

Observer's Instructions County Canvass Meetings

Fourth in a five-part set of instructions for observing election processes to promote accurate counts.
www.wisconsingrassroots.net/election_integrity_project

The buck stops here.

The members of the County Board of Canvass are the officials who must sign their names to a statement after each election certifying the vote totals to be “**correct and true.**”

No other state or local election official has more authority and responsibility to ensure that the vote totals for each contest are accurate.

Statutes direct the board, within the week following the election, to examine the results submitted by all the municipalities in the county, and if they find that any appear to be too “defective or informal,” they must send them back to the municipality with orders that the municipality “complete or remedy the defects.” When the board is satisfied that the election results are correct, they sign a Canvass Statement and submit the results to GAB, which makes the election results official.

The meeting of the county board of canvass provides the last and best chance to ensure that any oddities and anomalies in the vote totals are noticed, examined, and resolved before the raw voting-machine output is accepted as final election results.

Purposes of observing

The mere presence of observers—even if they say nothing—helps to ensure the county board of canvass performs its review diligently, and doesn’t simply go through the motions of rubber stamping whatever the municipalities submit.

When everything goes well, observers can attest to the impartial and thorough work done by the board of canvass, and when problems are noted, citizen observers can help to ensure that the problems are adequately noted and resolved.

The County Board of Canvass is the only part of Wisconsin’s elections administration that is conducted entirely by people with clear party affiliations. Our statutes require our county clerks (a

partisan office) to appoint people from each of the two major parties to the board of canvass. Although there is a danger some county clerks see their job as representing the interests of their party, the administrative-type work performed by county clerks does not make that job particularly attractive to ideologues. In addition, the clerk is required to appoint people from both political parties to the board of canvass, providing some built-in protection against partisan decisions. Finally, their meetings are open to the public to help ensure their judgment and actions are fair and unbiased.



Few required procedures

Perhaps because their task involves more judgment than most other election tasks, the county boards of canvass have not been provided with precise detailed instructions, either by statute or by GAB staff guidance. However, the instructions they do get from GAB are good, as far as they go.

The steps listed below are not all the steps the board of canvass can or should perform, but these are the most important steps for ensuring that a correct outcome is produced.

Check for completeness

The Board of Canvass will likely start its work by checking for completeness: Did each municipality submit complete results for each of its precincts?

Check for large discrepancies in vote totals

NOTICE: This is an important step, because one of the most common malfunctions of voting machines is a simple failure to count the votes as the machine processes the ballots. Our election officials do a good job of verifying the number of **ballots** was counted correctly. This step checks the number of **votes** was also counted correctly.

The board should compare the total number of voters in each precinct to the number of **votes** (not just ballots) cast in each precinct, to make sure there are no large discrepancies between the two numbers, for at least the top race (e.g., president, governor).

Perhaps the most common error that county and municipal clerks make, when thinking about the task of validating the machine's output is to confuse verifying the number of **ballots** the machine counted, and verifying the number of **votes** it counted. They need to do both.

Check that numbers were copied or transmitted accurately

Counties use several different methods for transferring election results from the precinct to the municipal clerk, and then from the municipal clerk to the county.

No method, including electronic transfer via modem, is foolproof, so the county board of canvass will need to check that the figures printed on each precinct's voting-machine output tape match those that will be used in calculating the county totals.

Check the addition

When the board is sure it's working with figures that accurately reflect the results tabulated in each precinct, it will need to check the addition to ensure the totals are correct.

Review inspectors' statements

The chief inspectors in every precinct prepared statements describing the routine and not-so-routine events that occurred at each polling

place. The county board of canvass should review these statements to notice whether any polling places reported problems that might affect the accuracy of the count.

Other tasks

The county board of canvass will likely perform some additional steps that are not listed above, such as processing some provisional ballots and ensuring that any write-in votes are properly counted. The complete GAB suggestions for the process of conducting the canvass can be found on this website: <http://gab.wi.gov/node/2719>.



What to do if you see a problem

The meeting cannot be closed to the public, but it is important that the board of canvass concentrate on its work and proceed in a very orderly, deliberate way, so you will not want to interrupt with questions. Speak to the county clerk before the canvass meeting to reach an understanding about how your questions will be answered during the proceedings.

Be discriminate about your concerns. Irregularities of varying levels of significance arise in nearly every election, and the county board of canvass must usually exercise some judgment in resolving them. Observers should focus their attention on those issues that might affect a significant number of votes. If an election is so close that one or two ballots will make a difference, it will likely be subject to recount, so detailed attention to issues involving individual ballots is not useful at the county board of canvass meeting.

If you observe a serious problem, speak to the county clerk or, if you are allowed, to the person creating the minutes of the canvass. Explain your

concern clearly and concisely and ask that it be reflected in the minutes.

Depending on the severity of the problem, contact the Elections Division of the Wisconsin Government Accountability Board, the day after the canvass if at all possible. GAB can be reached by phone at (608) 266-8005, or email at gab@wi.gov. Consider completing a complaint form (gab.wi.gov/forms/complaint), and faxing it to GAB at (608) 267-0500.

Please also consider sending an account of the problem to the Wisconsin Grassroots Network at wisconsingrassroots@gmail.com. We may be

able to offer guidance in resolving the matter, and we will be compiling data on the problems noted by observers to improve understanding of election integrity issues in Wisconsin.

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These instructions can be improved by your feedback. Please comment below or email your suggestions to us at wisconsingrassroots@gmail.com. We particularly invite suggestions from observers who have used these instructions at a county canvass meeting, and from election officials including people with experience as elections officials.