

Fiscal Estimate Narratives
ELEC 2/6/2020

LRB Number 19-4577/1	Introduction Number AB-0636	Estimate Type Original
Description canvassing absentee ballots on the Monday before an election and providing a penalty		

Assumptions Used in Arriving at Fiscal Estimate

Assumptions used in arriving at this estimate:

This bill authorizes a municipality to begin processing absentee ballots voted by mail and during the in-person absentee voting period on the last business day prior to election day. Any interested municipality would be required to adopt a resolution authorizing this option and the Elections Commission must certify that the municipality is capable of implementation prior to the ordinance taking effect. Absentee ballot processing would be restricted to the hours between 7:00 a.m. and 8:00 p.m. and would require the use of electronic tabulation equipment. The bill also outlines security procedures for the voting equipment and ballots used during early processing and requires the location and hours of early absentee processing to be posted by public notice. The bill also creates a criminal penalty for anyone who acts in a manner that would give them the ability to know or provide information about the vote totals of ballots processed early and restricts the tallying of votes until after the polls close on election day.

In constructing this estimate, the Wisconsin Elections Commission (WEC) made assumptions as to the responsibilities that would be assigned to the agency when implementing the law. The WEC assumes that the proposal requires the WEC to develop a process through which municipalities apply for certification to use the early canvassing process. Once the process is developed, the WEC would then be responsible for examining and approving applications and ordinances received from municipalities. It is also assumed that the WEC will prescribe the administrative process for early canvassing and develop guidance and training for municipalities. Because early absentee canvassing is optional to municipalities and the WEC does not have data on municipal costs to administer early canvassing, no exact municipal costs are outlined in this estimate.

The WEC believes that these new responsibilities are similar to routine procedures currently administered by the agency and any costs associated with implementing requirements under this bill can be absorbed into the current agency budget. The following additional responsibilities under this bill would be required:

- WEC creation of municipal application to use early absentee canvassing and development of an ongoing application review process
- WEC update of existing training materials and resources

WEC staff also recommends that voting equipment testing criteria be adjusted to account for early canvassing features and reporting requirements. It is assumed that additional voting equipment testing criteria would be developed as part of the application review process.

Municipal Implementation Costs and Long-Term Cost Savings of Early Absentee Canvassing

While the WEC does not know the direct impact on local governments, it is assumed that there will be some costs to municipalities who choose to implement early absentee canvassing as well as potential long-term cost savings to municipalities.

Because the early canvassing process is optional for municipalities and no municipality would be required to use the process, the WEC assumes that the municipalities would analyze the fiscal impact of early canvassing on their jurisdiction before opting to use the process. It is assumed that during that decision-making process municipalities will weigh cost along with other factors when making a decision on the suitability of early canvassing for their jurisdiction.

Municipalities may have to hire additional staff to assist with early canvassing as their current staff may and resources may be focused on preparations for election day. It is also assumed that increased time may be required to accommodate the enhanced pre-election voting equipment testing and security protocols.

The WEC also assumes that municipalities who opt to use the early absentee canvassing process may experience a decrease in costs associated with election day absentee ballot processing on an ongoing basis. Under the current law, absentee ballots may only be processed at the polls or at a central count facility on election day and that restrictive window has required additional municipal time and resources due to the increased popularity of absentee voting in recent years. It is assumed that municipalities who choose to use the early absentee canvassing process may see a decrease in the number of poll workers and staff hours needed to process absentee ballots at the polls or at their central count facility on election day. This bill would allow municipalities who use early canvassing to spread absentee ballot processing across two days and would provide them with more flexibility on how they deploy their resources on election day.

Long-Range Fiscal Implications