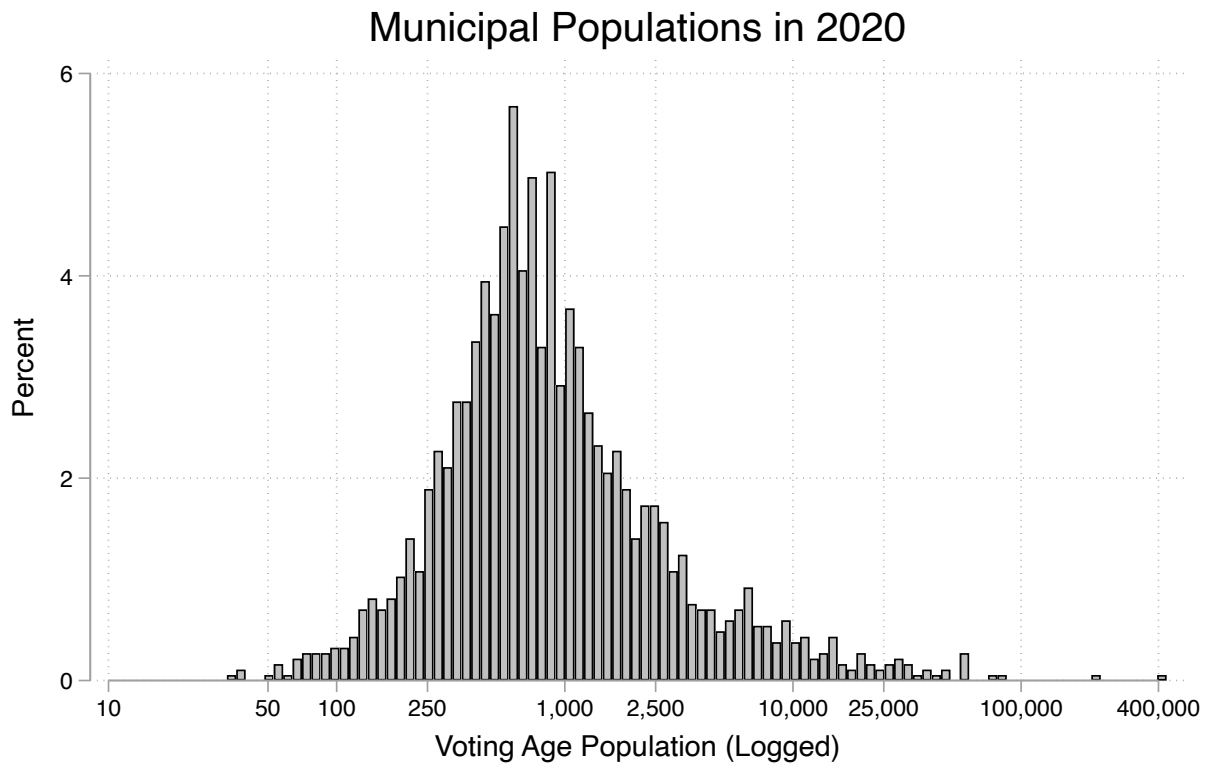
⁶ Burden, Barry C., David T. Canon, Stéphane Lavertu, Kenneth R. Mayer, and Donald P. Moynihan (2009), *2008 Wisconsin Election Data Collection Grant Program Evaluation Report*, submitted to the Wisconsin Government Accountability Board.

⁷ Milwaukee has an Election Commission that is administered by an Executive Director.

⁸ David C. Kimball and Brady Baybeck (2013) “Are All Jurisdictions Equal? Size Disparity in Election Administration,” *Election Law Journal* 12:130-145. Paul Manson, Natalie Adona, and Paul Gronke (2020), “Staffing the Stewards of Democracy: The Demographic and Professional Profile of America’s Local Election Officials.” Paper presented at the annual meeting of the Southern Political Science Association.

⁹ Estimates of the Voting Age Population (VAP) are based on January 1, 2020 and are provided by the Department of Administration’s Demographic Services Center:
https://doa.wi.gov/Pages/LocalGovtsGrants/Population_Estimates.aspx

the population, the voices of residents of larger cities will be unrepresented relative to their actual share of the state.



To account for variation on populations across municipalities, some analyses in the report breaks down responses by five categories based on the size of the voting age population (VAP) reported by the Department of Administration as of January 1, 2020. This facilitates comparisons between big and small communities to determine for which questions the skew in representation toward less populous areas is consequential. The five population categories use in the report are: 500 residents or fewer, 501 to 1,000 residents, 1,001 to 5,000 residents, 5,001 to 15,000 residents, and 15,001 residents or more.

Challenges to Voters

The first analyses examine the challenges that voters faced in the November 2020 election. The unprecedented difficulties caused by the pandemic, the economic downturn, and criticism of the election system itself could have led to substantial obstacles for potential voters. Voter turnout was high and absentee voting exploded despite resulting in a smaller than usual share of absentee ballots, metrics that suggest a highly successful election.

The survey of the Wisconsin electorate asked respondents directly about how hard it was to vote. Respondents who reported they were sure they voted in the 2020 election were then asked about the difficulty of the voting process. Eighty-five percent of voters said that it was “not difficult at all” to vote. However, 8% said the process a “little difficult” and another 6% viewed it as “moderately” to “extremely” difficult. Perceived difficulty of the process did not vary much among

those who voted early in person, on election day, or by mail. Voting was somewhat more difficult for voters with disabilities, younger voters, Black voters, and those who rent rather than own homes. This suggests that the election system – even during the COVID crisis – worked exceptionally well for the vast majority of Wisconsin residents. Further, a small but significant minority of people who encountered significant friction in the system were able to overcome it and cast their ballots successfully.

One of the steps required of most voters in Wisconsin is to show an approved form of identification. A person wishing to vote absentee by mail generally must mail a paper photocopy of their ID or upload an electronic photo of their ID to an online form. Because absentee voting spiked in 2020 and was a new experience for many voters, it is appropriate to consider the degree to which the ID requirement was a particular burden or deterrent to voting by mail or to voter participation more generally.

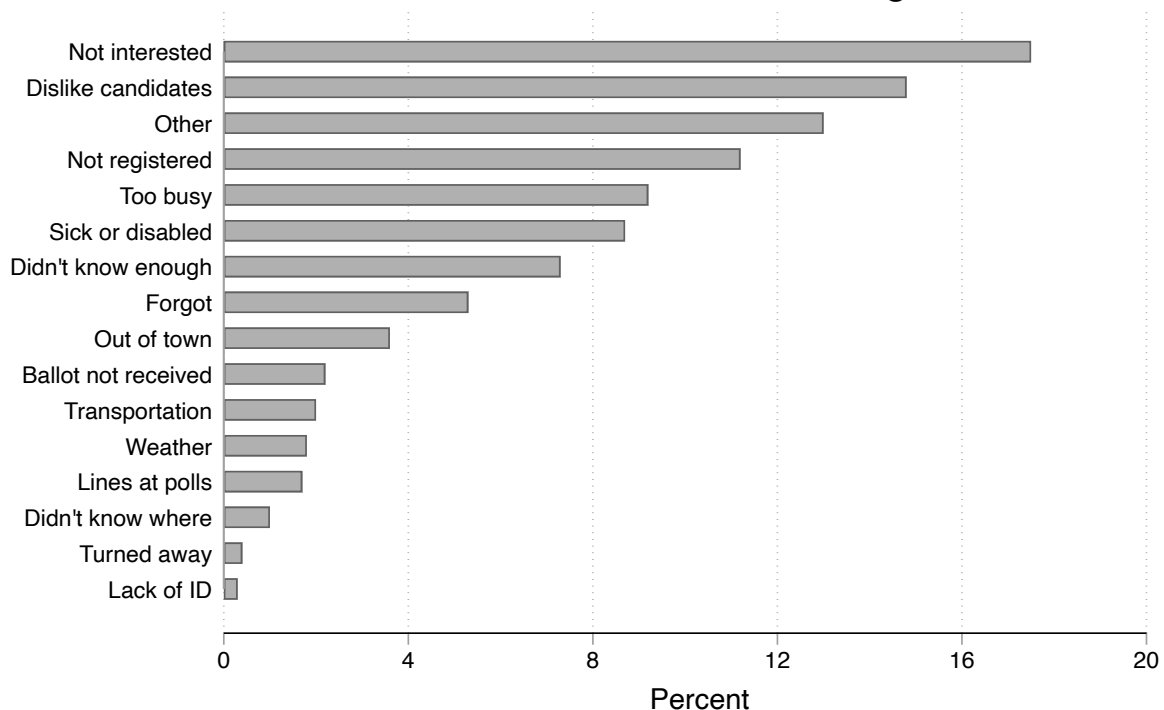
Respondents were asked, “If you wished to vote by mail, how difficult would it be for you to mail a photocopy of your photo ID or send an electronic image of your photo ID?” Sixty percent believed it would be “not difficult at all,” 20% described it as “a little difficult,” and the remaining 19% rated the requirement as somewhere between “moderately” and “extremely” difficult. These results indicate that complying with the ID requirement for voting by mail would be easy for most voters, but it would be a substantial hurdle for a significant number of people.

Compared to those who voted in person, people who voted by mail saw the ID requirement for mail ballot requests as less difficult. Among mail voters, 69% described the process as “not difficult” and just 5% described it as “very” or “extremely” difficult. Among in-person voters, 61% believed it would be “not difficult” while 8% saw it as “very” or “extremely” difficult. Non-voters anticipated the process to be even more challenging. Only 48% of these individuals described it as “not difficult.” These results suggest it is possible that the process was perceived as sufficiently daunting to discourage some people from voting at all.

Were there people who wished to vote but were unable to do so? For the respondents who did not participate in the general election, a question asked for “main reason” they did not vote. The figure below shows that the top two reasons – “I’m not interested” and “I did not like the candidates” – account for about one-third of the non-voters. These factors are largely beyond the control of policy makers and election officials. Beyond the ambiguous “other” category, the next most chosen option was “I am not registered” at 11%. It is not clear how many of these individuals were not registered by their own intentional choice versus how many found it too difficult because of the deadlines and documents required, or did not want to register in person at the polls out of concern for the virus. Likewise, for the 4% who did not vote because they were out of town and 9% who were sick or disabled, the absentee voting process might have served them well or may have been perceived as too challenging to navigate. Among the factors most under the control of election officials and policy makers, 2% of non-voters were deterred by long lines and another 2% did not receive the absentee ballots they requested.¹⁰

¹⁰ Because the reasons for voting or not voting are often multidimensional, non-voters were also asked to select all “other reasons” they did not vote beyond the primary reason they selected in a previous question. Adding those additional reasons makes all of the percentages in the figure larger. For example, lack of ID goes from .3% to 2.6%. For more analysis of primary and secondary reasons for not voting in analysis, see Michael G. DeCrescenzo and

Reasons for Not Voting



Voters with disabilities are prevalent in Wisconsin and must be accommodated under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and the Help America Vote Act (HAVA). Some people reported being “sick or disabled” as the main reason for not voting. This response is ambiguous about whether such problems were unexpected illnesses or ailments that presented themselves around election day, were lengthier experiences with the coronavirus disease, or were chronic disabilities that routinely making voting hard. This ambiguity can be addressed by other questions in the public survey.

The public survey provides two ways to identify voters with disabilities. First, 23% of respondents report having a “long-term health problem or impairment” that limits activities. Second, when asked about specific disabilities, 32% of the sample reports having difficulty hearing, seeing, concentrating, walking, or doing errands. By these two measures, it seems that somewhere between one-quarter and one-third of Wisconsin adult citizens could be classified as having a disability that might require accommodation by election officials.

Using the first measure, 68% of those with health problems report that they voted, as compared to 77% of those without such problems, a gap of nine percentage points. Using the second measure, those with difficulties voted at a rate of 66% compared to a rate of 79% among those without disabilities, a gap of 13 percentage points.

Kenneth R. Mayer (2019), “Voter Identification and Nonvoting in Wisconsin—Evidence from the 2016 Election,” *Election Law Journal* 18:342-39.

These disparities cannot be easily compared to prior elections to determine if a person’s disability status was more consequential in 2020. However, it is possible to make comparisons over time using surveys conducted by the Census Bureau. The Bureau’s Current Population Surveys (CPS) conducted in November of each election year ask respondents about six daily difficulties that indicate disability.¹¹ Examining only the Wisconsin residents from the surveys, the gap in turnout between those with and without disabilities was 8.2 percentage points in 2012, 7.7 points in 2016, and 11.4 points in 2020. Thus, the CPS figure is in line with the survey conducted for this report and indicates that voters with disabilities were burdened more than usual in 2020 in Wisconsin.

Equitable access to absentee voting is an essential option for voters with disabilities or impairments that may be viewed differently by the public and election administrators. Clerks were asked specifically about whether the pandemic disproportionately affected voters with disabilities. Only 5% said voters with disabilities were more negatively affected by the challenges of absentee voting or lack of access to equipment at their polling place or clerk’s office.

Compared to those without disabilities, people with disabilities who reported that they voted were slightly more likely to vote by mail and slightly less likely to vote on election day. The shift to voting by mail appears not to have an adequate solution for all residents with disabilities.

For people who voted by mail, the survey asked if they had any difficulty requesting the ballot, receiving the ballot in a timely fashion, returning the ballot in a timely fashion, or finding a witness to sign the absentee ballot envelope. The first three of these difficulties was each experienced by fewer than 5% of absentee voters and was not much more prevalent among voters with disabilities than those without. However, trouble finding a witness was a difficulty for only 4% of absentee voters without disabilities but was a difficulty for 10% of voters with disabilities.

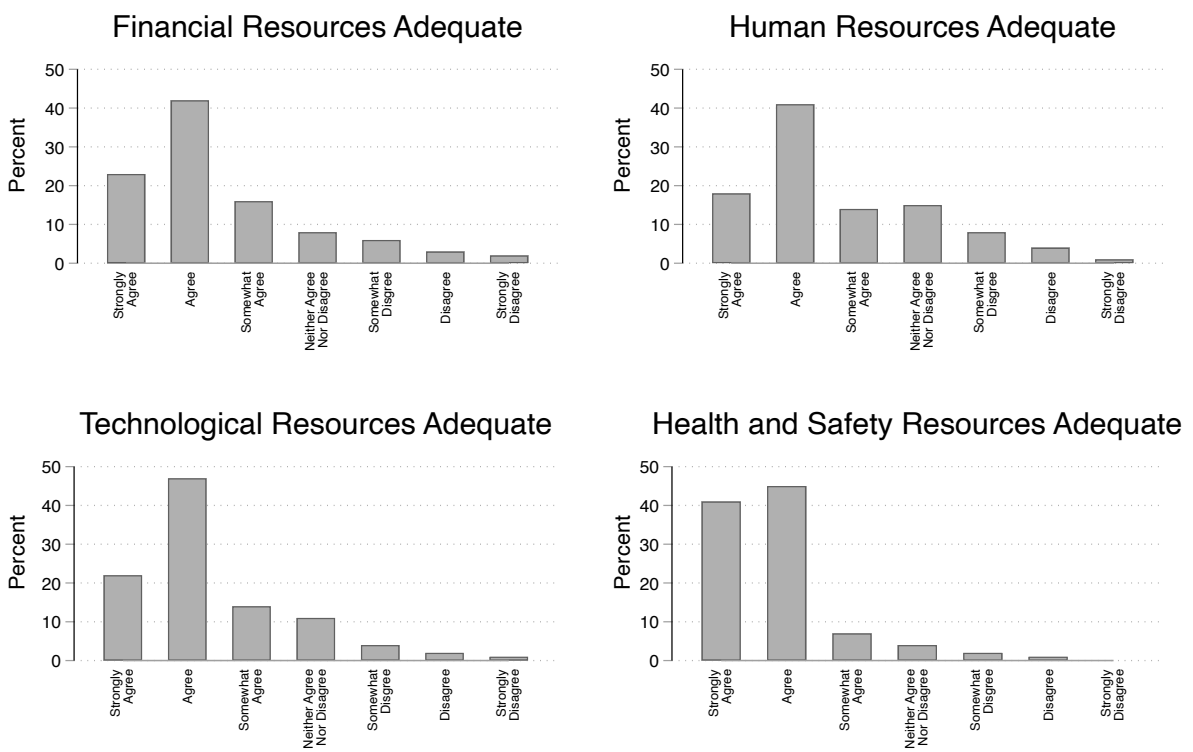
In terms of accommodations, 12% of surveyed voters said they used assistance from someone, most often an election official or family member. Nearly one in ten used an “accessible” voting machine (mandated at each polling place by HAVA) and 13% used curbside voting (an option provided in state law). Voters using these options overwhelmingly agreed that poll workers who assisted them “knew what they were doing,” although one in ten disagreed that the poll worker knew how to operate the accessible voting equipment.

Availability of Resources

An ongoing concern in election administration is whether officials have the funding, personnel, and equipment necessary to conduct a fair, accessible, and secure election. This concern was heightened in 2020 when clerks found themselves processing more absentee ballots, receiving more questions from voters, and in need of more personal protective equipment (PPE) for staff and volunteers while the pandemic ensued.

¹¹ See Lisa Schur and Douglas Kruse, “Fact Sheet: Disability and Voter Turnout in the 2016 Elections,” Rutgers University (available at https://smlr.rutgers.edu/sites/default/files/Documents/Centers/Program_Disability_Research/Fact%20Sheet%20Disability%20Voter%202016%20Elections.pdf)

To assess possible shortcomings in resources, clerks were asked to indicate on a seven-point scale ranging from “strongly agree” to “strongly disagree” whether they had “adequate amounts” of financial resources, human resources, technological resources, and health and safety resources (e.g., PPE) to conduct the 2020 election. The figure below shows that for all four types of resources, clerks overwhelmingly report having enough to do their jobs. This is especially true for health and safety resources, which had been in short supply for the April 7 election but were plentiful by the fall. Despite this good news, there is a small number of jurisdictions where resources were deemed to be inadequate. In general, clerks from less populous municipalities were somewhat more likely to agree that resources were adequate while clerks from the most populous jurisdictions were more apt to disagree that they had what was needed to run the 2020 election. Despite these modest differences, clerks from different kinds of jurisdictions largely believed their resources were sufficient to conduct the general election.



Three of the resource questions were also asked in the 2009 survey of the state’s municipal clerks. Keeping in mind that the prior survey had a higher response rate and generated responses from a different set of clerks, the comparison across 12 years provides some information about the unique strains on clerk’s offices in 2020. Fewer clerks reported in 2009 that they strongly agreed or agreed that resources were adequate in the prior election: only 29% in the case of financial resources, 34% in the case of human resources, and 32% in the case for technological resources. Compared to clerks’ beliefs about the 2008 presidential elections, resources appear to have been much more sufficient for the 2020 election cycle. It is possible that this change reflects a general investment in election infrastructure over the intervening decade that is distinct from the challenges of 2020. It might also reflect the more immediate addition of poll workers from new sources such as the National Guard and the infusion of funds, some of from nonprofit foundations, that helped to

recruit poll workers, purchase PPE, and aid in collection of absentee ballots compared to the spring election.

Having adequate resources appears to be a key to factor that made it possible for the 2020 presidential election in Wisconsin to carried off successfully. So was support from county clerks and the Wisconsin Elections Commission. One clerk reflected that, “I feel the WEC staff did a tremendous job in 2020 in spite of the pandemic and relentless scrutiny from politicians.” Another concluded that,

“Despite the pandemic and volume of absentee ballots, the 2020 general election was one of the most smooth elections I have ever participated in. I felt more prepared and had more help from the WEC and [redacted] County than I ever had before. We all came together to run a fair election.”

When clerks were dissatisfied with the WEC, it was about communication, in some cases because they received too many messages and in other cases because it was difficult to communicate with a staff person immediately. Some clerks believed that the WEC and county clerks were too communicative while others thought they did not communicative enough. It is possible that disgruntlement of these kinds may be exacerbated in tense environments such as the 2020 election cycle when much was being asked of clerks.

Poll Workers

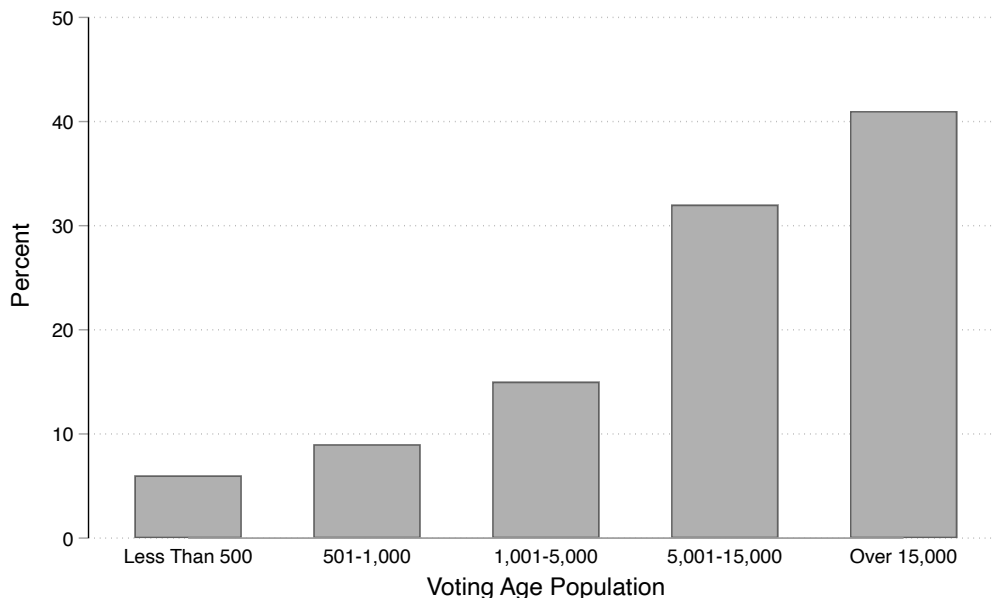
Among the most important human resources are poll workers, also known in Wisconsin as “election inspectors.” Poll workers are the primary frontline individuals with whom voters interact. Clerks scrambled in March and April to find enough poll workers when many seasoned poll workers withdrew as the pandemic took hold. What was the experience in the general election?

The survey of clerks asked about personnel who worked the November 2020 election. The mean number of poll workers hired was 14.9. However, over half of clerks hired fewer than seven poll workers, but some jurisdictions hired dozens or even hundreds. The survey asked clerks whether they had “trouble finding enough poll workers.” One in four clerks replied that they did have trouble. This is similar to the rate reported in the 2009 survey of municipal clerks about the 2008 election. Perhaps surprisingly, trouble finding poll workers did not vary systematically by the size the jurisdiction. Although experiencing “trouble” in recruiting poll workers was fairly common, it did not seem to lead to a real shortage. Only 2% of clerks report closing or consolidating polling places in the general election due to a shortage of poll workers. This outcome is likely due at least in part to clerks’ successful recruitment efforts, despite the difficulties some faced in doing so.

Nearly one in five clerks provided poll workers with “significantly more pay” than usual in 2020. More than two-thirds of clerks believe that poll workers were adequately compensated for their work on election day, a similar rate as was reported in the 2009 survey. Larger jurisdictions were only slightly more likely to pay more in 2020, but those clerks were actually less likely to believe the pay was sufficient. As a result, although poll worker compensation was more generous in 2020 than usual, a significant share of clerks believed that it was still not sufficient. Higher pay may be a key to recruitment of enough high quality poll workers during future elections, particularly in emergency conditions.

Despite the disruptive nature of the pandemic, there was surprising continuity in who served as poll workers in November 2020. Asked what percentage were serving for the first time, almost half of clerks replied that none of their poll workers were new. This was especially the case in the smallest jurisdictions where more than more than 90% of poll workers had served in the past. However, in the two largest categories of municipalities (those over 5,000 in VAP), about one-third of poll workers were new. Because of the more substantial changes in population experienced in big cities over time, it is likely that clerks in more populous municipalities also drew on first time poll workers more often in elections prior to 2020.

First Time Poll Workers



Asked whether they had recruited poll workers from specific sources such as schools and universities, the Army National Guard, local government, or businesses for the first time, 16% of clerks replied yes. These new recruitment pathways were concentrated in more populous jurisdictions. The smallest municipalities got only about 10% of their poll workers from these novel sources, but in municipalities with more than 5,000 people almost 40% of poll workers came from these sources. It may be that the greater “trouble” in finding poll workers in big cities led to use alternative sources for the first time. In open-ended comments about recruiting poll workers from new sources, many clerks mentioned the National Guard specifically as a useful pool of election workers. However, some clerks also reported that Guard members were offered without their making a request. In some cases those Guard members were not trained or were offered too late to be helpful.

Even if a clerk is able to recruit a large enough number of poll workers, it is possible that those poll workers may not be sufficiently prepared to administer the election.¹² This could be especially true in 2020 if many poll workers were serving for the first time and/or had difficulty receiving training or carrying out their duties because of pandemic. Fortunately, the introduction of many new poll workers did not necessary reduce the effectiveness of poll workers. Clerks were asked

¹² Barry C. Burden and Jeffrey Milyo (2015), “The Quantities and Qualities of Poll Workers,” *Election Law Journal* 15:38-46.

whether poll workers who served in November 2020 were of better, same, or worse quality than in the previous presidential election (if the clerk also held office at that time). The vast majority of clerks (75%) rated them as the same and a sizable number (24%) actually rated them as better than in 2016. These assessments did not vary systematically by the size of the jurisdiction, although those that recruited poll workers from new sources such as the National Guard and schools were slightly more likely to view them as better than in the past.

One clerk explained that adequate training helped make the new poll workers effective:

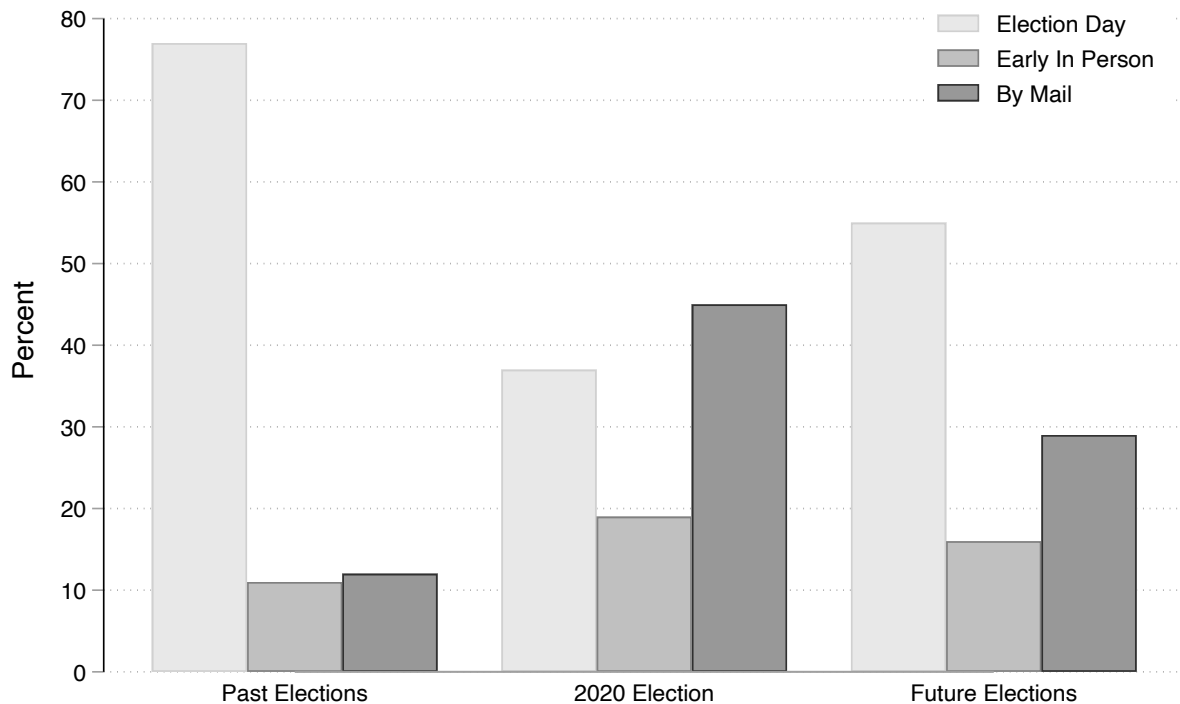
“A lot of my faithful poll workers were afraid to work due to the pandemic so I had to recruit and assure proper training of new workers. The WEC website training videos were a great help with training. Surprisingly a few of the new workers were very good at their tasks so a few of the old grumpy ones will be weeded out for the next term.”

Although challenges in recruiting and training new poll workers is a stress on clerks and their offices, it seems that poll workers from new and unconventional sources were often quite effective and sometimes more effective than veteran poll workers in providing sufficient election staffing. This is especially true in more populous municipalities where locating enough poll workers is more challenging.

Methods of Voting

The most obvious effect of the COVID pandemic was to increase the share of voters who cast ballots by mail. Respondents who said they voted in 2020 were asked what methods they used to cast their ballots. The figure below shows the breakdown: 37% on election day, 19% early in-person, and 45% absentee by mail. These percentages are similar to the official statewide breakdown reported by the WEC of 40% election day, 19% early, and 41% by mail, a correspondence that helps boost confidence in the representativeness of the survey. In retrospect, it is quite remarkable that 41% of ballots were cast by mail in 2020, compared to rates of just 5% in November 2016 and 6% in November 2018. Public emergencies can result in massive changes to voter behavior in a short period of time.

Method of Voting



In terms of demographics, rates of voting by mail did not vary much by race and ethnicity, by levels of education, or even by disability status. Women were somewhat more likely than men to vote by mail (49% versus 41%). The most substantial divides were by age. Among voters aged 50 and below, 39% voted by mail and 42% voted on election day, but among voters over 50, 49% voted by mail and 31% voted on election day. This is a reversal from prior elections when older voters reported that they were more likely than younger voters to vote on election day. The pandemic sharply increased mail voting across the state, but particularly so for older voters who were presumably most concerned about exposure to the virus.

Concern about the spread of the virus in election settings was still apparent when the survey was conducted in April 2021 as vaccines were being administered and public health precautions were lifting. One fourth of respondents reported being “very concerned” that the coronavirus could spread at a polling place, and another 34% remained “somewhat concerned.” These concerns are strongly related to the respondents’ method of voting in November 2020. Of those not concerned about virus spread at the polls, 63% voted on election day and 19% by mail; of the very concerned, 21% voted on election and 66% voted by mail. Sixteen percent of respondents said that, to the best of their knowledge, they or a member of their household had contracted COVID. Those who experienced the disease in these ways were somewhat less concerned about its spread at polling places and were much more likely to vote in person on election day and less likely to vote by mail.

Respondents were also asked how they “usually voted” in the past. As the figure above shows, among those who say they typically voted in the past, the breakdown was 77% on election day, 11% early in person, and 12% absentee by mail. Perhaps of more interest to clerks who must plan

for subsequent elections, respondents were also asked how they “expect to vote” in “future elections.” The figure shows that the expectation is 55% will vote on election day, 16% will vote early, and 29% will vote by mail. If respondents are able to make reasonable predictions about their own behavior, the data indicate that most voters will return to casting ballots on election day, at least in high turnout presidential elections, but that absentee voting will remain somewhat more prevalent than before the pandemic.

For some voters, the pandemic appears to have motivated them to become more aware of absentee voting by mail and to take advantage of it for the first time, as well as to make it their preferred voting method even after the pandemic has subsided. Public emergencies not only disrupt existing patterns of behavior in the short-term but also leave an imprint in the long-term. While the long-term impact of the 2020 pandemic election is still developing, in Wisconsin, that imprint appears to be a more equal balance among voting by mail, voting on election day, and voting early in person.

Voting in Person

Although the 2020 general election was marked by a spike in voting absentee by mail, a majority of voters still cast ballots in person, either on election day or by casting absentee ballots in person before election day. The choice of many to vote in person during the pandemic could have reflected several motivations including a desire to stick with familiar ways of casting ballots and concerns about whether the postal service would be able to deliver mailed ballots on time. The demand for absentee ballots requested by mail put new stresses on clerks’ operations, but it also raised questions about running traditional polling places. It is natural to ask whether polling places should exist in the same way if many voters continue to prefer returning ballots by mail or through other methods such as drop boxes and larger-scale ballot collection events in parks or athletic facilities.

Some changes to polling operations are done out of necessity, as was the case when many schools were no longer available as voting sites due to COVID precautions. But other changes may have been designed intentionally to serve voters’ unique preferences during the pandemic. As one clerk explained how they were forced to change election day plans:

“Covid19 did play a part in the election day process. My municipality had to move our polling place (and pay to use it). We needed a larger location to keep people socially distanced and allow for the large number of people who voted. Three days were involved in set-up/election day/take down.”

Other municipalities chose to offer voting at outdoor locations, athletic facilities that were not used while sporting events were on hold, or spacious out-of-use commercial spaces such as closed department stores. These locations enhanced public safety by spreading out poll workers and voters, and in some cases they offered more and better spaces for parking. However, these new locations might have also been less familiar to voters and further from their homes or workplaces, making transportation a greater challenge.

To assess these trade-offs, the survey of the electorate asked people about their preferences for different kinds of voting locations, contrasting a smaller neighborhood site with a larger but more distant site. Respondents were asked to imagine they wished to vote in person and whether they would then prefer a “traditional polling place in a school, church, or community building near my

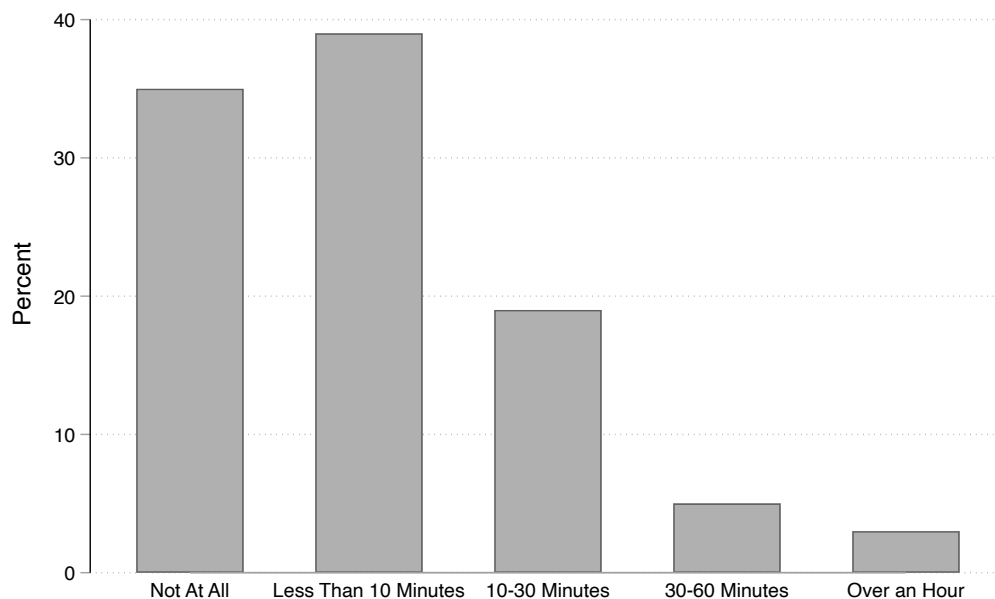
home” or “a large facilitation such as a convention center or sports arena further from my home.” An overwhelming 94% of respondents choose the traditional polling place as the preferred option. The near unanimity on this question might reflect the “status quo bias” of voters preferring what is familiar but it might also reflect the genuine needs of voters with disabilities, limited transportation options, or home responsibilities that makes the local polling place the best or perhaps only feasible option. In the event that their preferred type of in-person voting was not available, 58% say the alternative is undesirable enough that it would make them more likely to vote by mail. Although public opinion is not the only factor to consider when choosing voting sites, the dominant preference for keeping traditional neighborhood polling places must be kept in mind even when a public emergency calls for more resources to service absentee voters.

One third of ballots cast in person were cast early rather than on election day. These ballots may have been issued by mail or in person; they were also returned in a variety of ways. Of those who voted early in person, 71% say they submitted their ballots at a clerk’s office or other government office. This option may be appealing in part because clerks’ offices offer unique services such as the opportunity for same day voter registration and assistance for voters with disabilities. It might also reflect concern about the U.S. Postal Service, as voting in person avoids concerns about ballots being delivered late or not at all. Another 26% used an alternative ballot collection site such as a park or library. A small number of these early voters used a drop slot or drop box. It is notable that more than one-quarter of early voters cast ballots in ways other than at a clerk’s office even though many communities did not offer these kinds of alternative sites. It is possible that providing more of these options would serve voters who desired or needed ways to return ballots the did not involve traveling to a clerk’s office during business hours or sending their ballot through the mail.

The amount of time that voters spent waiting to vote were a particular focus in 2020 because of experiences with exceptionally long waits in the April primary and because of concern about spread of the virus at the polls. Voting times could have been affected by the pandemic in one of two ways. On the one hand, although turnout was high, because such a large share of voters cast their ballots by mail, that should have reduced the congestion at in-person voting opportunities, resulting in shorter wait times. On the other hand, constraints on suitable voting locations due COVID precautions, a shortage of experienced poll workers, and a reduction in ballot marking stations to maintain “social distancing” could have created more bottlenecks in the voting process, leading to longer wait times.

Voters who cast their ballots in person in the general election were asked how long they waited. As the figure shows, more than one-third waited “not at all” and 39% waited under 10 minutes. But nearly one in ten voters waited more than 30 minutes and some waited more than an hour. Wait times were similar for those who voted on election day versus early in-person voting, but they were notably longer for non-white voters compared to white non-Hispanic voters. The disparity was even greater between young voters and old voters. Among those 18-25, only 27% had no wait and 13% waited more than 30 minutes. Among those older than 70, 56% had no wait at all and just 2% waited more than 30 minutes. In terms of the time required to participate, the pandemic did not alleviate and might have actually exacerbated disparities among some categories of voters than others.

Time Waiting to Vote



Although an identical survey from 2016 is not available for comparison to a pre-pandemic election, it is possible to make rough assessment of whether wait times were noticeably different in 2020 using a comparable data source: the Survey of the Performance of American Elections (SPAЕ). The SPAЕ was conducted in both 2016 and 2020 using the same methodology and includes a suitable sample of Wisconsin respondents. The survey indicate that wait times were in fact shorter in 2016. In that election, 47% of voters reported they did not wait at all and another 35% reported waiting less than 10 minutes. However, in 2020, only 34% report waiting not at all and 32% reported waiting less than 10 minutes, similar to results shown in the figure above. Because the raw number of individuals who voted in person decreased between the elections,¹³ the longer waits due to the supply of polling places and poll workers or new precautions taken at polling places appear to have more than counterbalanced the lower volume of voters being served. A key lesson from these results is that wait times are affected by much more than simply how many voters are at the polling place.

Voting by Mail

Because the flexibility of local election officials, support from the WEC, and tremendous public education, voting by mail was used successfully by a record number of Wisconsin voters in 2020. It was convenient and effective for the large share of voters who wished to avoid or could not be at a physical polling place during the early voting period or on election day. At the same time, absentee ballots presented challenges for many clerks who needed to process the requests and

¹³ Data from the Wisconsin Elections Commissions indicate that approximately 2.9 million people voted on election day or early in person in 2016 but that only 1.9 million did so in 2020 despite overall higher voter turnout.

tabulate them on election day as well for voters, who in some cases had difficulty overcoming some challenges in the absentee voting process.

As noted above, 2% of people who did not vote stated that the “main” reason was that the absentee ballots they requested never arrived. Some other voters who failed to receive requested absentee ballots might have chosen to vote in person. For voters with mobility limitations, who were concerned about contracting the virus at the polls, or were away from their residences, failure to receive the ballot would have effectively disenfranchised them. While the percentage is quite small, the problem is serious when it occurs.

People who voted by mail were asked whether they had any “difficulties” in requesting the ballot, receiving the ballot in a timely fashion, returning the ballot in a timely fashion, finding a person to sign the envelop as a witness, or any other aspect of the process. Eighty-eight percent of mail voters reported that they faced no “significant difficulties.” Of those who did encounter trouble, the reported rates of difficulty were 5% for finding a witness, 4% for requesting the ballot and 4% for receiving the ballot, and 3% for returning the ballot. The majority of mail voters who encountered difficulties did so in only one aspect of the process. In other words, it was individual steps of the process that were problematic rather than voters who experienced problems at multiple steps.

Young voters were especially likely to encounter difficulties: those aged 18-25 faced difficulties 23% of the time versus only 8% among those above age 70. It is likely that the higher residential mobility of young people (especially those moving between a college residence and a parent’s home) as well as less experience with the voting process contributed to their greater prevalence of difficulties. The greater rate of problems for young absentee voters exists even though the overall difficulty of voting was similar across methods and mail voters were slightly older on average. It is possible that difficulties voting by mail partly explain why young people were more likely to vote on election day.

Among absentee voters, more than half (56%) report using the state’s MyVote web site to track the status of their ballots. Anecdotal comments from clerks indicate that some voters also communicated with local clerk’s offices directly to check on their ballots. Young absentee voters were twice as likely as old absentee voters to use the state web site.

In open-ended comments, clerks noted that the volume of absentee ballot requests was challenging to fulfill in a timely fashion and that tabulation of many absentees on election day made it more difficult to service in-person voters at the polls. Most common complaints from clerks were about the confusion caused by voters who mistakenly submitted multiple absentee ballot requests and from individuals who received voter registration forms from multiple advocacy groups. Clerks also say they fielded many public inquiries resulting from confusion about changing election rules over the course of the year and misunderstandings when individuals heard news about differing election practices in neighboring states such as Minnesota. In short, it seems that the need for authoritative, high quality information for voters was even greater due to the disruptions of the pandemic. The educational efforts of clerks are analyzed later in this report.

Many clerks adopted creative solutions to facilitate more absentee voting and ensure the safety of voters and election workers. One clerk described how they worked out of a shed in a parking lot because municipal offices were closed. The shed became a collection point for voters who wanted to drive through the lot and drop off their completed absentee ballots. Other clerks were thankful that the absentee ballot request system was streamlined through the central WisVote system. One clerk reported that this centralization reduced the amount of time need to process a request by half.

Opinions about Election Practices and Policies

The novel experiences of 2020 might have led some clerks and voters to reconsider their views about the desirability of some existing election practices and policies. Both clerks and the public were asked their views on several election practices and policies. Some of these were existing routines that became more salient in 2020 while others are possible innovations to consider in the future.

Clerks were asked several questions about absentee voting policies. One asked for their agreement with the statement, “Mail absentee voting should be considered a voter’s right.” On a five-point scale, nearly two-thirds of clerks reported that they either “strongly agree” or “somewhat agree.” Another 20% placed themselves in the middle category and 17% disagreed at least somewhat. Surprisingly, agreement that absentee voting is a right was more prevalent among clerks from small municipalities than big ones.

Although most clerks continued to see absentee voting as a right, a majority of them also believed that absentee voting “increases the administrative burden on election officials like me.” This belief was more common in large municipalities. For many clerks the administrative hassles associated with absentee ballots are justified. Forty-six percent of clerks agreed that the “benefits of mail absentee voting outweigh the cost” compared to only 31% who disagreed.

A sizable minority of clerks objected to voters using absentee voting when it was not necessary. In their view, voting by absentee undermines the traditional election day and creates excessive work and expense for local clerks as they try to maintain service at traditional polling places. As one clerk put it,

“With the absentee process being so simple to apply for with no specific reason, it is putting a lot more work on the Clerks that are a ‘one’ person office. Everyone should get a chance to vote, however, they need to come to the polling place if they are able. We are paying for poll workers and don't know if half the voting population voted absentee. We must still have a sufficient supply of poll workers at the polls to accommodate if everyone comes into the polling place to vote or not. It is a waste of taxpayer dollars.”

Several clerks complained that the postage costs and labor involved in issuing absentee ballots strained the resources of their offices. The expenses came on suddenly in 2020 due to the pandemic. As a clerk from a small municipality observed, “Most of the extra work and absentee ballots from the 2020 election was because of the pandemic” and “keeping the voters safe from the Covid virus.” Multiple clerks identified streamlining measures that did or would make the workload more manageable. As noted above, centralizing the request process was helpful in

reducing the burden on local clerks. As one clerk summarized, “The ability of people to request an absentee ballot thru myvote.wi.gov was instrumental in surviving the onslaught of requests.”

Numerous clerks noted that missing information on absentee ballots envelopes was a common problem. Many clerks wanted to contact and assist voters to ensure that information was complete, but they were often inhibited by demands on their time and a lack of handy contact information for voters such as phone numbers and email addresses that are not necessarily included in voter registration data. Multiple clerks also expressed concern about inconsistent or delayed mail delivery, making the late deadline for requesting absentee ballots unrealistic for many voters. Some clerks in smaller communities delivered such ballots themselves to avoid problems with the mail.

Most clerks believed that the process of verifying the validity of absentee ballots is fairly easy. Only 27% agreed that the “authenticity of a mail ballot is difficult to verify.” Even clerks with this view did not necessarily mean that it was impossible to verify such ballots, just as having difficulty finding poll workers do not mean that poll workers were not eventually found.

The public was asked similar questions about absentee voting using a lengthier seven-point response scale ranging from “strongly agree” to “strongly disagree.” This scale differs from the five-point scale used in the clerk survey, so the responses are not perfectly comparable. Nonetheless, it is possible to gauge the rough level of correspondence between the two groups by examining what share of respondents were on the agree or disagree side of the midpoint on each scale. As the table below shows, compared to clerks, the public believes that absentee ballots are more difficult to verify but the public is in greater agreement that the costs of absentee voting are worth the effort and that no-excuse absentee voting should be considered a right. It is worth noting that respondents who voted in 2020 were generally more supportive of absentee voting than were non-voters, and absentee voters were even more strongly in support of the practice than those who voted on election day.

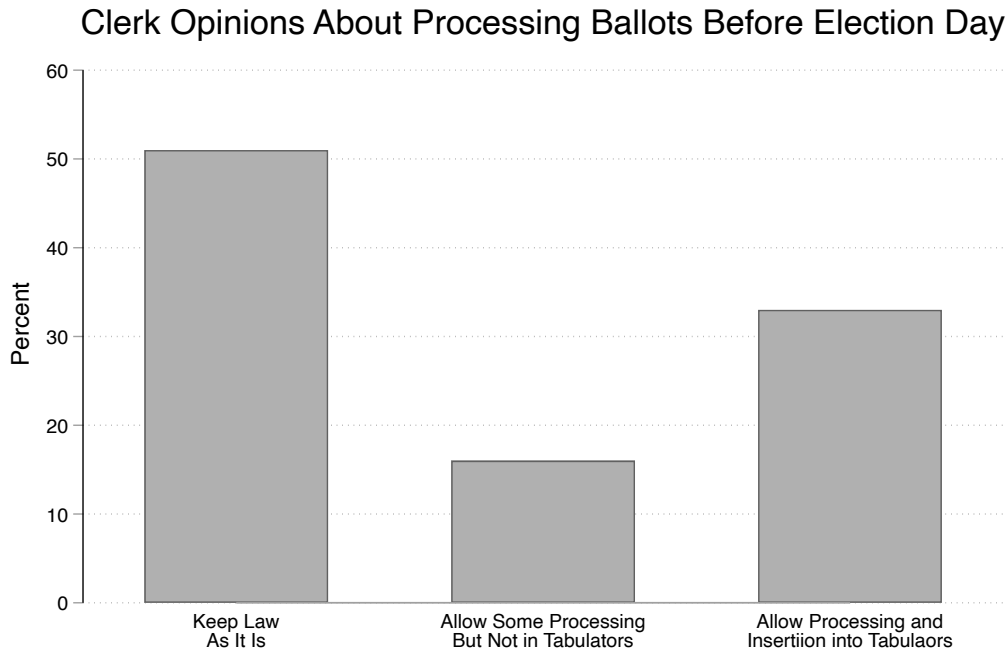
Opinions about Absentee Voting

	Clerks		Public	
	Agree	Disagree	Agree	Disagree
Authenticity Difficult to Verify	27%	52%	42%	42%
Benefits Outweigh the Costs	46%	31%	57%	22%
Consider a Voter’s Right	63%	16%	69%	17%

Processing of absentee ballots became a focal point in the election because of the high volume of mail ballots returned. Election officials in Wisconsin were generally prohibited from doing more than inspecting the exterior of absentee ballot envelopes and contacting voters about deficiencies. Ballots could not be prepared for tabulation, let alone tabulated until the opening of polls at 7:00 AM on election day. Some lawmakers and clerks have proposed changing the rules to allow some processing of absentee ballots before election day.

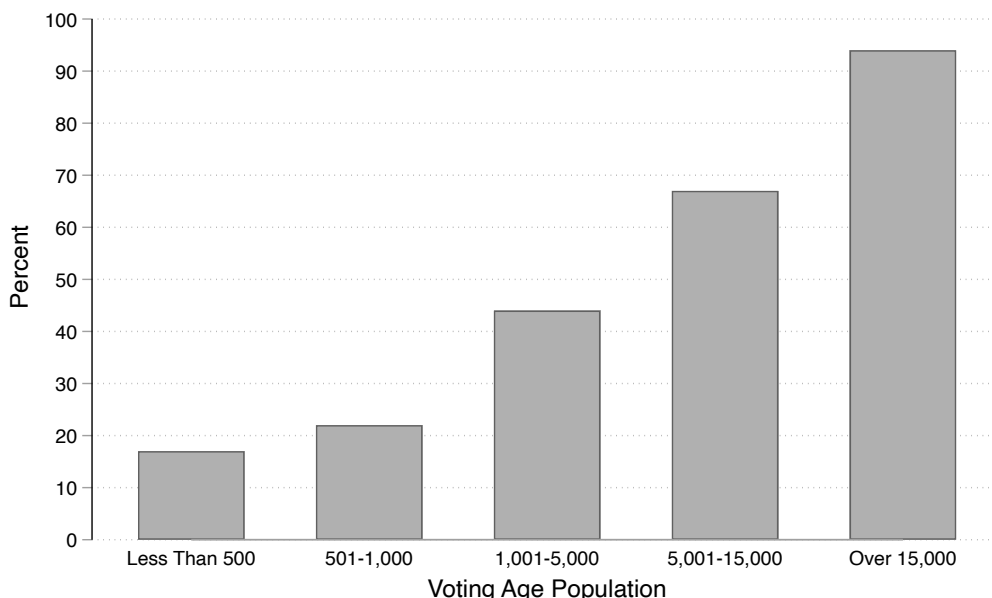
Clerks were asked about the desirability of processing or canvassing absentee ballots before election day. The figure below shows that clerks were equally divided on the question. Just over half of clerks believed the law should remain as it is. The other half was divided between those

that would allow some processing but no tabulating (16%) and those that would also allow tabulating if tallies for candidates were not generated (33%).



Clerks' opinions about processing of ballots before election day are strongly related to the size of municipality, perhaps more so than on any other question. As the figure below shows, support among clerks for allowing absentee ballots to be inserted into tabulators before election day is a paltry 17% in the least populous municipalities but support rises dramatically to 94% in the most populous jurisdictions. Most clerks in the smaller municipalities did not want to allow any processing of absentee ballots before election day.

Clerk Opinions About Insertion of Ballots before Election Day



Despite half of clerks (mostly from small communities) supporting the current rules, open-ended comments strongly favored allowing processing of absentee ballots before election day. Many comments expressed support for allowing in-person absentee voters to insert ballots directly into tabulators as election day voters do. These clerks reasoned that allowing early voters to put their ballots into tabulators would reduce the administrative burden of absentee ballots and would be a more satisfying experience for voters. As a representative of this view summarized, “I think voters for in-person absentee voting would love to be able to feed their ballots directly into a tabulator instead of using absentee envelopes.” Even some clerks from less populous municipalities backed the early processing of absentee ballots, if only to reduce the workload on election day poll workers. One clerk explained,

“We are a smaller municipality and it took two election workers the entire election day to process all the absentee ballots we received for this election. We weren't sure it would get completed prior to polls closing. If we would have been allowed to process all of them prior to election day, it would have saved valuable time and would have freed up additional workers to be available to work with in-person voters.”

Some clerks also believed that putting such ballots directly in tabulators would avoid some of the challenges that come with absentee ballots when they are tabulated without the voter present: “Early in person absentee voters should be allowed to feed their ballot into the voting tabulator, ensures if there are problems the voter can correct immediately.” Clerks opposed to allowing pre-processing of ballots generally did not explain their reasoning in open-ended comments.

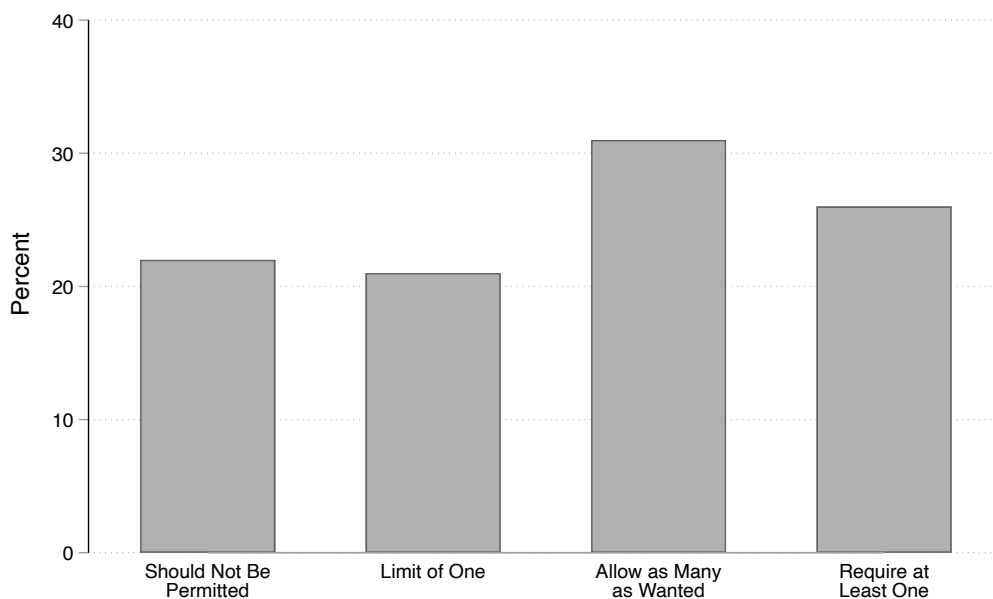
By the time of the 2020 general election, 39 municipalities had opted to tabulate absentee ballots at a “central count” location rather than alongside in-person ballots at individual polling places. Clerks were asked whether they believed this practice should be permissible and whether they planned to adopt it in their municipalities. Four out of five clerks believed that central counting ought to be permitted by law. The desire to adopt central counts was less prevalent in the many

small towns and villages that have only one or two polling places. Sixty-five clerks who completed the survey said that they already use central counts or are likely to do so, a sign that adoption will expand, especially in more populous municipalities.

Some municipalities used public drop slots or drop boxes to receive absentee ballots before election day. Clerks were asked which of four policies about drop boxes came closest to their views. As the figure below demonstrates, opinions were divided quite uniformly across the options, with 22% of clerks taking the most restrictive position of preferring to outlaw drop boxes, another 21% preferring to limit the number of boxes to one in each municipality. Yet most clerks favored a requirement of at least one box or allowing clerks to install as many as they like.

Respondents in the public survey was asked the same question and produced a similar distribution of answers: 31% would not permit drop boxes at all, 17% would limit them to one per community, 20% of respondents would allow as many as wanted, and 32% require at least one per municipality. This is a remarkable amount of agreement with the clerk survey despite the clerks overrepresenting low population communities. For both groups, a large majority would allow drop boxes, although opinions vary on whether there ought to be a minimum number required or maximum number permitted.

Clerk Opinions About Drop Boxes



Clerks' opinions about drop boxes varied substantially depending on the population of the municipalities they serve. Among the smallest municipalities with fewer than 500 people of voting age population, 36% of clerks believed drop boxes should not be permitted and 24% believed they should be allowed to have as many as they want. In the two most populous categories (VAP over 5,000), not a single clerk believed the drop boxes should be banned and more than 70% agreed that municipalities should be allowed to have as many as they want or at least one.

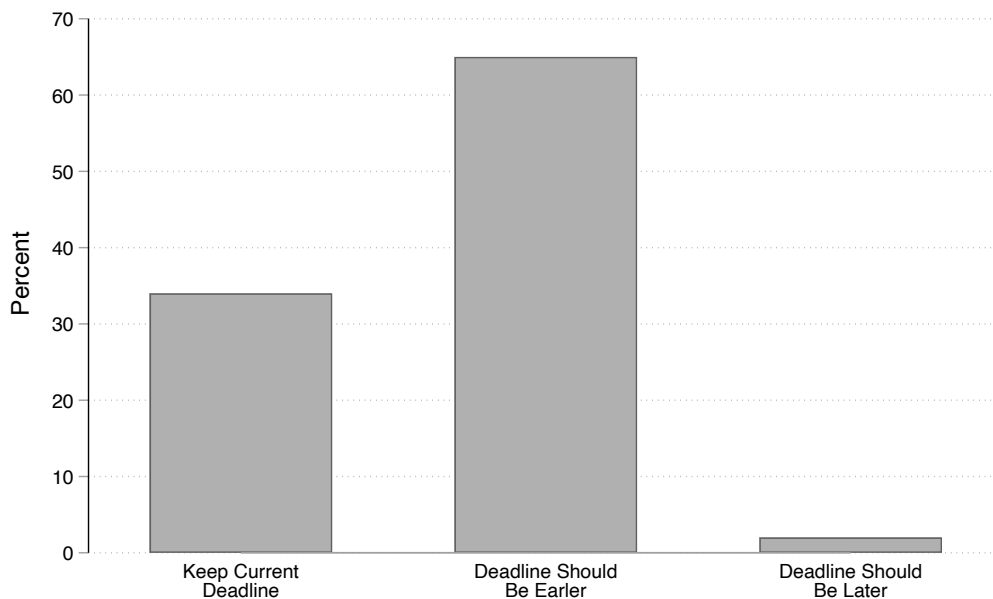
A lack of poll workers, the need for safe voting locations, and unusually high demand for absentee ballots caused some municipalities to consolidate polling locations. This was especially true in the

April 7 primary election, but continued to some degree in the November election. Clerks were asked to imagine that if “absentee continues to be widely used in Wisconsin after 2020,” what would be their views about keeping existing polling places. The vast majority of clerks (76%) responded that “the number of election day polling places must be maintained” while the remainder believed “it would be appropriate to reduce the number of election day polling places.” Support for maintaining existing polling places was especially widespread among clerks from the smallest municipalities.

Another dimension of absentee voting that got attention in 2020 were the deadlines for requesting and returning ballots, both of which were subject to litigation prior to the election. Concerns about the speed of delivery by the United States Postal Service and the unique logistical challenges faced by voters because of the pandemic raised question about whether those deadlines should be altered.

To probe views about deadlines for absentee ballot *requests*, the survey first reminded clerks that “Wisconsin law currently allows a voter to request an absentee ballot up to five days before election day” and then asked whether they wished the deadline remained the same, moved to an earlier day, or moved to later day. While a sizable minority of clerks would keep the current deadline, the graph shows that nearly two-thirds of clerks believed the deadline should be earlier. Although the majority view across all sizes of municipalities, the desire for an earlier deadline was more common among clerks from larger municipalities than smaller ones. This is one of just a few policy areas where clerks preferred a change to policy rather than sticking to the status quo.

Clerk Opinions About Absentee Ballot Requests



In terms of deadlines for *returning* absentee ballots, clerks were reminded that the current deadline is when polls close on election night and were then asked whether the law should remain as it is, the deadline should be extended to the Friday following the election (as the law previously allowed until 2016), or extended to the Monday following the election (the rule in place for the April 7 primary). On this question, there was near unanimity: 94% of clerks wanted to keep the election day deadline.

The public is not as versed in the legal details of absentee voting as are clerks, but the survey of the electorate did ask in a general manner whether absentee voting policies should be tightened or made more accommodating. Nearly half respondents opted to keep the law as it is, 37% wished that it was stricter, and 16% wished that absentee voting was easier. Respondents who preferred making absentee voting stricter were also more likely to vote in person, suggesting that they were generally opposed to that method of voting in principle or were less familiar with its administrative details because they had not use that method to vote.

The electorate was also asked for their opinions about voter ID laws in several circumstances. It is important to note that these questions only asked about “approved government ID” in a general way and did not detail exactly what forms of ID should be accepted or other details such as whether expired IDs may be used. For voting in person, 84% of the public supported requiring a photo ID. For voting by mail, 80% supported a photo ID requirement. For voters confined by the pandemic, support for the ID requirement was a bit lower at 76%. Clerks were also asked about the exception to the voter ID requirement for “indefinitely confined” voters; a similar majority of 71% supported requiring ID even for these individuals. In their open-ended comments, multiple clerks believed that voters were inappropriately exploiting the accommodation and believed that voters should provide proof of their confinement. Some also wanted proof of illness or disability to make sure of the absentee voting process.

Structure of Election Administration

Despite the stress caused by the unique 2020 environment and the new work flows it motivated, clerks’ experiences apparently did not alter their views about who should be responsible for administering elections. Only 11% of clerks agreed that more “centralized” election administration would be better than the current arrangement. This is not much different from the 16% of clerks who favored more centralized administration in the 2009 survey.

Municipal clerks were asked whether county clerks should generally play a larger role in election administration. A large majority – 73% – preferred not expanding the roles of county clerks. Remarkably, this percentage is unchanged from the 2009 survey of clerks, which also found 73% objecting to a larger role for county clerks. An interesting aspect of these views is that clerks from the least and the most populous municipalities were most supportive of increasing the county’s role while clerks serving midsized jurisdictions were most attached to the current arrangement.

Although clerks opposed expanding county clerks’ general roles by three-to-one margin, it is possible that they would prefer to see more involvement in some areas of election administration than others. Clerks were asked to consider the “balance of responsibilities” between municipalities and counties, and to indicate whether they believed county clerks should have more, the same, or less responsibility than they currently do in eight specific areas from printing ballots to entering voter registration information to reporting results. Across all eight areas, a majority of clerks expressed a preference for keeping the mix of responsibilities the same, with support ranging from 63% for recruiting and training poll workers to 94% for printing ballots. These high levels of support for the current configuration surely reflects in part a well-known “status quo bias” in which

administrators tend to believe that existing setups, even flawed ones, are preferable to the uncertainties and disruptions of new arrangements.

In terms of how election officials are selected, clerks were asked if would be better for their offices to be partisan or nonpartisan. Almost no clerks believed a partisan municipal clerk was the preferred model. But they were equally divided between preferring nonpartisan clerks and concluding that “it does not matter much if local election officials are partisan or nonpartisan.” The split between these two options varied by the size of the jurisdiction: most clerks from small jurisdictions were in the “does not matter” camp but a majority of clerks from large jurisdictions believed that it does matter, and that nonpartisanship is best. In response to an identical question in the survey of the electorate, the public came to almost the same conclusion as clerks: 6% preferred partisan officials, 43% preferred nonpartisanship, and 52% said it did not matter.

Clerks and the public were also asked about partisanship on the state’s central election authority. The question put to respondents was whether they think it “better if the state’s election board or commission is comprised of nonpartisan members or members from both major parties?” In contrast to their views about local officials, most clerks (57%) believed that nonpartisan selection was best, 29% said partisanship did not matter, and only 14% believed that a bipartisan commission was best. Although bipartisanship was the least popular approach and nonpartisanship the most popular, regardless of the clerk’s jurisdiction, those from big municipalities were more uniformly in favor of nonpartisanship while clerks from small municipalities often said it did not matter. The public was more supportive of a bipartisan commission, although it remained a minority view (27%). More members of the public believed that either nonpartisanship was best (33%) or that the partisan composition does not matter (40%).

Occupational Considerations

The survey of clerks also considered whether the experiences in the 2020 election altered how election officials view their jobs and election administration more generally. To examine these issues, some initial background on their work environments and experiences is helpful.

According to the survey, the average clerk is 57 years old and has held office for 12.5 years. About half have done some college coursework and nearly one third have bachelor’s degrees or more advanced degrees. Eighty-seven percent identify as female and 97% identify as white non-Hispanic.

Forty three percent of clerks reported that they were appointed to office (usually when hired by a town board), while the remaining 57% were directly elected by voters. Clerks tend to believe that the systems that put them in office are the best methods of selection. Seventy-two percent of elected clerks believed that election is the better method of selection while 86% of appointed clerks believed that appointment is preferable.

Most clerks reported that they work in their capacity as election administrators part time. Thirty percent also held the position of treasurer in their municipality. More than half had another job beyond serving as clerk (and treasurer, if they also hold that position). The typical clerk reported that they spend about one-third of their working time on elections. Many are one-person operations

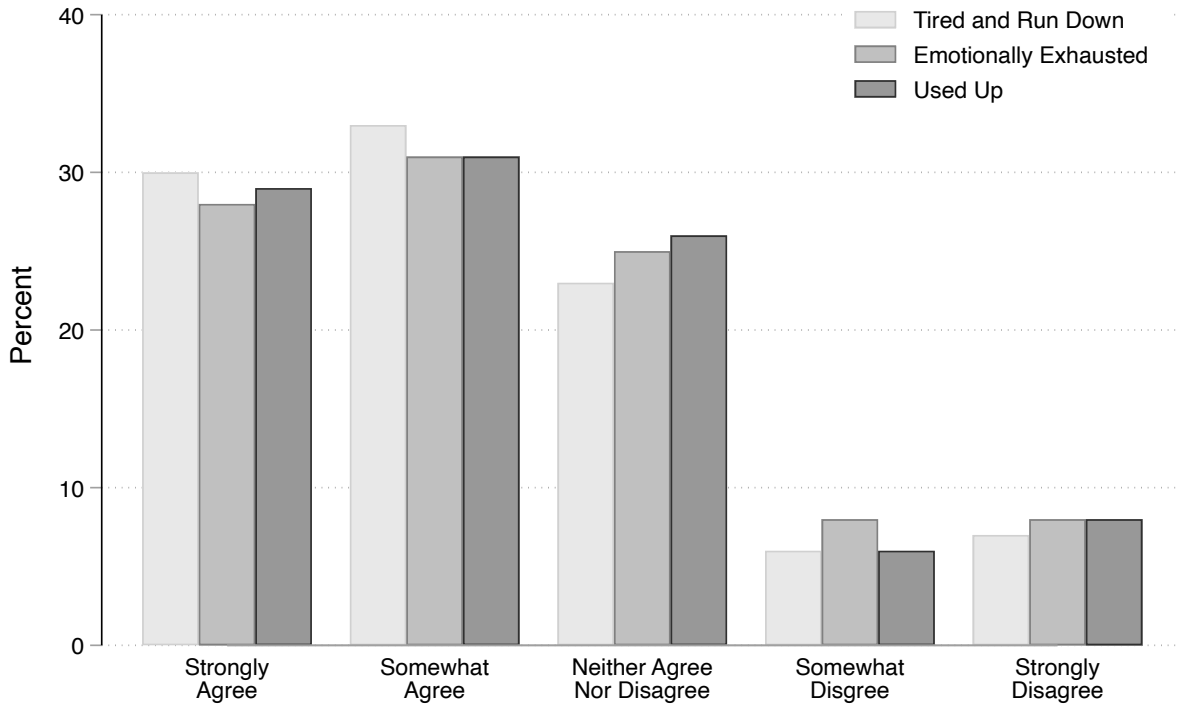
with no support staff. Thirty-one percent earn less than \$10,000 per year working as clerks and a majority earn less than \$30,000.

A significant share of municipal clerks were not enthusiastic or frequent users of computers. Seventeen percent reported that they do not “regularly use a computer at home.” Fifteen percent of clerks believed that “computers generally create more problems than they solve.” Limited technological training coupled with part-time employment, lower levels of formal education, and few staff understandably causes many clerks to resist additional statewide mandates and even additional options for serving voters for fear that there would be pressure to adopt them in their municipalities.

The 2020 election was unique in part because of the public criticism of election officials. Many administrators around the country reported that they were harassed or even threatened in the course of doing their jobs. Municipal clerks were asked if they received “more threatening or hostile messages in 2020 relative to other presidential elections” they worked. Of those who have worked a previous presidential election cycle, 19% report receiving more such messages in 2020. The problem was rare in the smallest jurisdictions (just 9%) but it happened to almost half of clerks serving municipalities with VAPs of more than 5,000. This is a stark difference in experiences during the same election cycle. Whereas clerks from smaller communities generally reported more stress associated with the rise in absentee voting, it seems that harassment and threats were of greater concern in larger communities.

To determine whether these stresses contributed to a sense of occupational burnout, clerks were asked whether they agreed with several statements about their election duties. Three questions asked clerks for their level of agreement on a five-point scale as to whether they “leave work feeling tired and run down,” “leave work feeling emotionally exhausted,” and “feel ‘used up’ at the end of the workday.” The figure below shows that a majority of clerks agreed to some degree with each of these statements.

Occupational Burnout



Clerks were asked if their experiences in 2020 affected the likelihood that they would continue to work in the field. The majority (62%) reported that it would not affect whether they continued to work as clerks. Twenty percent of those still in office in April 2021 said that the 2020 experience made it less likely they would continue serving.¹⁴ As one official explained,

“The 2020 election cycle confirmed I do not want to be a Clerk anymore. Just this year, I know of 6 colleagues of mine who have retired or are retiring because “they just can’t deal with this s*** anymore. You can count me in as well. My town board is amazing, my co-workers are fun and an absolute joy to work with, but I can not do this type of work anymore, and I’m only 40.”

In line with their greater exposure to harassment and threats, clerks from more populous municipalities were somewhat less likely to say they would continue.

Despite these motivations to leave the profession, 18% of clerks actually said that the 2020 experience made them more likely to continue serving. This suggests that weathering the challenges of the elections enhanced some clerks’ commitments to serving voters.

To examine whether the 2020 election cycle resulted in a higher rate of departures than normal, it is helpful to measure real turnover used public rosters of municipal clerks from before and after the election made available by the Wisconsin Elections Commission. Comparing a roster near election day 2020 with a roster from approximately six months into 2021 shows that the turnover

¹⁴ About 1% of clerks reported that they began their jobs in 2021. Another 7% reported that they began in 2020, although some of those probably took their positions before the general election. Turnover among clerks occurs continuously and some amount of replacement following a major election is normal.

rate during that time was 12%.¹⁵ While it might seem alarming that more than one in ten clerks left their posts in the months immediately following the presidential election, the rate does not appear to be exceptional. Doing a similar comparison of rosters from before and after the previous presidential election in 2016 shows that the turnover rate following that cycle was only slightly lower, at 9%.¹⁶ It seems that a significant amount of replacement of clerks is fairly normal, at least after major presidential elections, and that the 2020 cycle only resulted in a slightly higher outflow than usual.

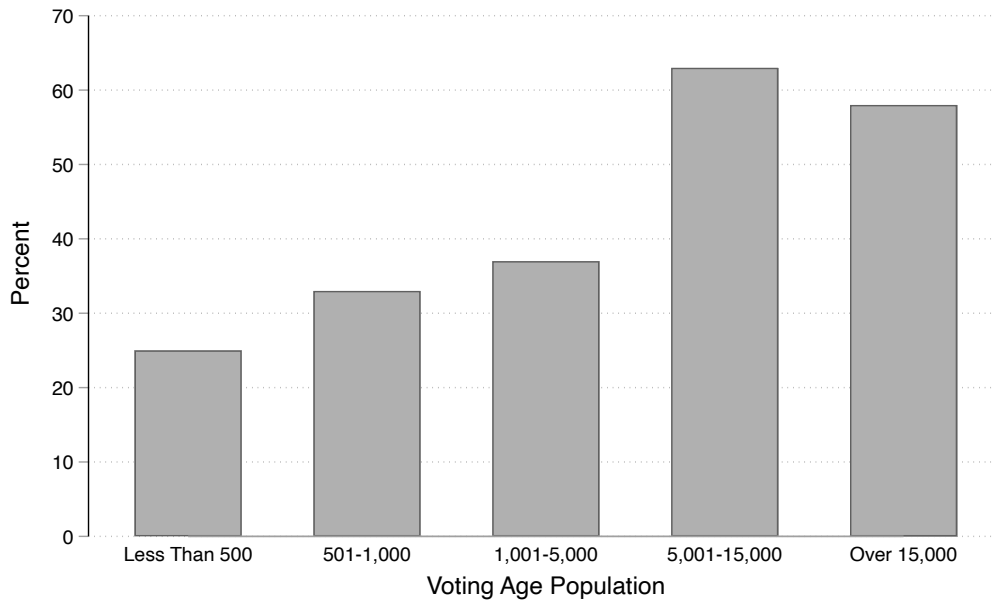
Part of a clerk's responsibility is to provide the public with information about how to vote. The survey asked several questions about public education. One question asked clerks whether they would prefer to devote more, less, or the same amount of "time and resources" to educate the public about elections. About half clerks believed that their current commitments to public education were "about the right amount" while 35% wished they could do more and 11% believed they already do too much.

The desire to do more public education was concentrated in the most populous municipalities, as shown in the figure below. Greater interest in expanding public education efforts in these communities could be due to the greater availability of resources such as full-time staff or because more populous municipalities see more "churn" in their residents, who as a result may be in greater need of orientation to the local election system. Satisfaction with the current levels of public education was more common among clerks who reported that they generally had the human, financial, and other resources they needed to conduct the 2020 election, suggesting that capacity is not an important factor behind attitudes about educating the public. It is significant that 23% of clerks reported that their offices do not have web sites or web pages. Those without a web presence were less interested in doing more education than those with a web presence.

¹⁵ The dates of the two rosters were October 26, 2020 and May 21, 2021.

¹⁶ The dates of the two rosters were November 1, 2016 and June 8, 2017.

Clerk Desire to Do More Public Education



Resource limits were a constraining factor for some officials. Some clerks clearly believed public education was neglected while they tended to more immediate concerns. One clerk expressed the sentiment this way: “Because elections is not the only job responsibility for municipal clerks, sometimes it is hard to spend more time and resources to educate the public about elections.” Many viewed themselves as answerers of public questions rather than initiators of information campaigns. Several comments expressed a similar sentiment of the clerk who asserted, “I am a one person office and do not have extra time to educate the public other than answer questions if they contact me.” Yet others conveyed that redirecting effort toward public education was not a good use of limited resources because of its limited effect on many people. One clerk wrote, “In our Village, there are uninformed voters and it seems that they choose to be uninformed.” Another believed that “Voters already have adequate sources to educate themselves.” The desire to not engage in more public education appears to be more dependent on the attitudes of clerks rather than resources available.

Public education was clearly an expected part of the job of many municipal clerks. Clerks explained they communicated with the public and other stakeholders in a variety of ways, using web sites, social media, newspaper notices, interviews with journalists, and referring people to WEC resources. Changing statewide rules in 2020 were a frustration because they forced clerks to alter their workflows, retrain poll workers, and update the public about new developments. A common plea in open-ended comments from clerks was for a stable set of rules and processes that do not change throughout an election cycle. One clerk explained that they personally “felt a lot of frustration with the politicians and the courts in Madison, trying to change the rules at the last minute.” Another clerk was also frustrated at “the courts which changed laws and confused voters and clerks doing their job” as well as the fact that “[m]ainstream and social media both failed in accurate information as to which state they were referring to with information” (for residents living near the state border). Informing the public is clearly more challenging when the facts are in flux.

In addition to providing facts for members of the public who lacked information, combatting the heightened level of *misinformation* in 2020 became an essential task for many clerks. As one clerk expressed, “There is a lot of misinformation out there for the public to consider regarding elections...I think if they were more informed the public trust in elections would drastically improve.” Clerks did not view misinformation as a kind of harmless campaign shenanigan but instead a major concern for public confidence in the election system and an insult to election officials. Numerous clerks took allegations of fraud or election irregularities as direct criticism of their integrity or competence as election administrators. As one clerk summarized:

“The fraud claims in 2020 were hard to hear because whether people realized it or not, it was criticizing the election workers. If only people understood the processes and realized what the election workers have to do.”

Clerks were asked to what degree voter misinformation about the election was a problem in 2020. About half reported that it was a “serious” problem, while one quarter called it a “minor” problem, and another quarter reported that it was “not much of a problem.” Although clerks of all sizes of jurisdictions were most likely to call the problem “serious,” that tendency was most extreme in municipalities with VAPs over 5,000, where more than 75% described the problem as serious.

The public’s assessment generally matched that of clerks, with 51% of the electorate viewing misinformation as a “serious” problem, 30% a “minor” problem, and 19% “not much of a” problem. This is an area where the public and local election officials are in agreement about a widespread concern that should be addressed.

Of six sources that might be responsible for spreading misinformation, clerks placed most blame on the mainstream media (39%), social media (31%), and candidates and campaigns (22%). Election officials, word of mouth, and lawsuits together only comprised 8% of the blame for fall information. Clerks from bigger jurisdictions were more prone to identify social media as the source of misinformation while smaller jurisdiction clerks were more divided in their assessment, putting somewhat more emphasis on mainstream media.

When they were asked about sources of misinformation, the public rendered a similar judgement to that of the clerks. The public pointed almost equally to mainstream media (31%), social media (27%), and candidates and campaigns (27%). Although social media and candidates are difficult to constrain, clerks can often make use of mainstream media to share correct, authoritative information about voting. Indeed, many clerks reported in open-ended sections of the survey that they held press conferences, make themselves available for interviews, or provided shareable information online.

The public was asked about one prominent event that transpired on election night in Wisconsin and was the subject of much misinformation. The tabulation of more than 100,000 centrally counted absentee ballots in Milwaukee and elsewhere was completed early in the morning of November 4 and was then added as a batch to the statewide totals. The WEC, some clerks, and the media warned that centrally counted ballots from larger cities, and Milwaukee in particular, might emerge in large batches late in the evening after polls had closed due to the high volume of ballots

that must be counted.¹⁷ A similar late batch from Milwaukee was added the night of the 2018 midterm election. Authoritative explanations for these late additions of ballots were also provided to the public after election day when the focus turned to tabulation.¹⁸ Despite these advisories, there were misunderstandings, suspicion, and even unfounded allegations about wrongdoing tied to these events.

In the survey of the electorate, respondents were asked what they thought about the “batch of votes from Milwaukee that was added to the totals long after the polls closed on election night.” The most common response, from 45% of respondents, was the correct one: it took until late at night to count the large number of absentee ballots cast in Milwaukee. Another 25% of respondents indicated that they did not know what was behind the batch. Most concerning is that 30% of respondents concluded that the “ballots appeared in a suspicious way late at night in a way that could indicate vote fraud.” Voters who cast ballots in person were especially like to believe this falsehood (41% were suspicious compared to 16% of mail voters). It seems that authoritative sources such as clerks were unable to prevent misinformation and that belief in some falsehoods has been sustained for months following the election.

This kind of misinformation might lead the public to have less trust in the election system. Fortunately, four out of five members of the public report that they were “somewhat” or “very” confident that ballots cast in in the state were counted as voters intended. This is similar to a rate of 83% reported in the 2016 among Wisconsin voters surveyed as part of the Survey of the Performance of American Elections (SPAЕ).¹⁹ An even larger 89% were “somewhat” or “very” confident their own votes were counted as they intended. This figure is similar to a rate of 85% from the 2016 SPAЕ in Wisconsin. Preliminary evidence then suggests only a slight decline in public confidence about the counting of ballots compared to the prior presidential election, although some people still harbor other concerns about “irregularities” or other allegations.

Conclusion

As this lengthy report has documented, it is challenging to summarize the experiences of municipal clerks and the electorate in the 2020 general election in Wisconsin. The election itself was highly successful, with high turnout, plentiful polling places and poll workers, flexible adaption to new conditions by election officials, and a low rate of rejected absentee ballots, despite unprecedented use of that method of voting. The grave problems of the April 7 presidential primary and spring election that took place just as the state was knocked off balance by the coronavirus pandemic had largely been remedied by the time general election voting started in the fall. The incidence of a widespread public emergency exploding just as voting is getting underway, as was the case in the spring of 2020, is fortunately extremely rare but also highly destabilizing. In the six months that followed, election officials adjusted their operations and largely tempered their expectations to the new environment. The result was mostly effective, although with some notable concerns and exceptions that deserve attention.

¹⁷ For example, see <https://elections.wi.gov/node/7223> and <https://elections.wi.gov/node/7221>.

¹⁸ For example, see <https://www.politifact.com/article/2020/nov/04/fact-checking-avalanche-wisconsin-election-misinfo/>

¹⁹ “2016 Survey of the Performance of American Elections Final Report” (available at <https://dataverse.harvard.edu/file.xhtml?persistentId=doi:10.7910/DVN/Y38VIQ/2NJD9>)

In particular, the survey revealed that young people and people with disabilities had more difficulty and faced more obstacles than did the majority of voters. This might be considered something like a 90-10 rule, or maybe an 80-20 rule, in which a large majority is well served but a subpopulation is not. Efforts must be made to serve voters in a reasonable fashion that protects the essential right to vote and conforms with state and federal law.

The experience of 2020 will have lasting impact, with higher levels of voting by mail in subsequent elections, new methods for voters to return such ballots, and some turnover among overburdened stressed clerks. The election serves as an opportunity to rethink central election practices and policies as well as how to prepare for other emergencies that might develop, from public health crises to weather disasters, or failures of technology or the electrical grid. Each of those scenarios will require some unique responses, but there may be best practices that can be useful in all of them.

The need to simultaneously administer mail and in-person voting both at neighborhood polling places and other sites appears to be the new normal. Operating these tandem systems is challenging for some clerks. They work well for most voters, yet long wait times and failure of absentee ballot requests to be delivered plague some potential voters. The convenience of relying on the same poll workers in one election after another is surely tempting for many clerks, but the shuffle in personnel caused by the pandemic also revealed that new poll workers recruited from different parts of the community can be even more effective. These realizations made apparent by the tumult of 2020 demonstrate that adhering to existing ways of administering elections is not adequate.

In terms of policies and practices to embrace beyond 2020, it is helpful to distinguish areas of widespread agreement among clerks and the public from those where there is a substantial amount of disagreement. Even on the disagreeable issues, it seems that there are solutions that should satisfy most stakeholders.

A hindrance to consensus that cannot be ignored is the tremendous disparity in the sizes of populations that clerks serve. At least on some matters, there are important differences in the needs of clerks and voters between big and small municipalities. Clerks from less populous jurisdictions tend to be especially wedded to existing ways of operating and are more likely to resist new mandates that increase the burden on their small offices. While there are common views statewide – such as appreciation for the MyVote web portal and National Guard members who served as poll workers – there are some significant differences of opinion among clerks depending on the size of their jurisdiction. Clerks from more populous municipalities want the freedom to install drop boxes and to process ballots before election day to serve their voters and manage workload whereas this is not the case for clerks from less populous municipalities.

Clerks surveyed for this report do recognize that a “one size fits all” approach will not work with some election practices. A clerk “from a small municipality” did not want policy changes for their own jurisdiction but admitted “that there may be problems that need addressing for larger cities, but those problems don't affect my municipality, ie. drop boxes, ballot processing at a central location.” Another clerk in a municipality with just one polling place likewise conceded “I have no idea what the experience might be like in a metropolitan area.”

When there are disagreements, the right statewide approach might be to provide municipalities with options rather than mandates. Some minimum standards of service need to be established for the entire state, but communities will also benefit from the ability to innovate to serve the particular needs of their populations. For example, having a single set of statewide deadlines for requesting and returning absentee ballots is essential so that voters are treated equally under the law. On the other hand, it seems counterproductive to ban drop boxes in all communities or to prevent clerks from allowing in-person absentee voters from inserting ballots directly into tabulators because some smaller jurisdictions are not interested in these options. It may be that some clerks opposed “allowing” these options when asked in the survey because they feared that such innovations might someday become mandates.

A key lesson from 2020 is that an election system built for one kind of “normal” environment may fail in important ways when an emergency upends regular ways of operating. The allowance of no-excuse absentee voting 20 years ago has permitted a small but growing number of absentee voters over time, but it became a lynchpin to carry out the 2020 election when the COVID-19 pandemic suddenly made voting by mail more desirable, if not necessary. Policies that allow clerks to innovate when disaster strikes will make the election infrastructure more resilient in the face of public health and other crises.