

Common Cause Wisconsin: The future of free and fair elections in Wisconsin

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Just prior to the long July 4th weekend, a number of dramatic events occurred regarding the future of fair and free elections in Wisconsin. Specifically, the immediate direction that the Wisconsin Elections Commission (WEC), the state agency that oversees our state's elections, will take leading into the critical and all-important 2024 presidential election year is clouded in uncertainty.

In 2015, majority Republican state legislators, together with then-Republican Gov. **Scott Walker**, engineered the destruction of the effective and nationally heralded nonpartisan Government Accountability Board (GAB). The GAB had been established with near unanimous bipartisan support in 2007 in the wake of the infamous Legislative Caucus Scandal of 2001-2002 which resulted in the criminal prosecution and removal from office of five of the top legislative leaders of both political parties. Republicans replaced the GAB with a more pliable and partisan entity that they apparently hoped would provide them with greater partisan advantage in future elections. The partisan-appointed WEC was devised and set up with only Republican input and support, with no buy-in or even consultation with nonpartisan organizations like CC/WI.

In 2019, Republican legislators unanimously voted to install the current WEC Administrator, **Meagan Wolfe**, replacing **Michael Haas**, who had held the position since 2015. Since her appointment, Wolfe has, by any objective measure, performed her role as administrator effectively, fairly and with a high level of professional and personal integrity and in a decidedly nonpartisan manner. However, because some far-right Republican conspiracy theorists and election deniers remain upset over the narrow but incontrovertible loss by **Donald**

Trump to Joe Biden in Wisconsin by some 20,500 votes in 2020, Wolfe has become a scapegoat and target for their baseless and unhinged charges. Every allegation of fraud has been disproven in the courts, and by numerous bipartisan, nonpartisan and even partisan GOP investigations as well as by vote canvasses and recounts. All have concluded that the 2020 outcome in Wisconsin was fair and accurate.

Despite this, election deniers spurred on by Trump and people like “Pillow Man” **Mike Lindell** and discredited former Wisconsin Supreme Court Justice **Michael Gableman** maintain an almost mystical hold over the Republican leadership in the Wisconsin Legislature. All have continued to call for the removal of the capable Meagan Wolfe, who is completely without any culpability or blame for Trump losing Wisconsin. And all of them know that.

As administrator, Wolfe does not make significant policy or operational decisions for the WEC. The administrator has no vote in determining the positions taken by the Commission. Every decision made by the WEC is based on a majority vote of the six commissioners, as specified when the WEC was established. Wolfe serves at the pleasure of the WEC commissioners.

At the end of June, the three Republican-appointed WEC Commissioners, Chair **Don Millis**, **Robert Spindell** and **Marge Bostelman**, voted to reappoint Wolfe to another term as administrator upon the expiration of her current term on June 30th. The three Democratic-appointed WEC Commissioners, **Ann Jacobs**, **Mark Thomsen** and **Joe Czarnezki**, all abstained from voting in order to prevent the appointment from moving forward. The 3-0 vote was arguably not sufficient because 4 votes are required to forward the Wolfe reappointment to the State Senate confirmation where State Senate Majority Leader **Devin LeMahieu** (R-Oostburg) and Senate President **Chris Kapenga** (R-Delafield) said she would be voted down.

Because of this unanticipated development, the matter is temporarily on hold. The courts may determine what happens next.

For the moment, at least, Wolfe continues in her role as administrator. As we draw ever closer to the beginning of the critical 2024 elections in Wisconsin it becomes increasingly important for the WEC to have Wolfe's firm, steady, able and experienced leadership at the helm.

CC/WI believes that Wisconsin voters of all political stripes would be best served by the continuation of Meagan Wolfe as Administrator of the Wisconsin Elections Commission.