

# Assembly passes series of election-related bills

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The Assembly today passed a series of election-related measures, including a pair of omnibus bills that would give clerks more whistleblower and privacy protections and allow them to start processing absentee ballots before election night.

Lawmakers passed AB 567 by voice vote adds municipal clerks to the list of those provided whistleblower protections and is now headed to the Senate for consideration.

Gov. Tony Evers is likely to sign the measure, spokesperson Britt Cudaback said earlier in the day.

“Gov. Evers for years has proposed allowing county and municipal clerks to begin canvassing absentee ballots the day before an election and is glad to see this effort finally has bipartisan support,” she said. “If AB567 passes in its current form as amended by the committee and without any poison-pill additions, the governor will sign it.”

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As far as the other bills go, Cudaback said the gov “will veto any bill that enables politicians to interfere with our elections or makes it harder for eligible Wisconsinites to cast their ballot, but if there are common-sense proposals that help ensure Wisconsin’s elections continue to be fair, secure, and safe, he’ll certainly consider signing them.”

Rep. Janel Brandtjen, R-Menomonee Falls, said she raised concerns about security issues associated with AB 567.

“This bill is going to make clerks move to an early count system and there is not

enough security,” she said.

She argued the state shouldn’t “substitute security for speed.”

Rep. Clinton Anderson called the bill “a good example of bipartisan work.”

“It’s not perfect. I don’t love everything about it. But the Monday night processing part is absolutely critical,” the Beloit Dem said.

AB 577, which passed by voice vote, would raise penalties for physically harming election workers to a Class I felony from a Class A misdemeanor. Class I is the lowest felony level, but it still comes with a maximum three-and-a-half year prison sentence or up to \$10,000 in fines or both. The measure now heads to the Senate.

Rep. Sylvia Ortiz-Velez, D-Milwaukee, said the bill “protects election workers in a time when personal safety has become a real issue.”

She shared a statement she said was from Milwaukee County Clerk George Christenson noting election officials, including in Milwaukee County, have been threatened, and adding the bill “demonstrates the serious nature of these unacceptable behaviors and makes it clear that such attacks on election officials in Wisconsin will not be tolerated.”

Rep. Joy Goeben said the bill would help protect election officials’ privacy, including personal information.

“It’s our duty to ensure that those who serve this vital role are shielded from potential harm,” the Hobart Republican said.

The bill would also bar the disclosure of clerks’ personally identifiable information such as their name, home address, phone number, driver’s license number, Social Security number and place of employment.

The bill allows election workers to participate in the address confidentiality program, which means they are exempt from some public records disclosures, giving them more protections against people who might want to use personal information against them.

Lawmakers also signed off on a pair of bills that would define what it means to be indefinitely confined for absentee voting and reduce the maximum election

observer distance from poll workers to 3 feet.

AB 543, which passed by voice vote, would require clerks to give election observers a 3-foot maximum distance from poll workers and increase penalties for obstructing observers. The bill reduces the current distance from a range of between 3 and 8 feet to 3 or less. The measure now heads to the Senate.

Opponents have argued the measure would deter people from volunteering to staff elections.

Proponents argue the 2020 recounts in Madison and Milwaukee showed observers can't see anything worth noting at 8 feet.

Lawmakers also approved AB 494 by voice vote, which would change the definition of indefinitely confined status to "those who cannot travel independently without significant burden because of frailty, physical illness, or a disability that is expected to last longer than one year."

The bill now heads to the Senate.

Current law allows any voter who feels they are indefinitely confined because of age, physical illness, infirmity or are disabled for an indefinite period.

The chamber also signed off 52-45 on AB 493 with nine Republicans joining all Dems opposed to bar primary election losers from registering as write-in candidates in the following general election. Speaker Robin Vos narrowly defeated Trump-backed entrepreneur Adam Steen last cycle after Steen lost the primary by less than 300 votes. Steen later registered as a write-in candidate for the general. The measure now heads to the Senate.

Lawmakers also by voice vote passed SB 98, which requires the Wisconsin Elections Commission to verify that registered voters are U.S. citizens. The measure also requires the Department of Transportation to indicate on IDs or driver's licenses for non-U.S. citizens that the ID is not valid for voting purposes. The bill now heads to the Senate.

According to the Department of Transportation, temporary visitors with appropriate documentation, such as students or visa holders, are eligible to get a state-issued ID. The expiration of those cards is tied to the date their legal status ends.

The state doesn't issue driver's licenses or ID cards to undocumented immigrants.

Assembly members 62-35 along party lines passed AB 396, which would establish a fee of \$250 or less to obtain a copy of the state's voter registration list, and to allow the Elections Commission to charge an extra fee for physical copies. The current price tag is \$12,500.

The measure now heads to the Senate.

The Assembly also approved:

\*AB 38, to create a notification system to inform voters when their absentee ballot application has been received and when the completed ballot has been received. The bill now heads to the Senate.

\*SB 283, to require municipalities that broadcast election canvassing proceedings live to record the broadcast and retain the recording for 22 months. The bill now heads to the gov's desk.

\*AB 298, to prohibit a municipality from closing more than half of its polling places within 30 days before an election. Dem Rep. Clinton Anderson, of Beloit, was the only lawmaker to vote against the measure. Rep. Francesca Hong, D-Madison, accidentally voted in favor, but the journal for today will put her as a "no," according to her office. The bill now heads to the Senate.

Anderson told WisPolitics the bill on the floor was significantly improved from the original proposal, but "I could not vote for it."

"We already have statutes for emergency polling place closures," he said. "This bill creates additional pathways to polling closures. I believe closing polling places shouldn't be easier than it already is."

\*AB 330, to clarify that additional nominating paper signatures must be reviewed if a candidate turns in nominating papers with more than the maximum number of required signatures and a filing official determines that not enough of them are valid. The bill now heads to the Senate.

\*AB 335, to require the campaign committees of candidates for public office who commit campaign finance or election fraud violations to be dissolved and require the candidate to return "unencumbered" campaign funds to be returned to donors.

The bill now heads to the Senate.

\*SB 433, to require municipal clerks to send absentee ballots for presidential preference primaries to voters no later than 21 days before the primary. The bill wouldn't alter a 47-day deadline to send absentee ballots to military or overseas voters. The bill now heads to the gov's desk.

\*AB 570, to allow clerks or board of election commissioners to appoint long-term care facility workers as personal care voting assistants during a public health emergency or incident of infectious disease. The bill now heads to the Senate.

\*AB 571, to require the Wisconsin Elections Commission to send a postcard or letter to voters if it receives credible information they have moved outside the municipality listed on their voter registration. The measure considers information stored in ERIC's national database to be credible for determining who's moved. The bill now heads to the gov's desk.

\*AB 572, to require administrators of long-term care facilities to notify designated contacts of those who intend to vote absentee with special voting deputies of when special voting deputies will be visiting. The bill now heads to the Senate.