

Fiscal Estimate Narratives

ELEC 4/14/2021

LRB Number 21-2032/1	Introduction Number SB-204	Estimate Type Original
Description absentee ballot applications, unsolicited mailing or transmission of absentee ballot applications and absentee ballots, canvassing absentee ballots, electronic voter registration, and providing a penalty		

Assumptions Used in Arriving at Fiscal Estimate

Please see attached memorandum for a complete fiscal estimate.

Long-Range Fiscal Implications



Wisconsin Elections Commission

212 East Washington Avenue | Third Floor | P.O. Box 7984 | Madison, WI 53707-7984
(608) 266-8005 | elections@wi.gov | elections.wi.gov

DATE: April 14, 2021
TO: State Senator Stroebel
FROM: Meagan Wolfe
Administrator
SUBJECT: Fiscal Estimate for Senate Bill 204

The proposed legislation requires the Elections Commission to prescribe the form and instructions of the absentee ballot application and requires the absentee ballot application to be separate and distinct from the certificate envelope. It eliminates the option for indefinitely confined voters, overseas voters, and all other voters, other than military voters, to receive an absentee ballot automatically for any election while providing that indefinitely confined voters may receive absentee ballot applications automatically. It also removes some exemptions from the voter ID requirements for certain voters. The proposed legislation prohibits the sending unsolicited absentee request applications or ballots, makes it a Class I felony for a clerk to send a ballot without an application on file, and requires municipal clerks to post absentee ballot canvass statistics hourly on election night. Finally, it requires voters registering to vote through the statewide online system, MyVote, to authorize the transmittal of their electronic signature from the Department of Transportation to the Elections Commission and for the Elections Commission to maintain a pdf file of each completed voter registration form submitted electronically to be made available upon request.

Changes to the Absentee Application

In preparation of this fiscal estimate, WEC staff reviewed costs associated with the development of a new absentee envelope, removing the language that states it may also act as a ballot application. Updating and redesigning forms fall within the normal scope of staff duties and finalizing an updated version of each would require approximately 60 staff hours with a total of 120 hours for both. As previously stated, these 120 hours would be considered routine staff activity and would not require additional project time to be allocated.

A larger fiscal impact would fall upon the municipalities. The proposed legislation would require that existing stock of both the absentee application and the certificate envelope be replaced with the updated versions, which would incur significant printing costs. Per staff research and depending on whether a municipality prints in-house or contracts with a private vendor, the cost to print a two-sided, single page form will typically range between \$0.10 and \$0.25. For the purposes of this estimate staff are using the printing cost of \$.17 per two-sided form.

It is unknown how many blank applications clerks maintain in their offices to provide to voters who may request them by mail or by other means and this number obviously varies by municipality. However, as the proposed legislation would require voters participating in in-person absentee voting (IPAV) to also complete an application when voting in the clerk's office or approved alternate site and given that approximately 600,000 voters participate in IPAV in a General Election year, the minimum cost of printing applications for voters would range between \$60,000 and \$150,000 statewide. Using the historical estimate of 600,000 total IPAV voters for elections in a year with a General Election, the total printing costs for municipalities would be \$102,000 for absentee applications across the state.

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Administrator
Meagan Wolfe

The cost to print new certificate envelopes is also variable, as municipalities are generally unable to print or prepare absentee envelopes in their own offices and will typically contract through a printing vendor to obtain new stock. An additional consideration is that the absentee voting process requires two envelopes, a larger transmission envelope that the clerk sends to the voter with all the requisite materials to vote and a smaller return envelope that the voter uses to return their ballot. The proposed legislation would not affect the transmission envelope and municipalities would be able to use their existing stock and reorder as normal. The proposed legislation would only affect the return envelope which currently functions, during in-person absentee voting, as both the absentee application and certificate. If existing stock could not be altered to reflect the required language changes on the envelope, municipalities would have to replace it with new compliant envelopes.

While staff were able to identify the cost to print new envelopes, the applicability of this figure toward estimating the financial impact at the municipal level is less clear. Any required changes to the current version of the envelope that would require the replacement of existing stock would obviously incur costs which would vary based on the amount of envelope stock each municipality needed to replace. The estimated printing cost for replacement envelopes would be \$95.00 per 1,000 pieces.

If no stock needed to be replaced with an updated envelope and clerks would be able to implement the new version in their normal procurement processes, i.e., on a rolling basis or as needed, any costs would fall within normal budgetary considerations and would not result in an additional financial impact to the municipality.

Automatic Sending of Absentee Ballot Applications to Indefinitely Confined Voters

Under the current statutes, when a voter registers as indefinitely confined, the municipal clerk sends them a ballot for every election until the voter changes their status, moves, or fails to return a ballot. Under the proposed legislation, before any ballot could be sent, an indefinitely confined voter would be mailed an application that would need to be returned to the clerk. There were 70,218 indefinitely confined voters statewide in 2018; a number that has historically increased by approximately 5000 voters biannually. This brings the anticipated number of voters for 2022 to around 80,000 (the increase in 2020 is taken out of the equation as an anomaly though it is unclear how many voters will remain on this list after the Spring 2021 election).

The absentee ballot application is a 2-sided, single sheet that would be enclosed in a standard envelope and mailed to the voter. A bulk first-class mailing for a 2-sided form costs a municipality \$.73 per piece (\$.51 postage; \$.05 envelope; \$.17 per 2-sided form). In odd number years, there are typically 2 elections while in some even numbered years, there are typically 4 elections; the below numbers reflect an average of 3 elections per year. The cost for mailing application packets to 80,000 voters would be \$58,400.00 for each election and \$175,200 for an average year with 3 statewide elections.

The removal of the requirement to mail absentee ballots automatically to voters who requested absentee ballots as indefinitely confined may represent a costs savings for ballot mailing costs depending on the number of indefinitely confined voters who do not return an application to request a ballot. Currently, the cost is, on average, \$.75 per ballot packet mailed out due to the size and number of pages included. Clerks are also required to provide postage for the voters to return their ballots which costs \$.51 for bulk first-class mailings, bringing the estimated mailing cost for each ballot packet to \$1.26. Municipalities would save this estimated amount per each indefinitely confined voter who is sent an application but declines to request a ballot.

Removal of Calendar Year Request Option for Most Voters

The proposed legislation also removes the option for all voters other than military voters to place a calendar year request as a part of their applications for absentee ballots. Every absentee ballot application has to be processed by the municipal clerk's office or their data entry provider, which is usually the county clerk's office. If the voter submits the request through MyVote, the clerk has to verify the information in WisVote before preparing and sending the ballot. If it is submitted on paper, the clerk must find the voter in WisVote and then go through the steps

to verify the information, enter the application, and prepare and send the ballot. On average, this process takes 2 minutes per voter. Currently, a local election official would only have to data enter a calendar year request one time in the WisVote system and the system will automatically generate the application record for each applicable election in that calendar year.

Removing the calendar year request option for all voters except military voters means that clerks will have to enter an estimated average of 110,000 absentee ballot applications for each election after the initial election when the calendar year request was received. This total includes estimated averages of 80,000 indefinitely confined applications and 30,000 applications for by mail absentee ballots from non-military voters that were determined from historical absentee data. The increase in the data entry requirements due to the elimination of calendar year absentee requests would mean an additional hour of staff time for every 30 applications received. Each additional staff hour would cost a municipality roughly \$15.00 to complete this data entry and the total additional costs required by this change would depend on the number of additional application received that needed to be data entered. Based on this estimate every 100 additional applications that required data entry would cost the municipality required to process them \$50.00 in staff costs. Municipalities who contract with a third party entity, such as their county clerk, to complete data entry on their behalf may see additional charges from their provider due to the increase in data entry. It is unknown if this change would also lead to a decrease in cost to municipalities due to a decrease in absentee applications for individual elections.

Hourly Posting of Absentee Canvass Progress and Statistics

To prepare this fiscal estimate, WEC staff spoke with municipal clerks in municipalities of varying sizes and who canvass absentee ballots at both central count locations and individual polling places. The impact of this proposed legislation would predominantly impact municipalities with multiple polling locations and that do not use central count for canvass of absentee ballots as it would require the clerk to check in with each polling location every hour to get a status update. Approximately 140 municipalities ranging in number of polling places from 2 to 153 would be impacted and would see their canvass process significantly slowed, requiring them to hire additional staff at an average of \$15 per hour. The total number of polling places across the state that would hourly be reporting to their clerks is 2083. What is not included in the estimate below but should not be discounted is the possibility that some municipal clerks will need assistance from IT or webmasters if they run into problems posting to their websites or if they do not have the credentials/access to do so themselves.

Electronic Signature and Maintenance of Voter Registration Forms

Voter registrations that are submitted through the online portal, MyVote, are examined and approved by the municipal clerks in the statewide database, WisVote. The voter registration initiates the creation of a voter record and through some steps in the database, county and municipal clerks may access pdf files of voter registration forms as needed. The development costs will require for the stored signatures to be searched, pulled, and applied to the pdf application files. WEC staff estimated it would take 240 development hours at \$91.25/hour (IT developer salary) for a total development cost of \$21,900.00 to make these changes.

As previously stated, the pdf files of voter registrations are created on an as-needed basis and initiated by the clerks themselves. For WEC to create and hold on to every registration form created electronically as well as the signature files, additional server space will be required to be purchased. Server storage rates are currently \$.39/GB for primary storage and \$.29/GB for backup for a total of \$.68/GB. The table below illustrates how the cost increases as the number of online voter registrations increase over time. What is not accounted for is whether data storage costs will change over time.

Year	Existing Online Application Count	New Online Application Count	Running Count	Size per pdf file (KB)	Size in GB	cost per GB/Month	Cost Per Month	Cost Per Year
2024	1,248,069	524,496	1,772,565	40	70.9026	0.68	\$48.21	\$578.57

2023	1,181,710	66,359	1,248,069	40	49.92276	0.68	\$33.95	\$407.37
2022	657,214	524,496	1,181,710	40	47.2684	0.68	\$32.14	\$385.71
2021	590,855	66,359	657,214	40	26.28856	0.68	\$17.88	\$214.51
2020	66,359	524,496	590,855	40	23.6342	0.68	\$16.07	\$192.86
2019	-	66,359	66,359	40	2.65436	0.68	\$1.81	\$21.66

Additionally, training for the clerks about how to access, view, and download the pdf files will require staff time but that work could be incorporated into normal agency project planning and would not require any additional costs for the agency.

Removal of Exceptions to Voter ID Requirements, Prohibition of Sending Unsolicited Mailers, New Penalties

The remaining elements of the proposed legislation have very minimal, if any, fiscal impact. The largest impact would be the cost of updating voter outreach and clerk/election worker training materials that outline the regulations for photo ID requirements for voters. Such changes would be part of normal updates to Elections Commission manuals or communication. Similarly, the prohibition of sending unsolicited mailers by the state/WEC, municipalities, and counties as well as the violation and associated penalties for sending absentee ballots without applications would be part of normal updates and would therefore have very minimal, if any fiscal impact.

CC: Michael Gallagher (Legislative Reference Bureau)