*This story was produced by*[*Wisconsin Watch*](http://www.wisconsinwatch.org/)*, a nonprofit, nonpartisan investigative reporting organization that focuses on government integrity and quality of life issues in Wisconsin.*

**GOP senator, voting experts urge Wisconsin Republicans to halt election attacks**

*By Brenda Wintrode and Jim Malewitz, Wisconsin Watch*

The Republican chair of the Wisconsin Senate elections committee on Monday urged members of her own party to halt their attempts to discredit the bipartisan elections system they created and to oust the state’s top official.

The moves began after President Joe Biden’s narrow victory over Donald Trump in Wisconsin’s 2020 presidential race.

“We have a great system here, and no one should falsely accuse election officials of cheating,” Sen. Kathleen Bernier, R-Chippewa Falls, said at a state Capitol event organized by Washington, D.C.-based Center for Election Innovation & Research (CEIR), a nonprofit that works with Republican and Democratic elections officials nationwide. “The misinformation and disinformation that has been perpetuated is very frustrating to me.”

Bernier, who oversaw elections for 12 years as the Chippewa County clerk, accused some Republicans of spreading falsehoods about Trump’s 2020 election loss to “jazz up” their political base. And she called on former Wisconsin Supreme Court Justice Michael Gableman to finish his partisan review of the election soon — to limit the damage to the Republican Party and Wisconsin’s democracy.

“I am a Republican. I vote conservative. I want Republicans to win and for our good policies to continue forward. This is a charade — what’s going on with this constant drumbeat of all the massive voter fraud,” she said. “There’s a simple explanation for almost everything that people accuse election officials of doing.”

CEIR focused Monday’s event on efforts by Trump supporters to contest the [audited](https://www.jsonline.com/story/news/politics/2021/10/22/wisconsin-election-audit-finds-voting-machines-worked-properly/6133018001/) and verified results of Trump’s 2020 loss, investigate the state and local election systems and [shift more power over elections to Republican-controlled legislatures](https://www.npr.org/2021/11/29/1059861701/wisconsin-gop-lawmakers-want-the-state-legislature-to-take-over-federal-election).

In Wisconsin, that includes Gableman’s [taxpayer-funded probe ordered by Republican Assembly Speaker Robin Vos](https://apnews.com/article/elections-wisconsin-3ee26438134d557d06f86c6bebf568c1) and GOP calls for the resignation of Wisconsin Elections Commission Administrator Meagan Wolfe and other members of the bipartisan commission that Republicans [created five years ago under then-Gov. Scott Walker](https://wisconsinwatch.org/2020/10/wisconsin-elections-commission-gridlock-frustrates-voters-officials/).

“I’m as scared and concerned as I’ve ever been in my entire career about the state of American democracy,” said CEIR founder David Becker, adding Bernier showed “political courage” in “standing up for American democracy” at a time when election officials face harassment and threats nationwide.

An international democracy expert told Wisconsin Watch in an interview that she is struck by the brazenness of the attempts to undermine democracy in the state compared to what she sees abroad. Laura Thornton is director of the Alliance for Securing Democracy at the German Marshall Fund, an international organization that defends democratic elections from autocratic influencers.

“Normally the takeovers are a little bit slyer or more nuanced,” Thornton said, but Wisconsin Republicans are “saying the quiet parts out loud.”

She added: “It’s terrifying how the very basics of what we all took for granted are just crumbling.”

Wisconsin elections officials are not the only ones under pressure. A Benenson Strategy Group [survey](https://www.scribd.com/document/512002241/Local-Election-Officials-Survey#fullscreen&from_embed) of 233 local election officials conducted in April found that 1 in 3 were concerned about feeling unsafe or being harassed because of their job, while 1 in 6 said they had been threatened.

In Wisconsin, Claire Woodall-Vogg, executive director of the Milwaukee Election Commission, has faced a flood of vulgar messages and threats since [overseeing Milwaukee’s election](https://wisconsinwatch.org/2020/12/milwaukee-elections-chief-claire-woodall-vogg-vote-count-election/) that Trump supporters falsely claimed was tainted by late-night “ballot dumps” favoring Biden.

Rather than regrouping during a typical post-election lull, election officials in 2021 faced harassment from “frivolous subpoenas” issued by state legislatures, overwhelming records requests and personal threats, Becker said.

“You’ve seen all three of these things happen in Wisconsin, directed at state officials and local officials and others,” he said.

Gableman in recent weeks has sought court permission to jail the mayors of Madison and Green Bay if they don’t meet with him soon. He has accused the mayors of refusing to answer questions about their cities’ elections during the probe Vos authorized under a [$676,000](https://www.fox6now.com/news/wisconsin-election-probe-data-analysis-estimated-to-cost-325k) contract.

Separately, Racine County Sheriff Christopher Schmaling in November [called for criminal charges](https://www.jsonline.com/story/news/politics/elections/2021/11/03/racine-sheriff-seeks-charges-wisconsin-elections-commissioners/6272910001/) against five of six members of the Elections Commission for telling local clerks to send absentee ballots to nursing homes rather than sending special deputies to oversee in-person voting due to the coronavirus pandemic. Schmaling, a Trump supporter, called that a violation of state law.

Some Republicans have seized on that issue [amid questions about whether staff at a Mount Pleasant nursing home](https://www.usnews.com/news/best-states/wisconsin/articles/2021-11-02/evers-prosecute-if-election-laws-were-broken-as-alleged) improperly influenced the voting of a few residents with cognitive problems. Vos called for Wolfe’s resignation in October in response to Schmaling’s nursing home voting probe.

Said Bernier: “That action that may or may not have occurred within the nursing home reflects on the individual who broke that law. Not the Wisconsin Election Commission and not Meagan Wolfe. They didn’t break the law.”

That came days after the Legislative Audit Bureau [made 30 recommendations](https://legis.wisconsin.gov/lab/esummary21-19) following a review of how clerks complied with state laws during the 2020 presidential primary and general election. Among other recommendations, the bureau called for improved training for municipal clerks on identifying potential duplicate voter registration records and ballot processing — and to make sure that absentee ballot certificates comply with state law requiring witness signatures.

While the report offered no evidence to support Trump’s baseless claims of voter fraud, Vos and some other Republicans [said](https://legis.wisconsin.gov/assembly/63/vos/media/news-updates-2019-to-2021/2021/lab-audit-highlights-major-issues-in-november-election-administration/) its findings justified further investigation of the state election administration.

Becker is among those who have applauded state and local election officials’ efforts to navigate the pandemic amid unprecedented voter turnout in 2020.

In a Nov. 8 [letter](https://electioninnovation.org/press/bipartisan-support-for-wec-administrator-meagan-wolfe/) to Vos, a bipartisan group of more than 50 election officials praised Wolfe’s “competence and excellence” and encouraged Vos and his colleagues to “speak out against this line of harassment and speak truth to all Wisconsin voters.”

Wolfe remains “determined to stay in the position and fight for fair and accurate elections,” Elections Commission spokesperson Riley Vetterkind told Wisconsin Watch.

For American citizens watching the post-election scrum play out, there can be a feeling of “helplessness,” Thornton said.

“When I have seen progress on democracy (internationally), it does mostly come from everyday people banding together,” Thornton said.

She said the question for the electorate is: “Are we at the point where people care enough?”

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