

ELECTIONS

How do new voting rules affect the August primaries? Wisconsin's top election official explains



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In less than two weeks Wisconsin voters will decide the Republican primary for governor and Democratic primary for U.S. Senate along with dozens of other races.

A recent decision by the Wisconsin Supreme Court eliminated the drop boxes distributed during the 2020 pandemic and changed how ballots can be delivered to local clerks' offices.

The Milwaukee Journal Sentinel spoke to the state's top election official, Meagan Wolfe, about these changes and what voters can expect leading up to the Aug. 9 Primary Election. Below is an edited transcript.

Alex Lasry dropped out of the Democratic U.S. Senate race, but nearly 140,000 absentee ballots have already been returned. Do you expect to hear from voters who voted for Lasry?

This does happen, especially in primaries when there may be a broad field (Kevin Nicholson and Tom Nelson have also dropped out of governor and U.S. Senate races, respectively). We certainly do get questions from voters when they hear the news. The primary is a nomination process, those candidates are still an option, but people should pay attention to the public statements the candidates put out.

The state Legislature's Joint Committee for Review of Administrative Rules suspended the Wisconsin Election Commission's emergency rule allowing clerks to fill in missing address information from a witness of an absentee ballot envelope. How will this change absentee voting for the primary election?

It's really important to emphasize when a voter receives an absentee ballot they will get instructions from their municipal clerk. Before someone returns the ballot they should double and triple check everything to make sure everything is filled out. That is the number one big thing right now.

Regarding the JCRAR, they suspended the emergency rule. Because the commission hasn't met in open session, the guidance is still in place. The commission may still meet in the coming weeks. At this point, clerks are going to have to take a look at the 2016 guidance and decide exactly what to do in their local jurisdictions.

The Wisconsin Supreme Court recently ruled that absentee ballot drop boxes are illegal in Wisconsin. Can caretakers return a person's ballot by mail?

The court did not specify that particular question and the commission hasn't weighed in on that guidance either. It's not appropriate to speculate what should be done here. The bottom line for this upcoming election is voters will have to consider the Supreme Court ruling, or not ruling on this particular subject. Local clerks are also a great resource.

Local clerks can be found at www.myvote.wi.gov

If people want to observe the local election process or make sure voting equipment works, how can they do so?

Wisconsin has more opportunities than any other state in the country because elections are done at the local level and we have more than 1,850 local election officials. People can observe on election day, as absentee votes are tallied and also during pre-election testing of equipment. Clerks will likely put out press releases about when this is done, or post the date at town halls. We encourage people to get involved in all aspects of elections to see that the system is secure and we take steps to make sure every legitimate, legal ballot is counted accurately.

What are the upcoming dates and deadlines related to the primary election?

In-person absentee voting started Tuesday and continues through Aug. 7. The deadline to request an absentee ballot is Aug. 4, but the U.S. Postal Service cautions it could take up to two weeks for a ballot to make a round-trip journey. All ballots have to be returned by 8 p.m. Aug. 9 to be counted.

Do you expect any other last-minute changes before Election Day?

I don't want to speculate, but there are none that we are anticipating before Election Day. Still, I would encourage people to stay engaged and if there are any questions or concerns call their local clerk or the Wisconsin Elections Commission.

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