

Wisconsin Election Observers Welcome, But Must Follow Rules

Written by League Women Voters WI, Andrea Kaminski
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MADISON – There has been a lot of talk lately about the role of election observers. While some think poll monitors will root out corruption at the polls, others are concerned that the presence of aggressive observers could intimidate voters. In Wisconsin, election observers are an important part of the election landscape.

People who go to the polls expecting to stop illegal voting might not find the excitement they seek. A recent, extensive study found only 31 credible allegations of fraud out of more than a billion votes cast nationally between 2000 and 2014.

As for intimidation, Wisconsin fortunately has excellent procedures that welcome observers but do not allow them to disrupt voting. Polling places are covered under our open meetings laws. Anyone may observe, but there are rules in place to protect the voting process.

Election observers are nothing new. Candidate campaigns and political parties have long sent observers to the polls to note whether their supporters have voted so they can make targeted reminder calls by late afternoon. Advocacy groups send observers to ensure that polling places are accessible for people with disabilities.

The League of Women Voters of Wisconsin has been placing volunteer observers in polling places around the state since 2010. Our volunteers know their role is to observe, not to interfere. If they have concerns about something they see, they follow a procedure to have the problem addressed. The League's observers submit written reports to our state office following the election, providing valuable data to strengthen the League's advocacy for free, fair and accessible elections.

In May I testified in a federal trial challenging several recently enacted election laws in a case filed by One Wisconsin Institute and Citizen Action of Wisconsin Education Fund. I was pleased to share relevant data gathered by hundreds of diligent League volunteers. The state attorney, in defending the restrictive voting laws, sought to have my testimony dismissed because, he pointed out, I was not personally in 200 polling places on Election Day. But the judge said he wanted to hear what I had to share. Indeed, the League's observation reports in the past five years reveal a systematic clampdown on people's ability to register and vote in our state.

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In Wisconsin, election observers must sign in with their name, address and affiliation, if any, when they get to the polling place. They must stay in a designated area three to eight feet from the table where voters check in or register. Observers may not wear buttons or clothing referring to a candidate or party. They may not speak to voters or interfere with the voting process. If they have a concern, they are to address it with the Chief Inspector. If that does not resolve the problem, our League observers have numbers they can call or text for assistance. They have to leave the polling place in order to make a phone call. The Chief Inspector has the authority to limit the number of observers and to require disruptive observers to leave.

Anyone planning to challenge an individual's right to vote should know that in Wisconsin the burden of proof is on the challenger. You will have to state under oath what specific information you have indicating that the individual is not qualified to vote. Charges such as "she looks too young" or "his name sounds foreign" are not acceptable.

We believe if more people spent time in the polls, they would be very impressed – as our volunteers are – by the high level of professionalism of our election officials and the excellent safeguards that ensure an orderly and fair election. They would see how hard it would be to cheat in Wisconsin.

We welcome anyone to volunteer as an observer with the League this November, as long as you are willing to be trained, to show up for your shift, to follow the rules and to submit your report at the end of the day. You can sign up on the League of Women Voters of Wisconsin website at www.lwvwi.org.

Andrea Kaminski is executive director of the League of Women Voters of Wisconsin, a nonpartisan organization that advocates for informed and active participation in government. The League welcomes women and men across the state as members. With 18 local Leagues in Wisconsin and 800 affiliates across the country, the League is one of the nation's most trusted grassroots organizations. Follow @LWV_WI on Twitter.