



Absentee Voting Begins in Wisconsin

By Marti Mikkelson

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Last week, Ohio residents began voting for president. This week, people who live in Wisconsin may do the same. Starting today, citizens here may request an absentee ballot from their city clerk and vote early. WUWM's Marti Mikkelson looks at the popularity of absentee voting in the badger state.

Wisconsin residents have been allowed to vote absentee for nearly 100 years. It was designed for people who might be traveling on Election Day. They could request a ballot to vote early. Kyle Richmond is spokesman for the Wisconsin Government Accountability Board. He says there was a change in the law several years ago, clearing the way for anyone to vote absentee if they desired.

"Wisconsin's had what some people call "no excuse" absentee voting since 2000, meaning you don't have to provide an excuse as to why you want to vote absentee. If you're planning on being out of town or if you have child care duties that day or if your job's really busy, you can vote in advance. You just apply to your municipal clerk for an absentee ballot, and then you can vote at home and mail it in, or you can actually go to the clerk's office and request an absentee ballot in person and vote at the same time," Richmond says.

Richmond says since the "no excuse" rule was implemented, the number of absentee voters in Wisconsin increased 12 percent between the 2000 and 2004 presidential elections. Absentee voting has also become more popular in the city of Milwaukee, according to Election Commissioner Sue Edman.

"I can tell you in November of 2000, there were 10,000 absentee ballots returned to us. In 2004 there were 18,651 so we saw an 8,600 increase there. Now, for this Nov. 4, we're expecting 18 to 20,000 absentee ballots," Edman says.

Edman says absentee voting is largely a matter of convenience among people who want to make sure they vote. Her staff has put up more than a dozen voting booths in the Ziedler Municipal Building, across from City Hall, for those who want to cast their absentee ballot in person. She predicts only a few people will vote this week, but expects waiting lines in the days leading up to the election.

One organization that assists people in voting absentee is the immigrant rights group Voces de la Frontera. Director Christine Neumann-Ortiz says in the past couple of months, the group has registered more than 2,000 residents to vote, and some want to do it before Nov. 4.

"People mark on their registration form that they want to receive an absentee ballot, and if they haven't received it, they do contact us. What we have done in the past is gone to city hall, actually obtained the absentee ballot and taken it to them," Neumann-Ortiz says.

Neumann-Ortiz says many people she works with are elderly, and choose to vote absentee at home because they don't want to brave the colder weather on Election Day. Another group that reaches out to absentee voters is the Republican Party of Wisconsin. Spokeswoman Kirsten Kukowski says the organization mails absentee ballots to people who request them.

But what happens if you vote early and then change your mind and want to vote for the other candidate? Government Accountability Board spokesman Kyle Richmond says in that case, a voter may request another absentee ballot from the city clerk and vote again. Local election officials then destroy the original ballot. They can easily locate it because each is put in its own envelope with the person's name on it. Milwaukee's Election Commissioner Sue Edman says that's only happened twice in the three years she's held the position.

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