



Election Commission

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November 3, 2020 Election Report

Turnout:

Overall voter turnout was at 78.63% of registered voters, almost identical to 2016. In 2016 we saw a turnout of 75.49% of registered voters, but our total number of registered voters was slightly higher. In this election, we had 248,065 total voters, 61,323 in-person “early” absentee voters, 108,582 by-mail absentee voters, and 78,160 Election Day polling place voters.

Angela Lang of Black Leaders Organizing for Communities (BLOC) recently published an op-ed entitled “Stop Blaming People of Color.” In it she wrote, “The pandemic, this country’s racial reckoning, and voter suppression have all made it harder for Black, brown and Indigenous communities to exercise their right to vote. Yet at the same time, our willingness to turn out and vote in the last election and our voices are under intense scrutiny.” Voters of color continue to face subtle but extremely effective voter suppression tactics, especially when it comes to voter registration and photo ID requirements in the State that have created tremendous confusion due to their complexity. In this election, voters not only face suppression efforts prior to the election, but also after the election as the Trump campaign continues to attempt to have hundreds of thousands of ballots thrown out only in Milwaukee and Dane Counties.

I have provided an excel spreadsheet which can be sorted by Aldermanic District, voter turnout, absentee turnout, and polling place turnout. However, I have not provided a “ranking” analysis of which areas turned out over others. All but one (Ward 130) City of Milwaukee ward saw voter turnout over 50% and the majority saw turnout well over 65%. Wards 130 and 198 are both home to a large student population around UWM and Marquette. These wards saw large drops in voter participation, but in-person enrollment was down and students were also encouraged to vote from their home address if there were any concerns about a last minute quarantine.

During a global pandemic, we doubled the number of early voting sites, amplified voter education, provided voter assistance around mail-in voting and registration, added secure ballot drop boxes across the City, and recruited a new generation of poll workers to ensure that we kept voting at a local, neighborhood-based level. These efforts maximized voter access and ensured that we did not lose voters from 2016. Our entire City can stand proud that we did not let a pandemic silence or quell our voices in this election.

Challenges:

Misinformation

Misinformation and conspiracy theories continue to be the largest challenge with this past election. From accusations of “voter dumps” in the middle of the night, flash drive conspiracies, and voting equipment misinformation to accusations of ballot stuffing, inaccurate portrayals of observer access, and lawsuits trying to throw out thousands of absentee ballots in Milwaukee that

were legally cast. The Election Commission worked diligently to educate the public and the media prior to the election on timelines such as our absentee results all coming in at once and likely not until 3:00am or 4:00am. We gave media tours of our warehouse to highlight election security and equipment testing. Central Count was carefully laid out to ensure the safety of workers, but also preserving observer access. While some areas required observers to remain seated, the majority of the room was fully accessible to observers and media within 6 feet of all election work being conducted. Unfortunately, conspiracy theories cannot be fought with facts.

Complicated Voting Laws

Reports from community groups and election protection on Election Day indicate that voters continue to struggle with photo ID requirements, as well as proof of residence requirements to register to vote. 68 provisional ballots were issued for lack of photo ID; 16 voters brought in their ID and had their provisional ballot counted on the Friday after the election. Voters who do not have stable housing often have all of their mail sent to a family member who owns their home. Providing proof of residence for where they are currently staying becomes a challenge that requires assistance to navigate, such as accessing a WE Energies bill online or brainstorming other acceptable documents. Lack of proof of residence is not an allowable reason to issue a provisional ballot, so we will never be able to trace the number of people who go home and do not return to register and vote. Another area of confusion is over photo ID and whether a voter's address needs to be current. The Election Commission will continue to collaborate with community organizations and churches to simplify messaging around voting requirements. A final report from CMR, the marketing and communications firm that we contracted with for the election, will follow this report, as it has not yet been finalized.

One area of tremendous improvement seen through the course of 2020 was voters' familiarity with the requirements to complete their absentee certificate envelope. By the November election, we saw far less absentee certificate envelopes being returned without sufficient signatures or addresses. The Election Commission partnered with Common Ground in order to contact voters via phone and text who submitted absentee ballots via mail or drop box if their certificate envelopes were not complete. This effort was extremely successful. During the month leading up to the election, Common Ground attempted to contact over 700 voters who had a phone number on file. They were able to reach 287 voters who cured their ballots. They left voicemails and texts for another 241 voters.

Pandemic

The Election Commission staff worked tirelessly throughout the year despite personal concerns about health and the pandemic. We trained election workers on best practices around public health, as well as purchased PPE beyond what the State was able to provide. There were very limited reports of election workers contracting COVID19 in the weeks following the election; we worked with the Health Department to contact all poll workers who were determined to have direct contact. Unfortunately, several members of the Election Commission's payroll staff contracted COVID19 after the election, which required the majority of the staff to quarantine. We made every effort to continue processing payroll on time, including using three other City

employees outside of our department. However, having six of our staff members out resulted in payroll being delayed by a pay period. All workers will be paid on Thursday, December 10th.

Recount:

Overall, the recount confirmed that processes and procedures in the City of Milwaukee were accurate and transparent during this election. Very few discrepancies were discovered, and we completed the recount in one week. Two anomalies stood out during the recount, which are summarized below.

Ward 315 Unprocessed Absentee Ballots:

With all Election Day activities, training is the bedrock of our success. We try to control everything within our means up until Election Day, but it really does require releasing a certain amount of control in order to staff 170 polling places and to process 170,000 ballots for 325 wards within 24 hours. I am confident that Central Count training was thorough and comprehensive based on the level of accuracy that we have seen in all other absentee wards processed at the recount.

As I stated to the Milwaukee County Board of Election Commissioners at the recount, it appears that a team was working on Ward 315 when they approached the end of their shift. They put opened envelopes on top of unopened envelopes and brought up over 400 ballots for Ward 315. They indicated their last voter number assigned was 409. The tabulators check last voter number to the number of ballots that they process. This system has been in place since 2015 based on a log that I created. It prevents errors such as reconstructed ballots not being run through the machine and also catches numbering errors from the table teams.

In my eight years and Neil Albrecht's fifteen years, we have never had an instance where a team did not open envelopes for a ward but indicated otherwise. This was extremely unique. The two workers were new, but a long-term City employee and Central Counter referred them. I do not believe there was any malice involved in this incident. They processed other wards with accuracy and this appears to have been a communication failure.

Going forward, I will begin to have the tabulator team check last voter and ballots cast to the number of estimated absentee ballots returned in WisVote, which I will provide on each ward's log. This will prevent this type of error from occurring in the future.

Ward 254:

65 of 88 Election Day ballots in Ward 254 were not returned by the Chief Inspector in the sealed ballot bag and were unable to be recounted. This error is not one that could have been caught prior to the recount; ballots are returned in sealed and signed ballot bags by the Chief Inspector and then transferred to the County shortly after the election. Only during the recount are we able break the seal and open the bags. We searched reconstructed ballots, spoiled ballots, and all unused ballots from Election Day, as well as called the Chief Inspector. Additionally, the

County assisted us in getting into Kosciusko Community Center to search the polling place before the recount concluded. Unfortunately, the ballots were never located.