

To: Nat Robinson, GAB Elections Division Administrator
From: Maribeth Witzel-Behl, Madison City Clerk, and Paul Malischke
Date: April 20, 2009

Subject: Early voting and voter-marked paper ballots

Early voting presents logistical challenges when using hand-marked paper ballots. Stocking a large number of ballot styles presents practical and economic problems. In order to ameliorate these difficulties, the early voting legislation should include the following features. In addition to facilitating early voting, some of these measures will also simplify Election Day voting. We would be happy to discuss these further with you.

1) Municipalities should be allowed to determine satellite locations, and how many wards are served at a location, provided that each ward is served by at least one early voting location.

For the April 2009 election, Madison had 89 different ballot styles available for those who came to the clerk's office for in-person absentee voting. This high number of ballot styles is challenging at the clerk's office, but would probably be even more difficult at satellite locations.

Today, citizens can vote at only two places: their polling place, or at the clerks office. With the implementation of satellites for early voting, each citizen will have an additional place to vote with convenient hours, and it will be in their section of the city. It will not be necessary to have universal access at every satellite in order to make early voting a success.

2) Report early voting results in a manner that preserves secrecy and reduces ballot styles.

The GAB report states, "The best practice we found is to always combine early vote returns with Election Day returns in order to continue giving priority to the secrecy of the ballot."

If this were implemented, Madison would probably need 145 different ballot styles for every election, each with a different header code. Also, in low-turnout elections, it will be possible to identify how individuals voted. To accomplish this, simply take the final ward total, subtract the polling place tabulator total (a public record), and the result is the early vote.

Secrecy is better served by grouping the early votes for multiple wards, and reporting them together as a newly-created early voting ward. (Perhaps the size of the group should be limited so there was less than a total of 15,000 ballots cast in the last presidential election. If 20% of the ballots were early votes, there would be 3000 ballots in the early voting ward.) This method would require fewer ballot styles at the early voting location, since one ballot style can be widely used.

3) Allow combining wards into larger reporting units.

Waunakee, under statute 5.15 (6), is allowed to combine wards 8 to 14, with a total vote for president of 3873. In Wisconsin, 32 of the reporting units that are combinations of wards had over 3600 ballots cast. The largest had 6207 ballots cast.

Statute 5.15 (6) currently forbids municipalities with over 35,000 people from combining wards. This should be changed to allow large municipalities to combine wards if the combined wards had less than 3000 ballots cast in the last presidential election.

Currently, Madison has polling places with two wards that are in the same aldermanic district and the same school district, but must be reported separately (e.g. wards 70 and 71 at Hoyt, 2606 total votes for president). Therefore, two separate ballots are printed, one set white and one set blue. Two separate pollbooks are needed, and two separate serial number pads. The entire operation will be less costly and voting will proceed faster if the wards are combined into one reporting unit. Allowing this option will also facilitate early voting. (Wards 70 and 71 are in two different county board districts, so for those elections they would be kept separate.)

4) Eliminate wards with few or no voters, and allow future mid-decade annexations to be combined with existing wards.

Districting laws and procedures should be changed to eliminate wards that have few if any voters. Madison has eleven wards with from 1 to 10 voters in November 2008. Eight of these wards had all the ballots cast for one presidential candidate, so secrecy is gone. An additional 25 wards had zero votes. Each of these tiny wards had a ballot programmed, a machine tested, and ballots on hand just in case voters materialized. The statute should be changed to allow permanent merging of these wards into other wards for 2010, and also to avoid this situation in the next decade.

5) Change the statute to add election administration efficiency as a factor in adjusting ward boundaries during the 2011 redistricting.

One example would be balancing wards by size. Currently in Madison, the number of ballots cast at a ward ranges from 400 to over 3000 for the same presidential election. This is not an efficient use of people or equipment, and can result in unequal waiting times. Statute 5.15 severely limits ward boundary changes. The statutes are explained in the Legislative Reference Bureau 2001 guidelines for re-districting at <http://www.legis.state.wi.us/lrb/pubs/ib/01ib3.pdf>

cc: Madison Election Advisory Committee