**Wisconsin’s pandemic election: Long waits, face masks as voters go to polls**

*By Parker Schorr, The Cap Times*

Wisconsin’s election during the coronavirus pandemic was marked by lines of voters stretching for blocks on Tuesday in Milwaukee and frustration that some residents — many wearing face masks or respirators — were forced to choose between risking their health and relinquishing their right to vote.

Outside of Milwaukee, some polling places were nearly deserted. And thousands of voters who requested absentee ballots to avoid emerging from their homes during the state’s stay-at-home order never got them.

Ashley Norris was among them. She said she never got the mailed ballot she requested last week. That is why she spent nearly two hours in line at the polling station at Milwaukee’s Washington High School Tuesday, wearing a respirator and winter gloves.

“As an African-American woman, I think it’s my right to vote every time,” she told Milwaukee Neighborhood News Service.

Democratic Lt. Gov. Mandela Barnes tweeted that the election had turned into a “shit show.”

“This is a very sad situation for voters in Milwaukee and across the state,” said Neil Albrecht, executive director of the Milwaukee Election Commission.

Albrecht praised the safety precautions taken by poll workers, who wore gloves, masks and gowns. He said voting Tuesday was safer than going to the grocery store.

Nevertheless, “I am very concerned,” he said. “It is a group gathering during a time where we are being advised by all levels of government to avoid group gathering.”

Some Wisconsinites wore their “I voted” stickers as badges of honor, although in some communities, poll workers declined to issue them to avoid spreading the virus.

As Wisconsin voted, the world watched.

The election came after a whirlwind of lawsuits and executive orders in recent days challenging how — and whether — the election should be held on Tuesday. Gov. Tony Evers called in 2,400 National Guard troops who served in plain clothes as poll workers and to encourge social distancing at voting sites statewide.

After failing to convince the Legislature to change the election, the Democratic governor on Monday issued a last-ditch executive order converting it to mostly mail-in ballots and postponing in-person voting until June.

Republican legislative leaders quickly pushed back, convincing the conservative-leaning Wisconsin Supreme Court that Evers had overstepped his authority. Justice Daniel Kelly, who is on the ballot, recused himself from the 4-2 vote on Monday that reinstated Tuesday’s election.

Dean Knudson, a former Republican lawmaker who now chairs the Wisconsin Elections Commission, cheered the move to forge ahead with in-person voting.

“This is a tremendous safeguard to the franchise to know you can go and vote on Election Day,” he said, adding that Wisconsin’s “hybrid” system of voting — which includes casting votes by mail — offers a variety of options.

The U.S. Supreme Court late Monday ruled that mailed ballots had to be postmarked by Tuesday to count, even if voters who requested them had yet to receive them.

As of March 30, 15 states had postponed presidential primaries or other elections because of the pandemic. Tuesday’s election will decide the winner of Wisconsin’s Democratic presidential primary, a hotly contested state Supreme Court race and hundreds of local elections. Because of a federal court order, the results of the election will not be announced until April 13 to allow for the counting of late-arriving ballots.

Wisconsin’s statewide contest was watched around the globe as a test of the viability of holding an election amid the pandemic.

Among the lessons already learned: Many election workers will not serve over fears of contracting COVID-19. That prompted some municipalities, including Milwaukee, to sharply reduce the number of polling sites.

Milwaukee turned five high schools into massive polling places, replacing the normal 180 sites. Lines of voters, many of them spaced several feet apart, stretched for blocks on Tuesday. Albrecht said he anticipates 22,000 people will have cast their ballots in person, with three to five thousand people voting at each of the five locations.

**Voter: Feels like disenfranchisement**

Maya Neal, political strategy manager for Leaders Igniting Transformation in Milwaukee, said the lack of polling sites felt like disenfranchisement for the city’s African-American residents, who tend to have a harder time getting the proper ID to vote.

“Milwaukee is being disproportionately affected by the poll closures and the impact of these changes to the election, just continuing the voter disenfranchisement that we experience,” Neal said.

Normally, Neal would be cajoling everyone in her extended family to vote. But not this time — it was too dangerous. She told her sister, who has a weakened immune system and is recovering from heart surgery, to stay home.

“I couldn’t bring myself to do that (advocating voting),” she said. “I felt sad not being able to tell my family … to go exercise a right that our ancestors fought for and we continuously fight for.”

A record number of Wisconsin residents took advantage of early voting and absentee ballot options. Nearly 1.3 million absentee ballots were requested — more than four times the number requested in the presidential primary in April 2016.

But figures from the Wisconsin Elections Commission showed more than 9,000 of those ballot requests were not fulfilled by Tuesday. A commission official said that number could change as clerks update their figures, and one county deputy clerk said the final gap would likely be much smaller.

“I think this is yet another way in which the Republicans are succeeding in suppressing the vote,” said Jack Norman, spokesman for Voces de la Frontera, an advocacy group in Milwaukee. “They’re taking advantage of the health situation to minimize the number of people that are voting.”

Barbara Beckert, a director at Disability Rights Wisconsin, heard from a young woman in a nursing home who was unable to get an absentee ballot. Typically voters in nursing and group homes would be visited by special voting deputies who would help them vote, Beckert said. But because of visiting restrictions, that was not possible this election.

“Sadly, a lot of other people are in the same condition, but they aren’t well positioned to have some type of public outcry,” she said.

**‘Let people vote safely’**

Elizabeth Perry, a family physician, protested with her wife Rita Mae Reese outside the Madison East High School polling place with a handmade cardboard sign that said “Let people vote safely.”

She said Tuesday’s election could undo the sacrifices Wisconsin residents have made to limit the spread of the coronavirus, which as of Tuesday had killed at least 92 people and been detected in 2,578.

Perry accused Republicans of ignoring the danger by forging ahead with Tuesday’s election in an effort to benefit Kelly, the Supreme Court justice appointed by former GOP Gov. Scott Walker. He is running against Dane County Circuit Court Judge Judy Karofsky for a 10-year term.

“This is just a petty ploy to suppress the vote, to keep in a Walker state Supreme Court appointee,” she said. “It’s such a naked power grab.”

Voter Sally Josephson also worried about safety. She wore a bandana over her face to vote, but a poll worker in rural Oshkosh, who was not wearing a mask, could not understand Josephson’s muffled speech. Josephson was unnerved when the poll worker touched her to direct her to the correct place.

“It’s just not ideal that we are forced to come out or we don’t get to vote,” Josephson said.

Said Ann Jacobs, a Democrat who serves on the Wisconsin Elections Commission: “We are asking our voters to choose between democracy and disease.”

**GOP: Election ‘safe and fair’**

On Monday, Assembly Speaker Robin Vos and Senate Majority Leader Scott Fitzgerald waved away such concerns, saying Wisconsin clerks had worked hard to ensure a “safe and fair election.”

At many sites around the state, clerks erected plexiglass barriers between poll workers and voters. In Madison, poll workers with plastic face shields shuttled ballots between election sites and voters parked outside.

The two Republican leaders said their strategy of encouraging absentee balloting had worked — although they had blocked an effort by Evers to mail absentee ballots to all voters to sharply limit in-person voting, citing concerns over voter fraud.

“We continue to believe that citizens should be able to exercise their right to vote at the polls on Election Day, should they choose to do so,” Vos and Fitzgerald said.

On Tuesday, Vos tweeted a photo of himself working at a polling place in Racine County. He was wearing safety glasses, a paper mask, plastic gown and latex gloves.

*Wisconsin Watch Investigations Editor Jim Malewitz, Managing Editor Dee J. Hall and Edgar Mendez of Milwaukee Neighborhood News Service contributed to this report.*

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