

Wisconsin 2024 State Report

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Summary

Wisconsin, a state that is relatively evenly divided between Republican and Democratic voters, is commonly considered a battleground state, a key region for presidential candidates to win. Against the backdrop of such a politically divided state, election administration has been a priority for legislators. On top of this, ongoing legislative changes and power struggles—many of which were in response to the 2020 election—have complicated preparations for the upcoming general election. This report analyzes the 2024 presidential primary and spring election and the narratives in election administration that are developing within the state to situate the status of elections in Wisconsin as the 2024 general election nears.

Analysis of Primary Results

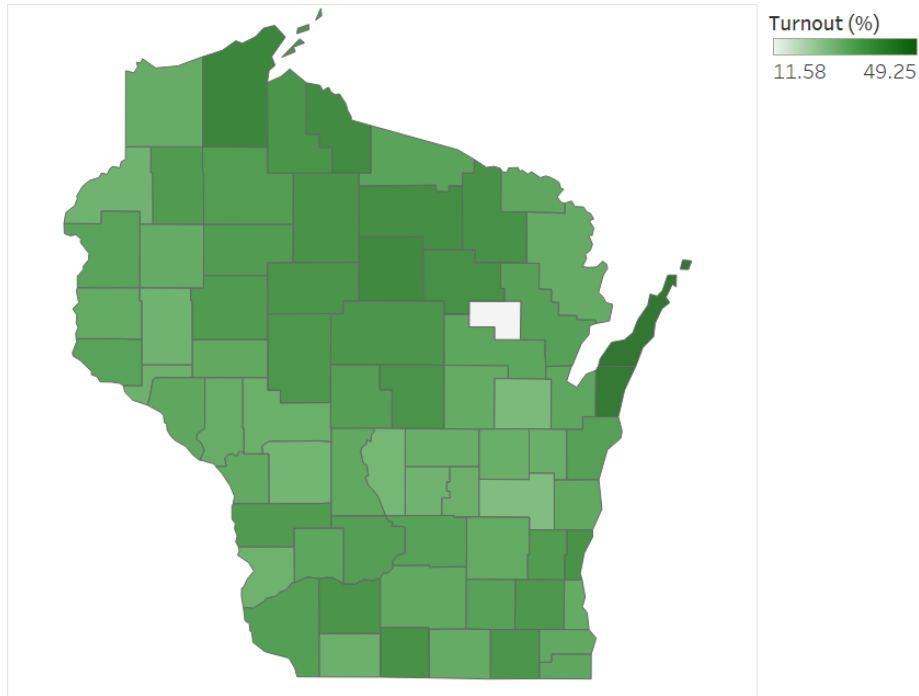
By the date of Wisconsin’s presidential primary on April 2, Joe Biden and Donald Trump had each won enough of their party’s delegates nationwide to secure the nomination. The

majority of Trump’s potential opponents had already dropped out of the race, ceding the victory to him. Although the races in Wisconsin may not have been make-or-break in the nomination process overall, the primary can serve as helpful insight, checking the pulse of the battleground state and assessing how voting has changed since the sometimes-chaotic 2020 presidential primary.

Turnout

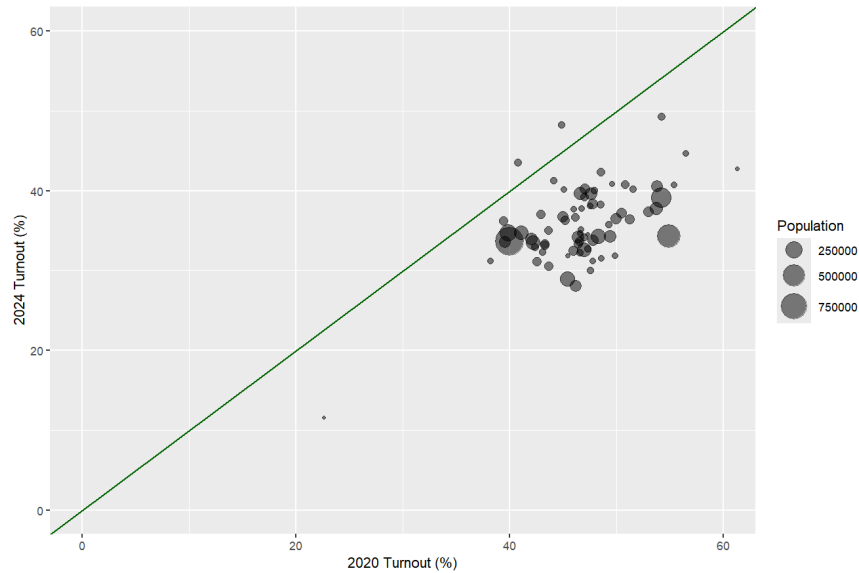
Statewide, the registered voter turnout for the 2024 primaries was [35.4%](#). Of 3,479,626 registered Wisconsinites, 1,229,972 voters participated. [A total of 582,527 participated in the Democratic primary and 604,177 in the Republican primary.](#) (The remaining voters presumably voted in neither primary but cast ballots in the local races on the spring general election ballot.) However, turnout across the state varied by county. Most counties saw turnout between 30% and 40%. Menominee County, which is essentially coterminous with the Menominee Indian Reservation, saw only 11% turnout. Others neared 50%. Figure 1 depicts this varied turnout, with greater turnout occurring in the central and northern parts of the state.

Figure 1: Wisconsin 2024 Primary Turnout by County



The registered voter turnout for the 2020 primary was 1,555,263, or [46.7%](#) making this year's turnout a decrease of more than eleven percentage points. [Turnout](#) in the 2020 Democratic primary was 925,065, while Republican turnout was 630,198. Figure 2 depicts the 2020 primary turnout along the x-axis and the 2024 primary turnout along the y-axis. Each point represents a county and is scaled according to its population. All but two counties had a decline in turnout in this primary compared to 2020, demonstrated by their location below the given equivalence line.

Figure 2: 2020 and 2024 Primary Turnout by County



However, this fall in turnout is not evenly distributed between the Republican and Democratic primaries. Since voters in Wisconsin do not register with a party, there are no specific figures regarding turnout for the partisan primaries. However, if we look between the 2020 and 2024 primaries, the change in number of voters in each primary can help demonstrate the shift that occurred. Figure 3 compares the number of voters in the 2020 and 2024 Democratic primaries by county. Every county saw a decrease in the number of Democratic participants at the presidential primary, and this gap is quite sizable for the largest counties. Figure 4 makes the same comparison between the 2020 and 2024 Republican primary. In this comparison, counties are much more clustered around the line of equivalence. Just over a third of counties had more Republican voters in 2024 than 2020. In the counties where Republican turnout decreased, it fell by fewer voters than the Democratic turnout.

Figure 3: 2020 and 2024 Democratic Votes by County

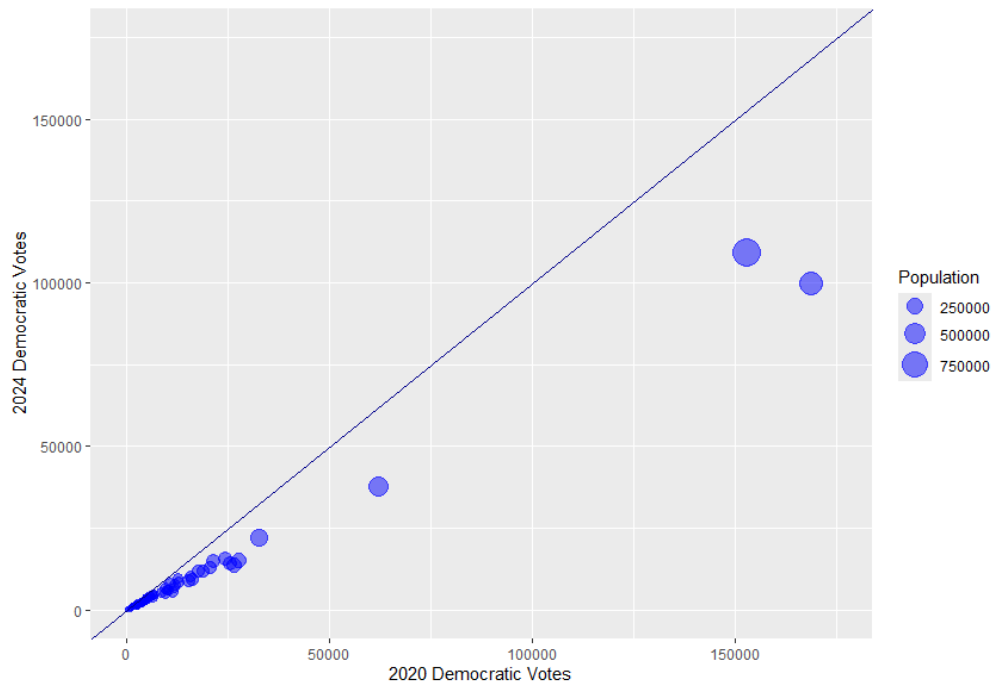
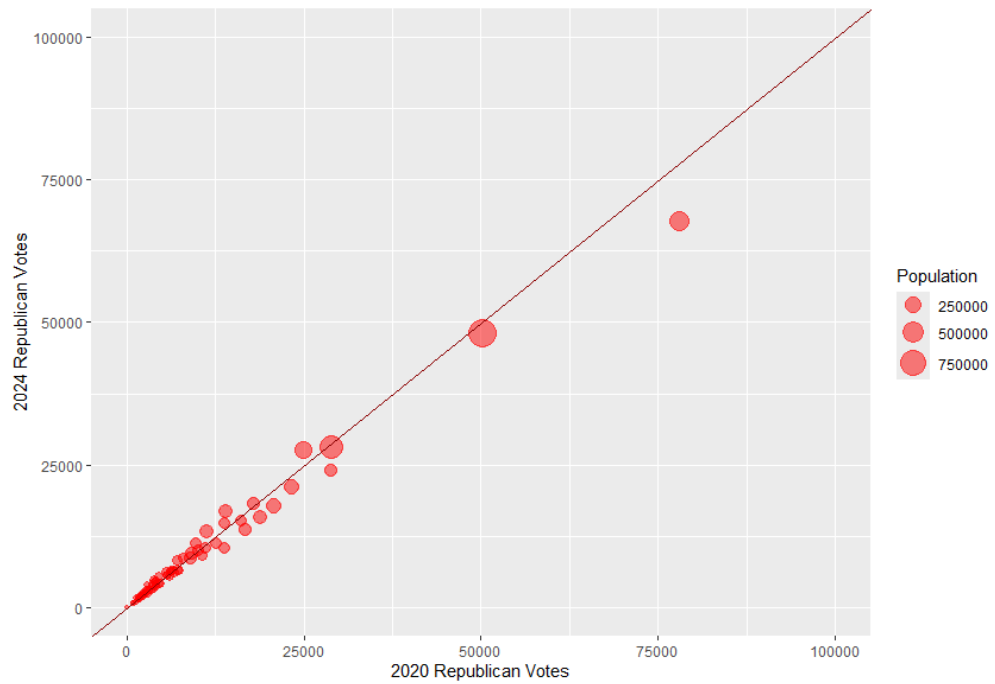


Figure 4: 2020 and 2024 Republican Votes by County

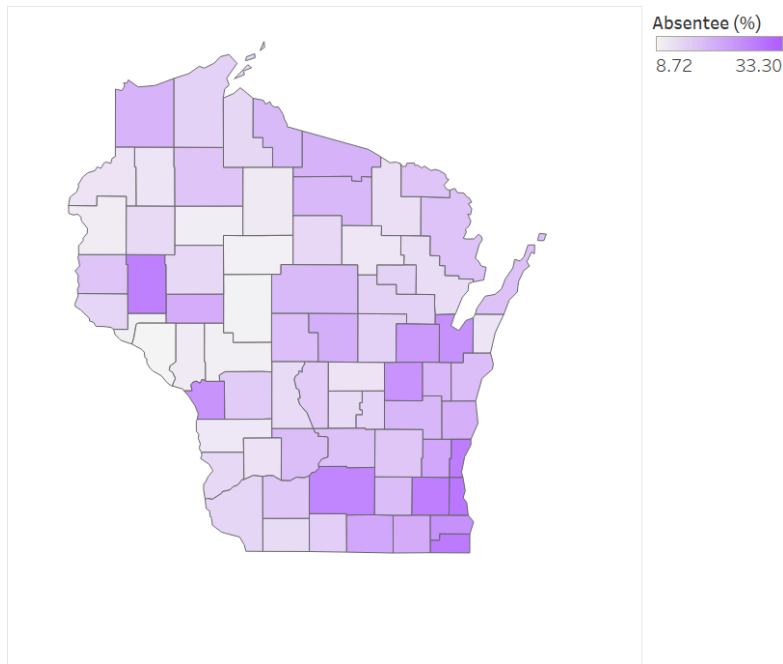


Voting Modes

Of the 1.2 million votes counted, [nearly a quarter](#) were absentee ballots. Three hundred two thousand eight hundred twenty-nine valid absentee votes were cast in Wisconsin's 2024 primary. Ninety-three thousand eight hundred twenty-six of these absentee ballots were in-person absentee votes (whereby a voter who might not be available to vote in person on Election Day can cast a vote at a physical voting location during an early voting period before Election Day). In-person absentee voting is an early voting option provided for Wisconsin voters within the two weeks preceding Election Day, ending the Sunday prior. However, the availability of this option varies by municipality due to the decentralized nature of Wisconsin's election administration. The remaining 69% of absentee ballots were mail-in. Drop boxes began to be used in Wisconsin in 2020 for voters in the state to return their mail-in absentee ballot, but the availability of this option had been in doubt owing to a [ruling](#) by the Wisconsin Supreme Court that outlawed their use in 2022. In July 2024, the Supreme Court [reversed itself](#) after undergoing a change in personnel, allowing drop box use in 2024.

The use of absentee voting varied by county. Figure 5 depicts the utilization of absentee voting by county. Some counties had minimal utilization, with less than 10% of the votes cast absentee; others saw use in the mid-30% range. While there does not appear to be a strong relationship between population and reliance on absentee voting, the state's top five most populated counties were among the top eight in utilization of absentee voting.

Figure 5: 2024 Primary Absentee Voting by County



Examining the breakdown by county further, Figures 6-8 show the usage of different vote modes – in-person Election Day, in-person absentee/early voting, and mail voting – related to the proportion of votes cast in the Democratic primary in each county. Figure 6 shows that counties with less participation in the Democratic primary had the vast majority of votes cast in person on Election Day, with multiple counties above 90%. Figures 7 and 8 show that in-person absentee and mail-in voting were used more heavily in counties where the Democratic primary had more participation.

Figure 6: Election Day Vote Share by County

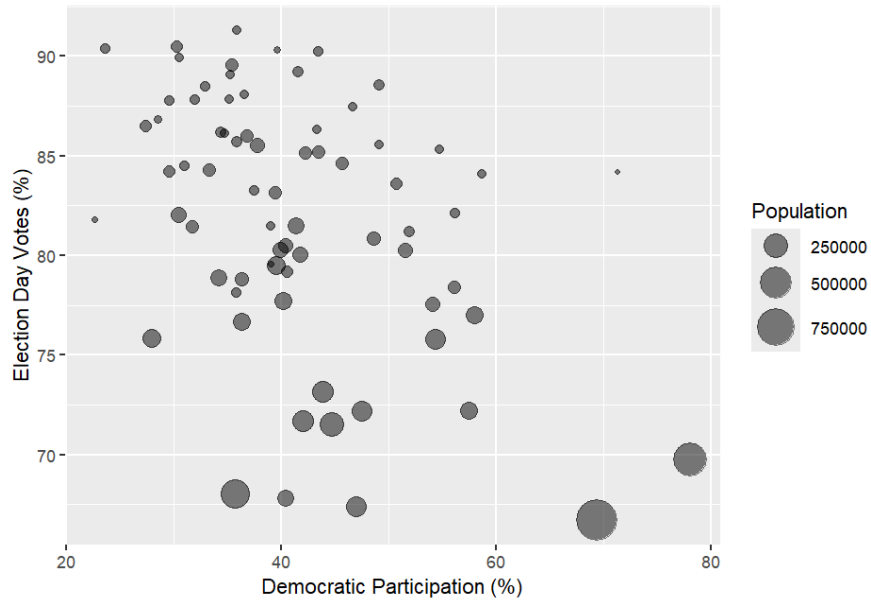


Figure 7: In-Person Absentee Vote Share by County

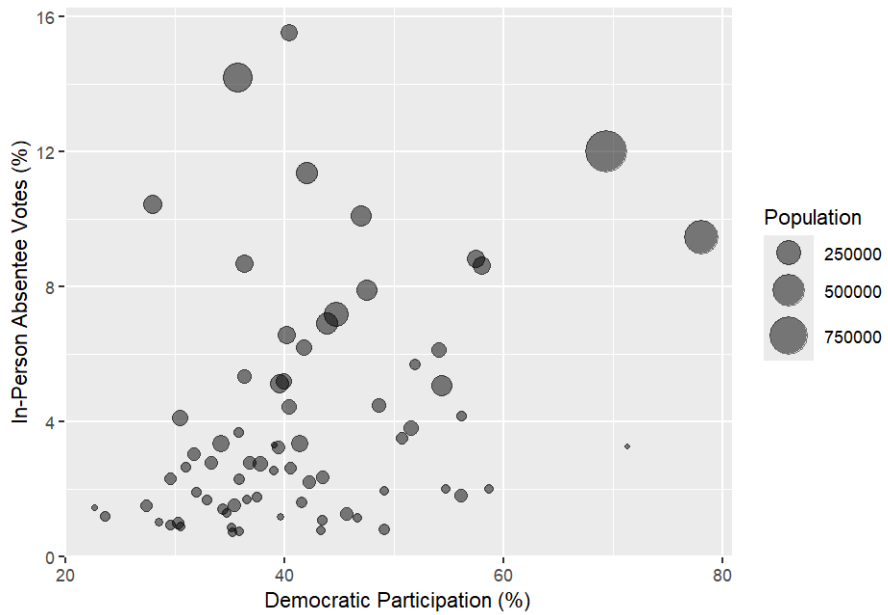
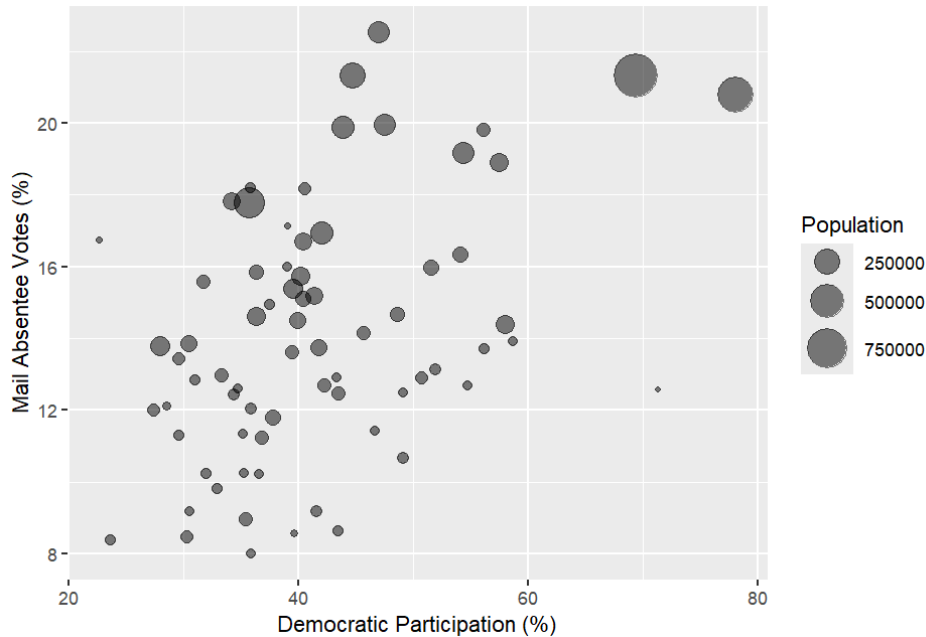


Figure 8: Mail Vote Share by County



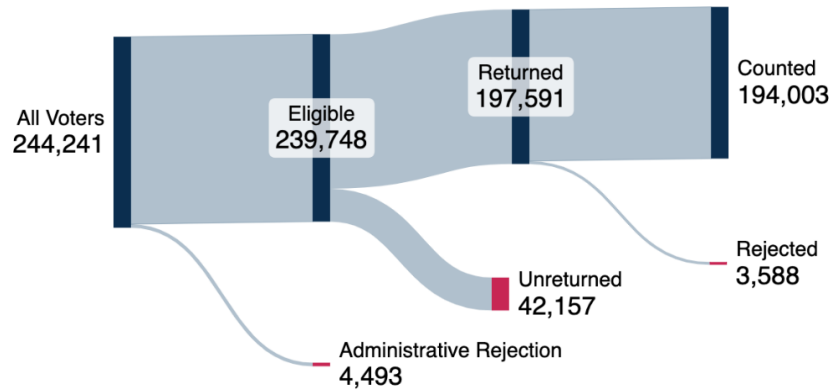
In total, 244,241 ballots were requested. 4,493 of those were rejected for administrative reasons¹. Of the remaining 239,748 ballots, 197,591 were returned (42,157 were not returned for a return rate of 82.42%)². Of those, 3,588 were rejected and 194,003 were counted (1.82% rejection rate)³. These outcomes are depicted visually in Figure 9.

¹ Administrative reasons for cancellation were calculated using the Ballot Status Reason and Ballot Reason Type variables and include ballots which were: clerk canceled, voter canceled, undeliverable, and voter ineligible. These included any ballots which had a “Ballot Status Reason” of “Voter Request”, “Voter Spoiled”, “Undeliverable”, “Voter Moved”, and “Ineligible” as well as ballots with “Ballot Reason Type” of “Voter Not Qualified” or “Voter Deceased.”

² These included ballots which had “Ballot Status Reason” of “Not Returned”, “Not Returned, sent to voter for resolution”, “Ballot Not Received”, and “Ballot Not Returned By Deadline.” Note that “Ballot Not Returned By Deadline” does not necessarily mean ballots which arrived after the voter registration deadline. While ballots arriving after the deadline are typically classified as “Ballot Returned After Deadline,” Wisconsin does not require those votes to be counted at all so some may fall into “Not Returned” or “Not Returned By Deadline.”

³ These included ballots which had “Ballot Status Reason” of “Returned, to be Reject”, “Rejected at Polls/MBOC”, and “Ballot Returned After Deadline.”

Figure 9: Mail Ballot Outcomes



However, the return rate was not evenly distributed throughout the state. Figures 10 and 11 show the return and rejection rate (respectively) by county as compared to the rates from 2020. Figure 10 shows that almost all counties saw declines in ballot return rates in this primary compared to that of 2020. Figure 11 captures that there was no specific trend in change of rejection rate; counties of various sizes saw increases and decreases alike.

Figure 10: Mail Ballot Return Rate by County

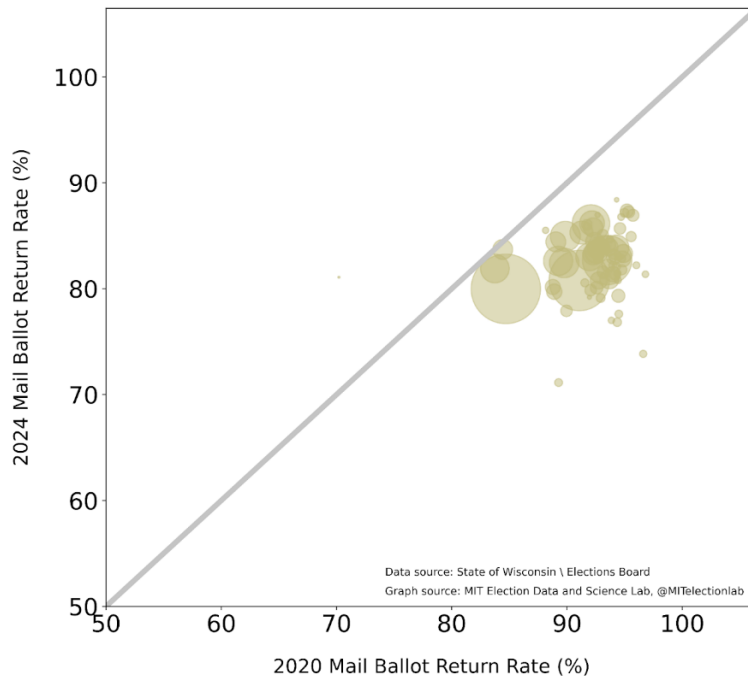


Figure 11: Mail Ballot Rejection Rate by County⁴

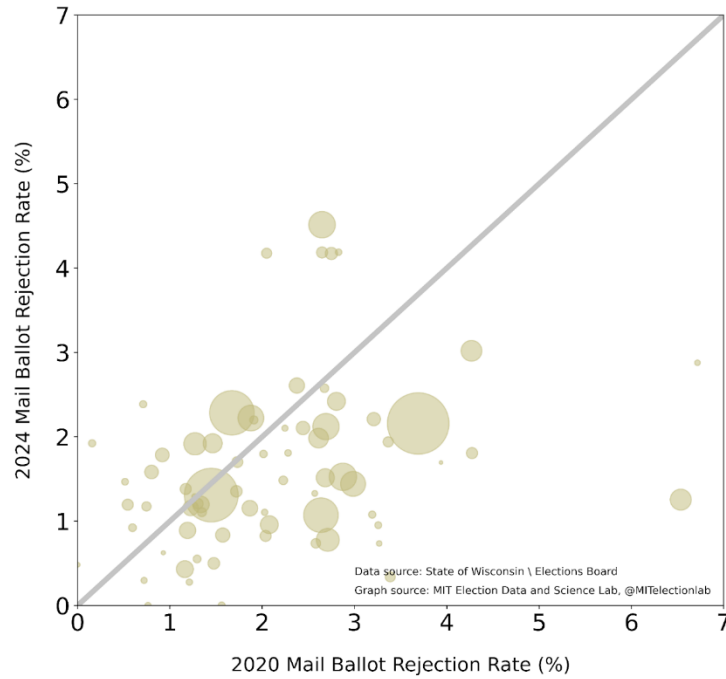
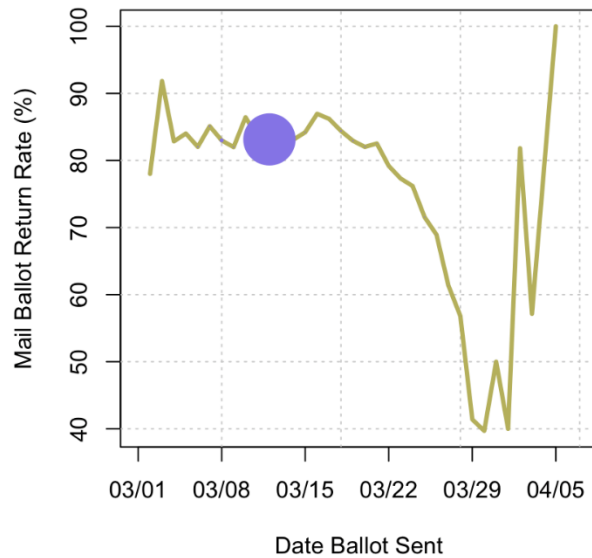


Figure 12 shows the return rate of mail ballots by the date that the ballot was sent. Note that the return rates on each day are represented by purple points, proportional in size to the number of ballots sent out on that day; the overwhelming majority of mail ballots were sent out on March 12th, around a month before election day. Return rates gradually decreased to around 40% for ballots sent out 2 weeks prior to election day. In the final days before the election, the return rate increased, though less than a total of 60 ballots were sent out within this timeframe.

⁴ Menominee County has been excluded from this graph. It had a rejection rate of 10% in 2024 and 0% in 2020 but only had 3 total ballots rejected in 2024.

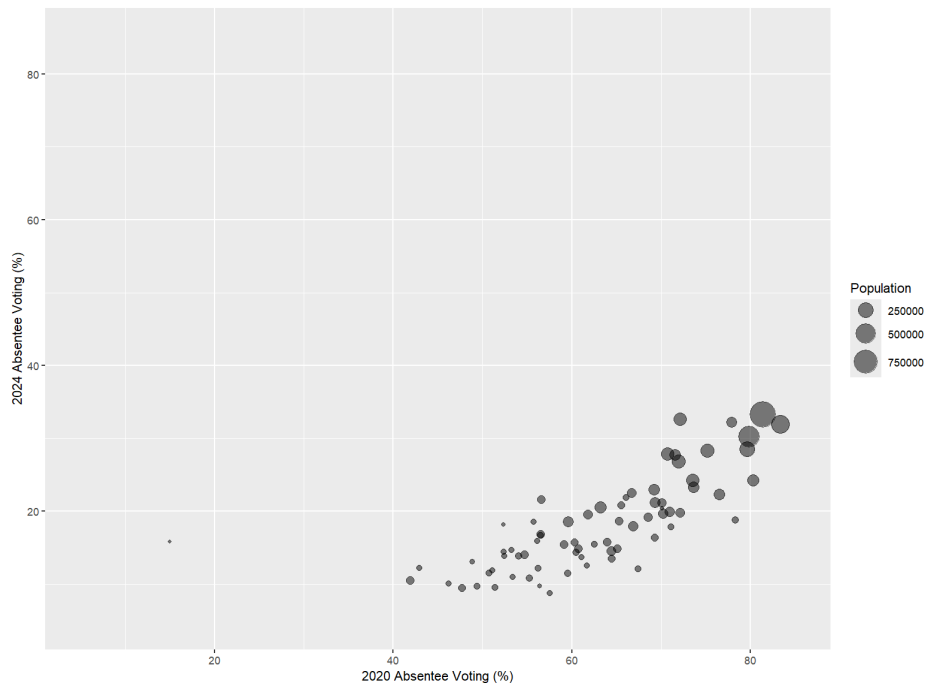
Figure 12: Mail Ballot Return Rate by Ballot Send Date⁵



The use of absentee voting has significantly declined since 2020. The 2020 primary took place within weeks of the Safer-At-Home Order by Governor Evers in response to the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. In the April election that year, over 70% of votes were absentee ballots. However, prior to 2020, no election had seen more than 10% mail-in voting in Wisconsin. Figure 13 compares the percentage of votes cast absentee in 2020 to the same stat in 2024 by county. While almost all counties saw significant decreases in absentee usage, it captures a few interesting ideas. First, counties that relied more heavily on absentee voting in 2020 continued to use at higher rates than other counties. Second, more populated counties utilized absentee voting more across both primaries.

⁵ Excludes ballots sent prior to March 1

Figure 13: Mail Ballot Return Rate by Ballot Send Date



While this election’s figure shows a significant decrease in use from 2020, it shows the potential for absentee voting to become a more consistently used option among Wisconsin voters. However, the rise in usage is not universal. The usage of absentee voting particularly by mail, seems to fall along partisan lines: Democrats, who typically show greater support for absentee options, utilize these options more heavily than Republicans.

Vote Distribution

The winners of each party’s presidential primary won quite comfortably. Donald Trump received [79.2%](#) of the vote in the Republican primary, and Joe Biden received [88.6%](#) of the vote in the Democratic primary. However, looking at the performance of all options on the ballot can help provide insight into the candidates’ standings across the state.

Donald Trump faced off against Christ Christie, Vivek Ramaswamy, Nikki Haley, and Ron DeSantis, causing more splintering of the vote than seen in the race between Joe Biden and Dean Phillips. However, a third option on the ballot drew attention in the Democratic race: [“Uninstructed Delegate,”](#) which received the second largest share of

the Democratic vote, 8.3%. In the Republican primary, Haley was the runner-up candidate, receiving about 12.8% of the vote.

County-to-county support for the winning candidates or “runner-up” options varied. [Dane County](#), home to the state’s capital city, was also home to the most significant “runner-up” support. Here, Haley received nearly 24% of the vote, compared to Trump’s 63%, while the Uninstructed Delegate option received 15% of the vote, compared to Biden’s 83%. Meanwhile, [Menominee County](#) was home to the greatest support for the frontrunners in both party primaries. Trump received more than 91% of the vote in the county, and Biden secured over 95%. However, not all counties saw such a relationship between their support. Figure 14 and 15 present the support for the each race’s “runner-up” option. Alternatively, Figure 16 presents this runner-up data in scatterplot format.

Figure 14: Haley’s Vote Share

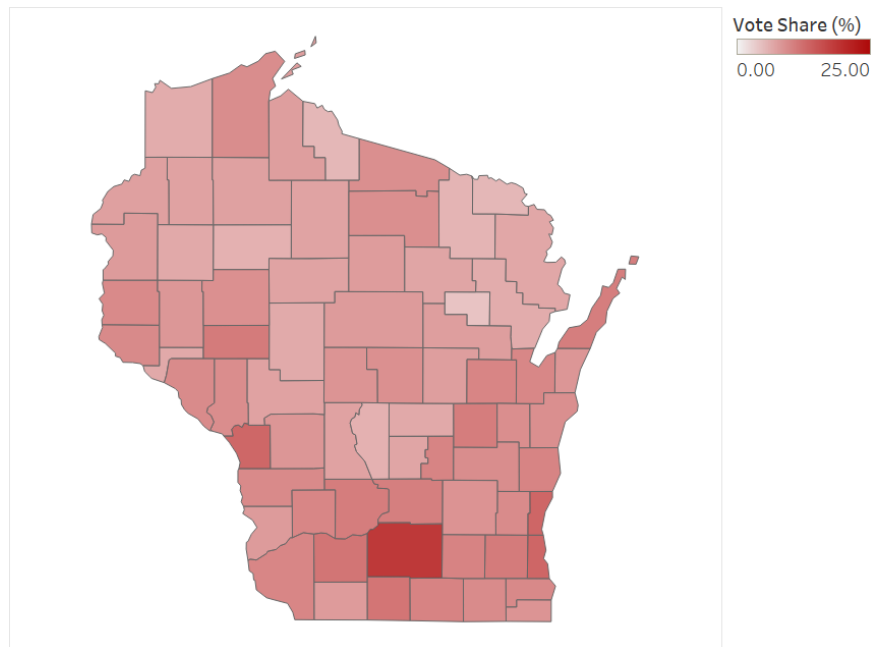


Figure 15: Uninstructed Delegate Vote Share by County

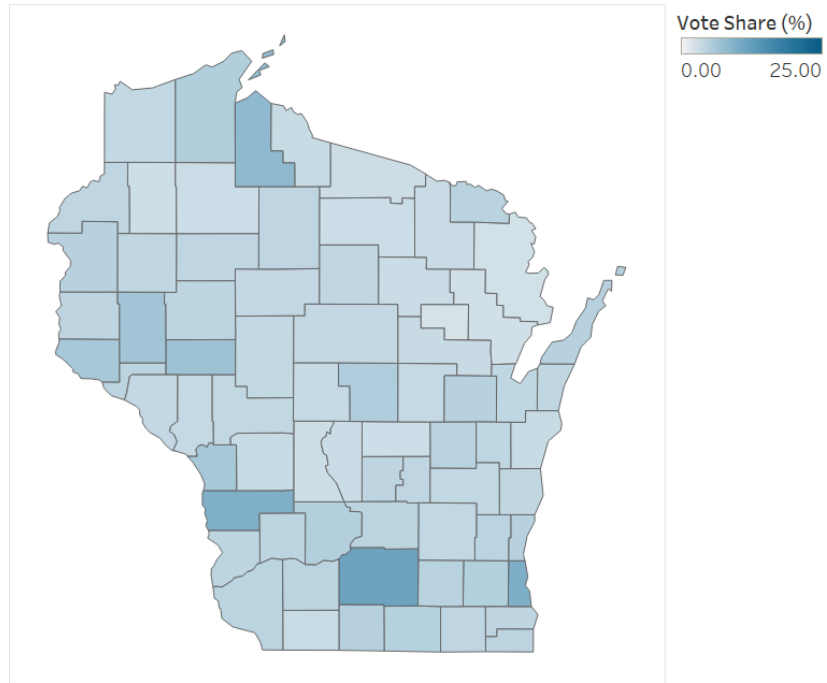
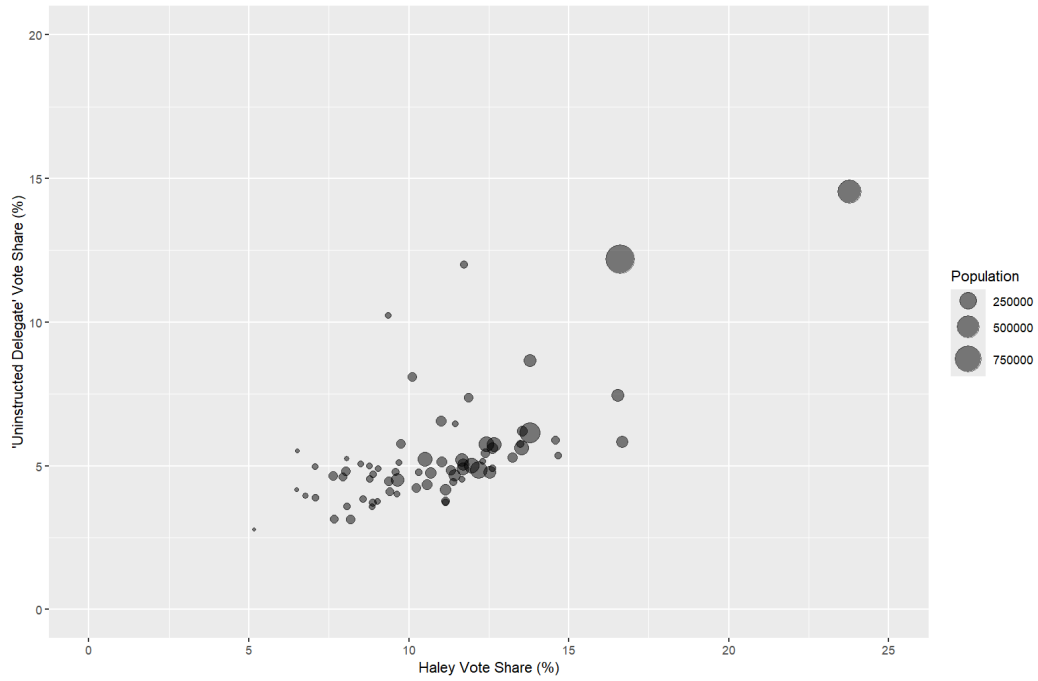


Figure 16: Runner Up Vote Share by County

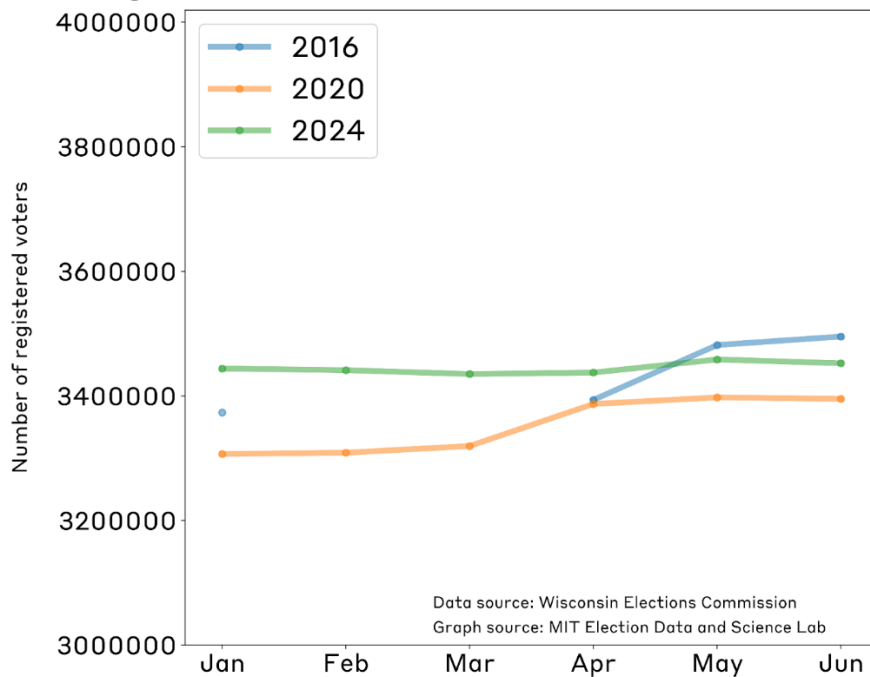


Voter Registration

On the first day of most months over the last decade, the [Wisconsin Election Commission has made statistics available](#) on the number of registered voters across the state, down to the level of individual wards. As of June 2024, there were 3,452,522 voters registered total across the state. For context, [on November 1, 2020](#), days before that year’s presidential election, there were 3,684,726 registered voters in Wisconsin; on [June 1 of that year](#), there were 3,395,382.

Figure 17 compares the total number of registered voters statewide, by month, from January through June of each of the last three presidential election years. Data were not available at the same time points in February and March of 2016, so those months are omitted.

Figure 17: Statewide Registrations, 2016 vs. 2020 vs. 2024

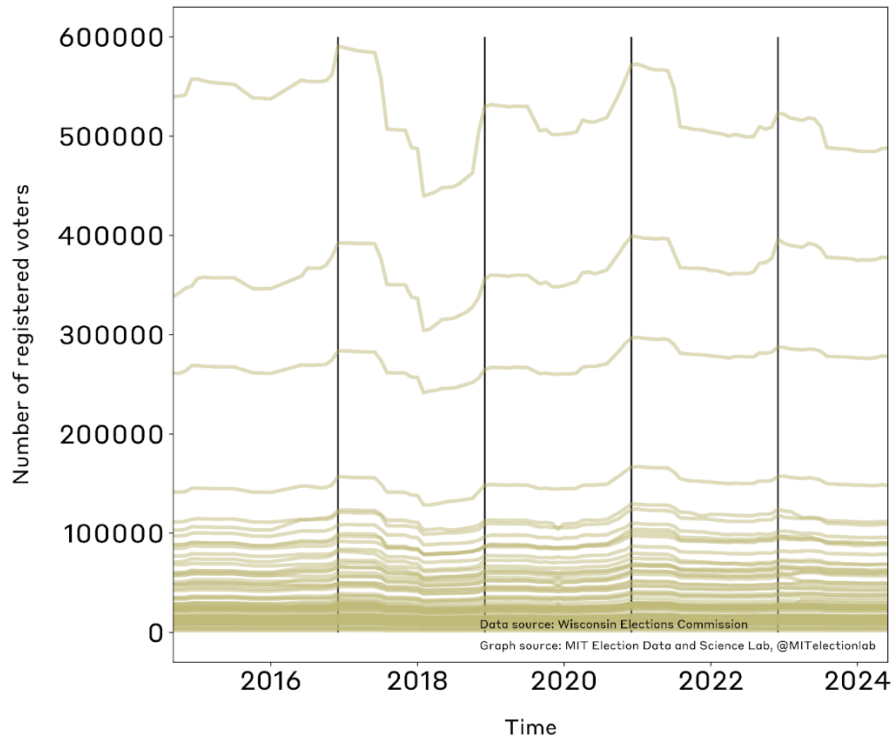


So far in 2024, the total number of registered voters has been roughly parallel to the trend over the course of the first half of 2020. However, against the backdrop of what [Census estimates suggest](#) is a fairly stable overall statewide population, the number of registered voters has increased overall in that period. Intriguingly, however, the gap narrowed in April, which was the month of the presidential primary in both 2020 and

2024. In 2020, there was a modest net increase of nearly 70,000 registered voters between March 1, 2020 and April 1, 2020, suggesting that people may have registered in order to vote in the primary election (while the Republican primary was not contested, the Democratic primary was contested by Joe Biden and Bernie Sanders). Between March 1, 2024 and April 1, 2024, the number of registered voters increased by only about 2,000. It is reasonable to imagine that a small number of eligible voters chose to register in March 2020 in order to vote in the April 2020 primary election, which at least included one partisan presidential primary that was at least contested by two nationally competitive candidates, but that very few eligible voters registered in order to vote in the April 2024 primary elections, in which both parties held elections without any meaningful competition.

To check for regional patterns in the trends and to use all of the available time points, we downloaded all of the near-monthly voter registration reports since 2014 and aggregated the number of registered voters to the level of counties. (Although Wisconsin elections are not administered at the county level, this is a convenient geographic unit to visualize the data). Those registration statistics are displayed in Figure 18. The beginning of each even-numbered year is marked on the x-axis, vertical lines correspond to the months of even-year general elections, and each curve represents a county.

Figure 18: Voter Registration by County, 2014-2024

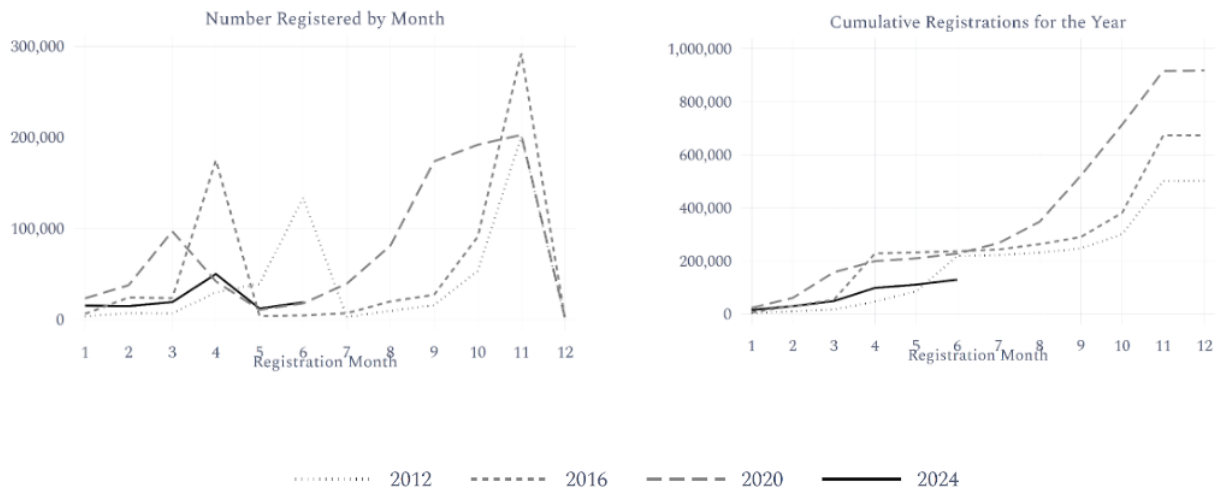


This decade of voter registration data shows striking stability overall and within most counties. In the final voter registration statistics update of 2014, the Wisconsin Elections Commission reported 3,475,958 registered voters; in the most recent data point in our plot, from June 2024, the Commission reported 3,452,522 registered voters. Some variation over time at the county level shows the ebb and flow of voters registering in the lead-up to elections. Counties across the state consistently see semi-periodic surges in voter registrations in the months leading up to general elections, especially in the largest counties, crescendoing during the month of the election and then plateauing. Over the year or two following a federal election, these highs tend to be adjusted downwards, presumably through routine processes of voter list maintenance (which is a necessary task to regularly undertake to remove previously eligible voters who have moved, passed away, or become otherwise ineligible to vote), with the consequent removal of a small proportion of voters.

The current county-by-county trends appear on visual inspection to align with the historical patterns in the early months of a presidential election year. However, Figure 19 provides a closer look at month-by-month comparison of voter registration during the last four presidential election years. Looking at this history, we may reasonably expect a

spike in the number of Wisconsinites who have registered to vote in the next few months. However, looking at the first half of the year, 2024 registration trends are already falling behind previous election years. While time remains for this cycle to catch up with those of the past, the slow start may indicate a lack of enthusiasm among voters for the given options.

Figure 19: Voter Registration by Month



Ongoing Spotlight Issues

Regions of Interest

Wisconsin has been long viewed as a swing state. While it has granted its electoral votes to the Democratic candidate in eight of the last ten presidential elections, the results have consistently been close. The state’s non-presidential elections have also represented the split of the state’s alliances; the state has had two Republican and two Democratic governors since the turn of the century. Governor Tony Evers, a Democrat serving his second term, currently works alongside a state legislature with Republican majorities in each chamber— the State Senate has a 22-10 Republican majority, and the State Assembly has a 64-35 Republican majority. The state has one Republican and one Democratic U.S. Senator who usually fall on opposing sides of major issues. The contentious nature of the state’s elections demands particular attention. Within the state, a few counties stand out as particularly of interest. Some such counties were dubbed “battleground counties” in the 2024 election by US News, garnering attention due to their potential to wield

significant influence on the state's result. Other counties are important to watch due to their strong partisan history and significance to candidates' campaigns within the state.

Brown County

Located in the Fox River Valley in northeastern Wisconsin, Brown County is home to a modest 271,000 residents, less than 5% of the state's total population. Green Bay, the central city in the county, accounts for 39% of the county's population, with roughly 107,000 residents. Demographically, Brown County aligns closely with the state's overall statistics. The county is 79% non-Hispanic white; the largest minority group is Hispanic, making up about 10% of the county. Just shy of 32% of residents have a bachelor's degree. The median household income is \$74,000, and the median home value is \$227,000. This average home value is notably lower than the national average of \$282,000 but on par with the Wisconsin average of \$231,000. The poverty rate in the county currently sits at 10%.

Brown County is considered to "lean modestly" Republican. It has favored the Republican candidate in all 21st century presidential elections but one, the election of President Barack Obama in 2008. Despite their lack of success overall, Democrats have seen modest gains in their performance in recent elections for other offices. In races for governor, support for the Democratic nominee has improved from 41% of the vote in 2014 to 47% in 2022. In recent races for the U.S. Senate, we see that in 2016, when Republican Senator Ron Johnson was elected for his second term, his Democratic opponent Russ Feingold received only 40% of the vote. In 2022, however, Democratic candidate Mandela Barnes garnered 45% of the vote against Johnson. These shifts over time show the potential for Brown County to be a close race in the 2024 election.

Brown County is also interesting to examine because it captures differences between urban and rural voters within close proximity. The county has an urban center, Green Bay, and a more rural countryside in the surrounding area. By examining candidates' performance in Green Bay compared to the county as a whole, we may gain a more accurate picture of any partisan divides or advantages. In the 2020 presidential election, President Biden lost Brown County by seven points but won Green Bay by eight points. Similarly, in 2022, Governor Tony Evers won Green Bay by 13 points but lost the county by four points. These disparities capture the divide between urban community residents and their rural neighbors.

WOW Counties

The WOW counties comprise three counties in the Milwaukee suburbs: Waukesha, Ozaukee, and Washington. These counties are three of the top four wealthiest in the state. Their combined population is 86.9% non-Hispanic white, compared to 78.6% in the state. This affluent region has traditionally voted solidly Republican. All three counties have voted for the Republican candidate with over 60% majority in all elections since 2000. However, the size of this lead is shrinking with time.

Looking at recent election results nationwide, President Trump and his fellow Republicans have struggled to maintain their hold on suburbs. For example, we can look to Elm Grove, a small city in Waukesha County. In Elm Grove, Mitt Romney beat Barack Obama by 36 percentage points in 2012; in 2020, Trump beat Biden by only 3 points. A similar trend can be witnessed across the WOW counties. Barry Burden, a political science professor at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, attributed some of this shift to the movement of younger, more diverse families to the suburbs away from the city center. In the case of the WOW counties, this would involve the relocation of families from Milwaukee into these more suburban regions. These new residents typically vote for Democratic candidates, shifting and narrowing the partisan split within the counties.

Many political analysts have devoted significant attention to the WOW counties. In their list of battleground counties for the upcoming election, US News highlighted Waukesha County in particular. Part of this special consideration can be attributed to the size of the county. It is the largest of the WOW counties and the third most populous in the state, with a population of over 406,000. In addition to its size, Waukesha is comparatively affluent: the median household income is \$98,849, sitting more than \$25,000 greater than the state median, while the median home value is \$353,000, more than \$120,000 greater than the state median.

Waukesha provides a clear example of the shift happening throughout more affluent suburbs. While it remains a Republican stronghold, its wide margins have begun to close. Between the 2016 and 2020 elections, Democratic candidates grew their margins by five percentage points.

Dane County & Milwaukee County

Dane County and Milwaukee County have traditionally been Democratic strongholds within Wisconsin. They are the two largest counties in the state, each home to one of Wisconsin's two largest urban centers. Dane County, home to over 575,000 people, includes Madison, the state's capital. On average, the county is highly educated, with 55% of residents having a bachelor's degree; the median household income is 20% higher than the state median. Milwaukee County, home to the state's largest city—which shares the county's name—has over 900,000 residents. It is by far the most diverse of the 72 counties in Wisconsin. The county is less than 50% non-Hispanic white, one of the only counties in the state where this demographic does not make up a majority. Sixty-five percent of the state's Black or African American population resides in Milwaukee County, despite the county making up less than 20% of the state's population.

Each of these counties has a strong Democratic voting tendency. Dane County has given Democratic candidates more than 70% of the vote in the past four elections and more than 60% in the two before that. Milwaukee County has also consistently favored the Democratic candidate, each winning over 60% of the vote in the past five elections.

However, despite this history, some Democrats are worried about growing resistance to President Biden. In Dane County, 14.5% of voters in the presidential preference primary opted for “Uninstructed Delegate.” Milwaukee County saw 12.2% of voters make the same choice. These shifts make it unclear how many voters will behave during the general election, especially now that Biden will not be the Democratic candidate. Many may still vote for the Democratic nominee, but others may opt for a third-party candidate or choose not to participate at all. In a state where winning margins have often been less than 1% of the votes cast, these shifts can be massively impactful on the outcome of the election.

Fallout from the 2020 Election

It has been nearly four years since the 2020 election, when Biden and Trump first faced off on the ballot. However, many features of the current election landscape resemble the landscape of 2020 beyond the simple fact that the candidates are the same. Many voters and others have held onto concerns about the administration of the 2020 election and the validity of its results. President Trump has repeatedly voiced support for the idea that ill-

intended actors falsified ballots to secure the office for President Biden, though this claim is not supported by evidence. These concerns continue to have an impact in Wisconsin.

Complaint regarding false electors⁶

On June 4, 2024, Wisconsin Attorney General Josh Kaul filed a criminal complaint against three significant players in Trump's 2020 campaign. Kaul alleged that these individuals "engaged in a plot to create a slate of 'false electors' to overturn President Biden's Wisconsin victory in 2020" and charged them with violating a state "forgery uttering" law prohibiting knowingly sharing false information. The alleged conduct occurred when Wisconsin's 2020 election results were challenged in the state's Supreme Court in December 2020. On December 14th, the state's Republican Party Chairman released a statement detailing that the Trump campaign was still pursuing legal options and that the Republican electors had met to maintain their role in the process as they awaited a court decision. Kaul alleges that, at this point, the named individuals had begun discussing sending disputed electors to Congress on January 6, 2021, when the election results would be confirmed in Congress.

Despite the criminal complaint, these men are not expected to be convicted of any crimes. As of 2022, the Wisconsin Department of Justice (DOJ) acknowledged that "Wisconsin law does not prohibit an alternative set of electors from meeting." The Wisconsin Election Commission (WEC) has twice unanimously rejected a complaint regarding the convening of these false electors. The filed complaint alleged that they "illegally posed as Wisconsin's electors in an attempt to convince the US Congress to hand the state to Trump" and asked the WEC to declare that they had acted illegally. The WEC first rejected this complaint in March of 2022, citing the DOJ's statement in their explanation. In May of that year, a judge ordered that the WEC rehear the complaint without consideration from one of its members, who had served as one of the Republican electors in 2020 and had sent a 2023 email that appeared to celebrate a decrease in voter turnout

⁶ Additional sources: <https://apnews.com/article/2022-midterm-elections-elections-media-wisconsin-election-2020-5ec47b445cf86d7fb03906fe3dc41bd1> and <https://apnews.com/article/wisconsin-fake-electors-trump-2020-062c7b6638b945f816185bdf1f231195>

among “Black and Hispanic areas.” The WEC rejected the complaint again shortly thereafter.

Attempted recall of Assembly Leader Robin Vos

Angered by his failure to aid in decertifying the 2020 election and not pursuing impeachment against the WEC administrator, many Trump supporters and election skeptics have sought to recall Republican Assembly Speaker Robin Vos from office. In March, the first attempt to recall Vos took place. Vos represents the 63rd Assembly District, which occupies the southern part of Racine County in southeastern Wisconsin. He has served as the Speaker of the Wisconsin State Assembly since 2013 and has been a member of the State Assembly since 2005. Opposition to his leadership has surfaced recently with two primary contributing factors.

First, Vos angered many Trump supporters and election skeptics by refusing to decertify the 2020 election after Biden’s narrow-margin win. Despite the closeness of Biden’s 21,000 vote lead, US News explains that the win was validated by “two partial recounts, numerous lawsuits, an independent audit and a review by a conservative law firm.” These certifications resulted in Vos’s decision to uphold the result.

Second, throughout the past year, several Republican lawmakers in the state have called for the impeachment of Wisconsin Election Commission Administrator Meagan Wolfe. Support for this effort stemmed from the belief that Wolfe was responsible for what they deemed a poor administration of the 2020 election. However, the impeachment effort did not achieve significant traction overall, and Speaker Vos did not support these attempts.

Following these two decisions by Vos, a petition to force a recall election for the Speaker began to circulate. The petition garnered more than the requisite number of signatures needed to spur the recall. Still, when it was submitted to the WEC, the commission determined that many of these were invalid (either repeats, not within the district, or with other invalidating issues), and the petition ended up with fewer valid signatures than required to initiate a recall election. A second attempt was circulated and submitted. Although, at first, WEC staff members found that the petition had 16 more valid signatures than needed to trigger a recall election, the commissioners subsequently threw out an additional 188 signatures because they were collected beyond the petition’s 60-day circulation window. While this decision means Vos will not face a recall election at this

time, the decision could be appealed to the courts. Although a recall election appears unlikely, it would be complicated by recent redistricting within the state. The Wisconsin Supreme Court determined that the existing district lines should no longer be used, and new boundaries have been drawn and approved. However, which boundaries would be used to determine those eligible to vote in a recall election is unclear.

Shifting Responsibilities in Election Administration

In part due to distrust and skepticism over how the 2020 election was conducted, there have been several attempts over the past few years to redistribute responsibility for election administration within the state government. These campaigns have been primarily based on the claim that election administrators covered up what was actually a victory for Donald Trump. While no evidence supports this theory, some legislators have pursued various strategies aimed at resolving what they believe were issues in the management of the election.

Threats to impeach Wisconsin Supreme Court Justice

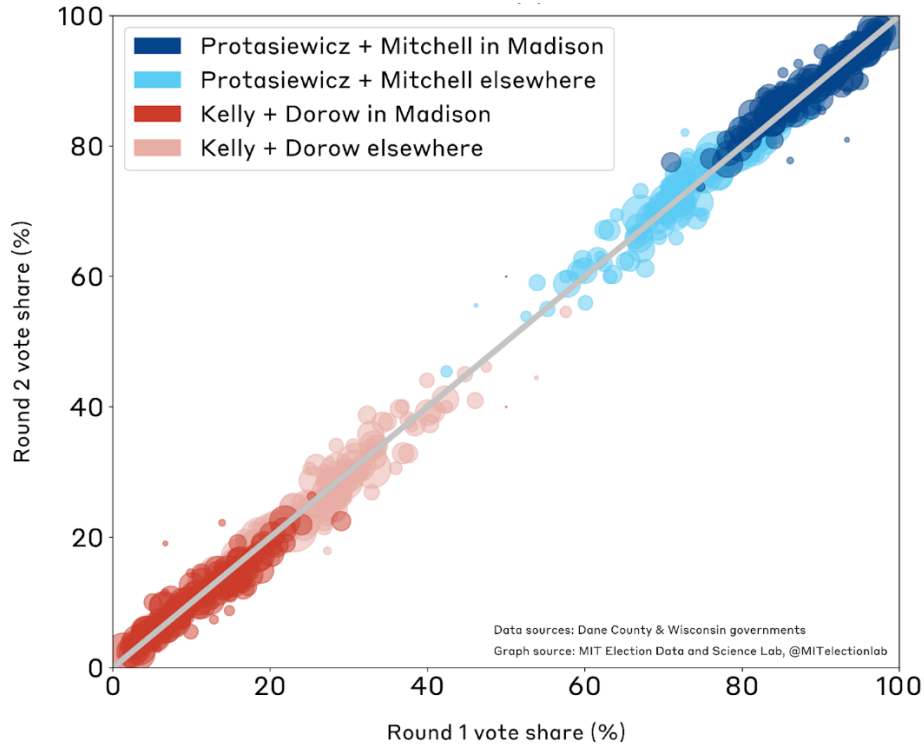
Following her election to the Wisconsin Supreme Court in 2023, Justice Janet Protasiewicz faced impeachment threats over comments she made about the political nature of the state's legislative districts, which Democrats claim to be gerrymandered to favor Republicans. Wisconsin State Supreme Court justices serve ten-year terms. In 2023, one of the conservative-leaning justices retired following the conclusion of her second term, and Justice Janet Protasiewicz won the election to be her replacement.

The Wisconsin Supreme Court is a nonpartisan elected body, and Protasiewicz is a nonpartisan elected official. However, she was backed by the Wisconsin Democratic Party (including through donations), just as the Republican Party backed her opponent. Elections for the court are structured in two rounds, wherein the two candidates with the most votes in the first round proceed to a second round to determine the overall winner. In 2023, four candidates were in the first round: two seen as more conservative (Daniel Kelly and Jennifer Dorow) and two viewed as more progressive (Protasiewicz and Everett Mitchell).

Protasiewicz and Kelly won the most and second-most votes in the first round, respectively. In the second round, they both very cleanly consolidated the votes that had

previously gone to the eliminated candidate with a more similar ideological position. Adding votes for Protasiewicz to votes for Mitchell in the first round and comparing them to votes for Protasiewicz in the second round in each of the state’s electoral precincts shows a tight linear relationship, shown in Figure 20.

Figure 20: Round 1 vs. Round 2 Vote Share in Dane County Precincts

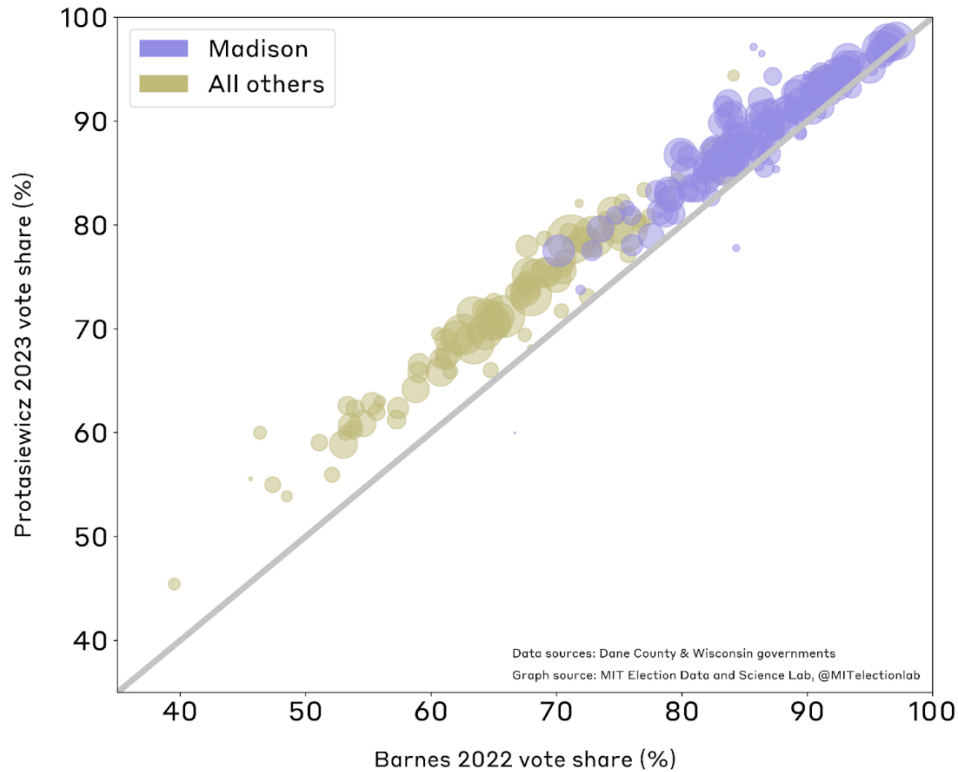


This suggests (though does not definitively establish) that Protasiewicz in the second round captured the left-of-center voters who had supported either her or Mitchell in the first round. Likewise, in the second round, Kelly achieved a similar vote share to the sum of his votes from the first round and the first-round votes for Dorow within each precinct. This points to a nonpartisan contest that became cleanly divided along partisan lines.

More direct evidence that the alignment observed in Figure 20 has a close relationship to explicit partisanship is provided by the correlation between Protasiewicz’s vote share within each precinct and the vote share for the Democrat in the last partisan statewide contest, U.S. Senate candidate Mandela Barnes. We focus on the example of Dane County because that county made granular results about the contest available, though other regions of the state may see more or less correlation. The relationship within each of the

county’s electoral precincts between Protasiewicz’s vote share and Barnes’s vote share is shown in Figure 21. This comparison shows a tight linear relationship between a precinct’s vote share for the Democratic candidate for U.S. Senate in 2022 and Protasiewicz’s vote share in that precinct the following year, illustrating the level of partisan polarization in the election

Figure 21: Barnes vs. Protasiewicz Vote Share in Dane County Precincts



Against this backdrop, Republican lawmakers viewed the election of Protasiewicz as the start of a liberal majority on the Wisconsin Supreme Court. Particularly with an election year on the horizon, Republicans worried that the now-liberal court would reject the existing legislative maps that had allowed Republicans to secure such a stronghold on the state’s legislature. During Justice Protasiewicz’s campaign, she called the maps “rigged,” suggesting her willingness to vote to overturn these lines. G.O.P. lawmakers called on her to recuse herself from the case challenging the district lines or else risk impeachment by the legislature. This call for impeachment received support not only from Republican lawmakers within the state legislature but also from other notable Republican figures

within the state. Senator Ron Johnson and former Republican Governor Scott Walker endorsed the potential plan.

In mid-October 2023, Republicans backed down from this threat. Speaker Robin Vos voiced his decision to shift his focus forward onto what the new justice does in office. However, he did say that impeachment remained on the table despite their choice not to pursue it then.

Attempts to remove WEC administrator

The Wisconsin Elections Commission (WEC) is a bi-partisan board of six commissioners – three Republicans and three Democrats – who are appointed by the governor and leaders of the state legislature. The board is overseen by an administrator appointed by the commissioners and confirmed by the State Senate for a four-year term. Meagan Wolfe initially stepped into the role as interim administrator in 2018 and was confirmed for her first term in 2019. This term ended July 1, 2023. However, there is a Wisconsin Supreme Court ruling in which officials maintain their posts even after their term ends until a successor is nominated and confirmed. As previously mentioned, Wolfe has received much criticism and blame for the alleged fraud that some claim occurred in the 2020 presidential election. Despite several different sources conducting investigations and concluding that no significant voter fraud happened within the state, various election conspiracies have been pinned on Wolfe. As a result, Republican leaders within the state began voicing interest in removing her from her position.

In the fall of 2023, the three Republicans serving on the WEC voted to renominate Wolfe. The process of renomination, as written, meant that if the WEC vote passed, the Senate would have the opportunity to reject it, ousting Wolfe from her position. However, the three Democrats abstained from this vote, meaning it failed to reach a majority, and Wolfe was not renominated. Following this, the State Senate chose to hold a vote regarding confirming her nomination and voted along party lines to remove Wolfe from her post. However, because the WEC's nomination vote had failed, the Senate vote did not wield any legal power and was later described as “symbolic.”

Another attempt to remove Wolfe occurred in January 2024, when a resolution to impeach her was introduced in the State Assembly. This resolution received little support in the Assembly, however, and was largely disregarded. Although this and the previous efforts

have yet to find traction, the effort to remove a non-partisan figure from office without a proposed replacement demonstrates the strength of conviction among those involved.

Attempts to disband WEC

Efforts to reshape control over election administration in Wisconsin have not been limited to removing the WEC administrator. In December 2023, a bill was proposed to dissolve the WEC entirely and pass its responsibilities to the Secretary of State. The bill summary explains: “Except for action related to the internal operations and procedures of the office, the office of the secretary of state may take no action with regard to election administration without getting prior approval from the standing committees in each house of the legislature with jurisdiction over election administration.” In effect, this bill would grant significant power to the legislature for future elections.

The Wisconsin Election Commission was established in 2015 and is responsible for overseeing election administration and upholding election laws. However, the actual administration of elections in Wisconsin is highly decentralized, and most of the responsibility falls to each of the over 1,900 county or municipal clerks. The co-sponsors of the proposal to dissolve the WEC have argued that making the Secretary of State the chief election official would allow for greater accountability to the state’s voters and that added legislative oversight would make for more straightforward checks on power. Within the bill, all current employees of the Wisconsin Election Commission would be transferred to work for the Secretary of State’s office with one noteworthy exception: the administrator position would be dissolved entirely.

Legal Challenges and Legislative Changes to Election Administration

There have been various other developments related to election administration in Wisconsin. Some are lawsuits being put forward by members of the voting community, concerned about the feasibility of voting for themselves or others. Others are legislative or judicial decisions.

Primary election amendments

On this year’s April 2 ballot, voters faced two proposed amendments to the Wisconsin Constitution. Each had already been passed in a previous legislative session. The first

banned the use of private money in election administration, which garnered support from 54.4% of voters. The second limited election administration to only those designated by state law to do so; 58.6% of voters favored this amendment.

These changes can be seen as responses to perceived “bad actors” from the 2020 election. In 2020, Mark Zuckerberg donated \$350 million to help election administration nationwide during the pandemic. Together, jurisdictions in Wisconsin received about \$10 million. Cities across the state received funds, but Milwaukee, Madison, Green Bay, Kenosha, and Racine stand out as major recipients. Many Republicans felt as though Democrats unfairly benefited from this donation. As a result, they sought to limit the role of private actors from supporting the state’s administration of elections, monetarily or otherwise. Opponents of this amendment have voiced concerns that it may have unintended impacts, hurting the overall ability to administer elections securely. No plan has been outlined to improve funding for election administration without the use of private money at this time.

On June 25, the state’s Attorney General released an opinion regarding the interpretation and meaning of the amendment regarding election staff. It was argued that most clerks were unaffected and could continue their procedures as usual. The opinion stated that the amendment “does not apply to more ordinary circumstances in which an election official works with or is assisted by non-election officials in ensuring the proper administration of an election.” While this may ease the worries of many election administrators, the opinion was not supported by some conservative groups, leaving open the possibility of litigation over the use of vendors and consultants in upcoming elections.

New district lines

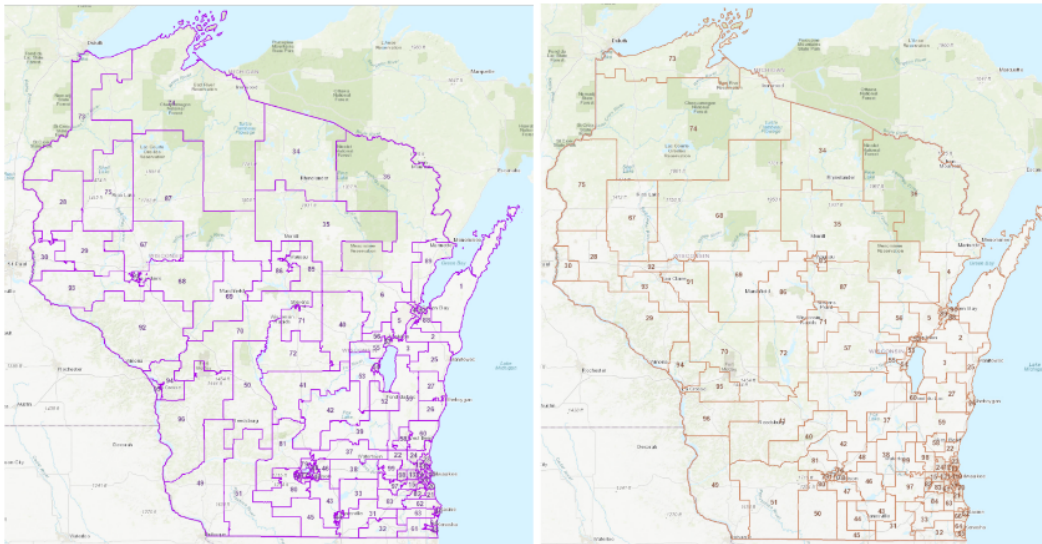
After the State Supreme Court election in 2023, many Republicans expected that the existing legislative district map would be contested. Indeed, the Supreme Court decided that these maps were unconstitutional due to the existence of non-contiguous voting districts.

These lines had been drawn in 2011 by a Republican-controlled legislature, and opponents argued that the maps allowed Republicans to maintain an unfair electoral advantage. While Republicans have consistently won strong majorities in both branches of the state’s legislature under these maps, the state is closely divided between the parties:

four of the past six presidential elections were decided by fewer than 23,000 votes. Opponents of the 2011 maps had begun trying to overturn them shortly after they were put into place, but the suit did not gain traction until 2023, when Justice Protasiewicz was elected.

Once the existing lines were overturned, the court accepted a handful of proposed maps from various sources: the governor, Democratic lawmakers, Republican lawmakers, and three other groups. A group of consultants hired by the court reported that the maps presented by Republican lawmakers and a conservative law firm were partisan gerrymanders. This left four maps from Democrats as options. Eventually, the court decided Governor Tony Evers' proposal should serve as the state's new map. The legislature subsequently voted to approve the map, although several Republicans voiced concerns that the new districts had been drawn to favor Democratic candidates. Figure 22 displays two maps: the original districts of the state House of Representatives and the redrawn [districts](#).

Figure 22: Old and New Assembly Districts



The new maps were intended to take effect in the November general election. However, Governor Evers urged the court to specify that they would also be in effect for any special elections before then. With the new lines in place, fifteen pairs of current Assembly incumbents will now run against each other; six such pairs are in the Senate. However, only one contest in each branch features two Democratic lawmakers, and one of the Democratic Senators has already announced that they will not run again this fall.

Therefore, it is likely that the legislature that takes office in January 2025 will see a much smaller Republican majority than the current legislature.

Opposition to ban on drop boxes

In July of 2023, several groups filed a lawsuit alleging that the current election laws incorrectly regarded absentee voting as a privilege rather than a right. The suit contests three state laws: the absentee ballot witness requirement, the ban on ballot drop boxes, and the existing deadline by which absentee voters must correct errors on their absentee ballot envelopes.

This case was initially dismissed at the circuit level. The plaintiffs appealed the dismissal to the Wisconsin Supreme Court, and the court agreed to hear arguments regarding prohibiting ballot drop boxes. In early July, the court decided that the use of ballot drop boxes should be allowed, overruling the previous decision. This decision does not require the provision of drop boxes by county or municipal clerks; it simply allows them to be offered.

Lawsuit about disabled voters' access to electronic ballots

In April, several disability rights organizations sued the Wisconsin Elections Commission, seeking to have ballots delivered to voters with disabilities electronically. The suit is centered around the fact that Wisconsin does not provide electronic absentee ballots for voters with disabilities, which the groups argue functionally disenfranchises many residents. Many disabled voters face barriers other voters do not face, including unreliable transportation to the polls for Election Day or in-person early voting. Because Wisconsin requires absentee ballots to be paper, many voters with disabilities need assistance filling out mail or in-person absentee ballots; the plaintiffs in this suit argue that this need for assistance forces voters in this position to forfeit their right to a secret ballot. Furthermore, as argued in the lawsuit, it requires voters in need of assistance need a person capable of providing such assistance, which may not be universally available. These barriers, they argue, cause many voters with disabilities in the state to not participate in elections or feel unsure of their ability to do so.

Despite the technology to provide these services, some administrators remain concerned about the safety of the process, particularly the electronic return. They argue that

malware or bad actors could affect the voter's computer, leading to possible fraudulent votes. Furthermore, the lack of a "paper trail" causes some to worry about verification and the possibility that votes could be changed in bulk.

In June, the Dane County Circuit Court issued a temporary injunction allowing the use of electronic ballots for disabled voters in the 2024 general election and stipulating conditions for doing so. However, the decision can still be appealed before the election.

Moving Forward

Wisconsin elections have often attracted public attention. Over the past four years, partisan disagreements over election administration have been intense in the state, owing to the narrow partisan margins both at the electoral level and in state government. Thus far, the primary elections have served as a useful guide to trends and opinions within the state. Still, ongoing stories regarding election administration require further attention.

Looking forward to the general election in November, it will likely be a close race with many variables at play. At the state level, recent redistricting will likely allow Democrats to increase their share of power within the state legislature.