

Wisconsin Election Commission: What to expect on election night

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To prepare members of the public and media who will be paying close attention to unofficial Election Night results, the Wisconsin Elections Commission is reminding the public that Election Night results are unofficial and may not be fully available until the early morning hours on Wednesday, Nov. 9, or later.

Election Night Results Are Unofficial

In recent elections in Wisconsin, public misunderstanding of how election officials tabulate votes and produce unofficial results has fueled misinformation and conspiracy theories about Wisconsin's strong, decentralized system of election administration.

The election results reported on election night are never the final, certified results. Election Night results are unofficial, meaning they have not been reviewed by County Boards of Canvassers or been certified by the WEC chairperson. In the days between Election Night and certification by the WEC chairman, it is normal for election results to change slightly as election officials conduct the canvasses to ensure an accurate vote total and complete the certification process.

All ballots must arrive by Election Day at 8 p.m. to count. Provisional ballots, however, an infrequently used option for voters who are unable to provide poll workers with photo ID on Election Day, can be counted until the Friday after Election Day. Provisional ballots are voted on Election Day but withheld from being counted unless the voter provides proper photo ID by the Friday after the election.

The purpose of a canvass is to account for every voted ballot and ensure that each valid vote is included in the official results.

State and national winners are not official until the results have been verified by counties and certified by the chairperson of the Wisconsin Elections Commission no later than Dec. 1, 2022.

No Statewide Reporting System

Election officials do not “call” elections on Election Night.

Wisconsin has never had a statewide system for reporting unofficial results on Election Night, and there is no central official website where results will be reported. Most of the unofficial results the public sees on Election Night and in the following days come from the Associated Press (AP) newswire service.

Election night declarations of victory are based on predictions and incomplete results.

“Election Night results are unofficial and reported out by media in real time,” said WEC Administrator Meagan Wolfe. “These results have not been verified by the quality control measures in the canvass process, so the public shouldn’t draw conclusions until the results have been certified by Dec. 1.”

Election officials are not allowed to produce the results from each polling place and central count facility until after polls close at 8 p.m. and all votes have been processed. In most jurisdictions that use voting equipment, producing the results will mean convening what is known as the local board of canvassers, a public meeting in which the voting equipment will print a results tape, which will be read aloud, announcing the vote totals for that polling place or central count facility.

Municipal clerks provide unofficial results to their county clerks, who will post them to the county’s website.

Municipal clerks must report unofficial results to the county clerk within two hours of the results being tabulated, and county clerks must post the results within two hours of receiving them from the municipal clerk.

Unofficial Election Results May Not Be Complete Until the Early Morning Hours on Nov. 9 or Later

While WEC can’t predict exactly when election officials will complete unofficial results reporting, it is possible unofficial Election Night results will not be fully

posted to respective county websites until the early morning hours on Nov. 9, or later.

This does not preclude the possibility that unofficial results may be available sooner.

There are several factors that may delay the reporting of unofficial election results. One of those factors is Wisconsin law, which prohibits election workers from processing and tabulating absentee ballots until 7 a.m. on Election Day. The high volume of absentee ballots cast in recent elections, along with potentially high Election Day turnout, means it may take longer to process ballots on Election Night.

Central Count Cities Typically Take Longer

The public should be aware that it may take longer for populous jurisdictions that count absentee ballots at central count facilities, such as Milwaukee, Green Bay, Racine, Kenosha, and Janesville, to process their large volumes of absentee ballots. Historically, these jurisdictions have been some of the last to complete unofficial results reporting.

The law requires local election officials to count ballots without adjourning until the counting is completed. Election workers are not permitted to stop the count and reconvene later.

“Election officials prioritize accuracy over speed when tallying the unofficial results,” Wolfe said. “Unofficial election results may not be complete until the early morning hours after Election Day or later. That doesn’t mean anything is wrong. It just means election workers are taking their time to ensure votes are counted accurately.”

Don’t Be Misled by Misinformation About Central Count Facilities

Results reporting in central count jurisdictions is a common source of online misinformation on Election Night, with misguided rumors about late night “ballot dumps” sowing doubt about the integrity of the election.

Large cities that process absentee ballots at central facilities report their results a bit differently than cities that process absentee ballots at polling places. These cities report aggregate absentee results all at once, unlike most other places that report results as they are ready.

Due to these factors, media compilations of unofficial election results may show a significant jump in the number of votes cast when the absentee results are added in from a large jurisdiction, such as Milwaukee.

“If you see media reports that show a significant increase in the unofficial number of votes cast, this doesn’t mean anything irregular is going on,” Wolfe said. “This is just the reality of how it works for large cities that process votes at central locations.”

Minor Election Day Disruptions Happen In Every Election

Minor disruptions happen in every election, but they’re not signs of nefarious activity.

A potential increase in the number of election observers and of individuals challenging voters via procedures outlined in state law could contribute to longer lines at polling places or delays in unofficial results processing. The WEC expects local election officials to honor the rights of electors, observers, and challengers in the polling place. However, doing so may inevitably cause the process to take longer.

Issues with voting equipment, such as a tabulator or printer jam, may require repair and cause longer lines at the polling place. Local election officials are prepared for all these scenarios.

It is also possible, but unlikely, that other unforeseen circumstances, such as a power outage or other technology issue, could delay the transmission of unofficial results electronically, via modem or wireless transmission. In that event, local election officials have backup plans and can either hand carry or phone in results to their county clerk to ensure results are reported after the public canvass.

Any delay in the transmission of results does not in any way affect the integrity of the results themselves, which in Wisconsin are entirely backed up by paper records. Both the manual and electronic transmission of unofficial election results are open to public observation.