Election Day: Not Just a One-Day Affair

Kelly Michaels, MMC, WCMC, Master Municipal Clerk, City of Brookfield

While Election Day is certainly a busy day for clerks, it isn't just a one-day affair. Preparing for and administering elections is like being an event planner and can be quite challenging. Clerks are continually educated in the latest state and federal election laws. A partisan election, with its politically charged environment, is not treated any differently, but does take on a completely different atmosphere than non-partisan elections. This is the reason why clerks often count the number of presidential elections before they retire, instead of the number of years! Voting patterns particular to any one community can be completely different from other communities throughout the state even if they are similar in size. Experience and training help clerks identify patterns, risks, and challenges to plan appropriately for voting paradigms within their community.

Poll Locations

Wisconsin municipalities range from having a single poll location to having nearly 200. In communities where there are multiple polling locations, the complexity of event planning expands to numerous "same-day" events with thousands of "guests" coming to each location. Success means paying close attention to detail with an aptitude for organizational juggling of people, places, and things. The biggest hurdle when looking for a polling location is to find a willing building owner, which is why it is typical for polling locations to be located in public buildings such as schools and municipal halls. Suitable polling locations should be located in or near the general area of the voters they serve, which can significantly limit availability. They must also be handicapped accessible; offer sufficient parking; and provide sufficient space to handle the amount of equipment, supplies, staffing, and voters expected for a large turnout experience. Some municipalities pay to lease polling space while others utilize public locations at no additional cost.

Turnout Projections

Knowing how many voters will turn out is key in determining things like how many ballots to order; poll workers to schedule and train; registration forms to provide; and what to expect for absentee balloting in the weeks leading up to Election Day. If projections are off, it can cause problems resulting in complaints and unfavorable media attention. It could even result in court action to extend Election Day polling hours.

Clerks utilize different methods of analysis when it comes to making these projections. A review of past turnout results for similar election types by polling location and a close eye on public engagement in the weeks leading up to Election Day is a good place to start.

Staffing, Training, and Scheduling Poll Workers

State law requires a minimum of seven workers per poll location or five if utilizing voting machines. In larger municipalities, planning often involves a deeper analysis to identify voting patterns resulting in higher or lower pockets of voter engagement across the municipality. Staffing levels increase to meet specific demands identified in the analysis: adding more voter registration for poll locations near residential developments with apartment buildings and student housing areas with high transient populations is an example. There are many different factors that go into staffing decisions, because voting patterns within municipalities can be as different as municipalities themselves. Small municipalities may find the scheduling of poll workers as simple as calling the five or seven worker who have done it for years. On the other end of the spectrum, large municipalities such as Milwaukee,

Poll worker training session at Waukesha City Hall.

must find and train 2,500 or more poll workers to fill shifts at nearly 200 different polling locations. Mid-sized municipalities fall somewhere in-between. Training poll workers is required for all clerks. The more poll workers, the more complex the scheduling and time-consuming the training events become. Scheduling has challenges for all municipalities as certain elections fall during peak flu season. Often, clerks must find last-minute replacement workers up to and including Election Day. Sometimes those who are already working agree to extend their shift to a full day in order to cover unanticipated vacancies. Other times, polling locations run short which can cause delays for voters, ballot processing, closing duties, and results reporting. (See "Election Training: An Overview on page 13 of this magazine.)

Drilling Down, Ordering Ballot Stock, Supplies, Programming, and Testing Equipment

Determining ballot stock involves analysis of many factors including projected turnout, past turnout; counts not reflected in the turnout such as ballots that are mailed out and not returned; ballots that are canceled and resent due to being lost in the mail or sent to an old address; remakes of voted ballots, and Election Day spoiling of ballots. Clerks should review ballot proofs to make sure the races and candidates appear on the ballot accurately before placing the order. The appropriate number of supplies such as tables, chairs, pens, etc., is determined based on the number of poll workers scheduled to work. The number of forms such as voter registration, supplemental poll list pages, and sequential voter count methodologies are determined by turnout projection.

The number of booths to place is a formula of one per every 200 voters who voted in the most recent fall general election per state law. Municipalities utilizing equipment must also plan for programming. Clerks work closely with the individual or vendor responsible for programming to make sure each media stick correctly reads the ballot styles for each ward assigned to the poll location where a

Testing of programmed equipment.

particular piece of equipment is in use. Some clerks perform the programming themselves. Following programming, testing to verify the equipment is working properly is a crucial function for success. Planning for the public testing of equipment requires public notice and preparation of test ballots for a pre-determined result. Many clerks also use the public test process as an opportunity to involve chief inspectors in order to refresh their memories on how the equipment works; ballots; security processes; and equipment opening/closing procedures. Once a successful public test is completed, the equipment is security sealed and set for delivery to polling locations on the Monday prior to Election Day.

Absentee Balloting

Some communities receive a handful of absentee ballots they easily process at their poll location, while others experience a rising popularity of "in-person absentee voting." Communities with thousands and thousands of absentee ballot envelopes require separate "event" planning for the management of those envelopes. Planning for the absentee event requires projecting absentee ballot stock needs;

Absentee ballots being sorted by ward and then alphabetized in Brookfield.

purchasing inner and outside envelopes based on mailing versus in-person use; obtaining postage for mailing both ways; hiring temporary office help to issue the ballots; line management systems; logging ballot envelope returns; and managing ballot envelopes to prepare for delivery, sorted by wards in alphabetical order. Additionally, some clerks must also plan voting events at nursing homes and assisted living facilities located in their community. The law requires two visits to each facility, so the event requires coordination with multiple facilities, as well as the hiring and training of special voting deputies. The visits begin the fourth Monday prior to Election Day and are typically concurrent with absentee voting by mail and in-person. The planning becomes more complex for communities with mega facilities or those with numerous qualifying facilities.

Voter Registration

There are many outside special interest groups promoting voter registration drives with varied degrees of accuracy or follow through. Unfortunately, clerks often hear voter complaints with these drives. Voters report misdirection by "well-meaning" but ill-informed volunteers. In some cases potential voters find they are not registered because the groups did not forward the forms they collected to the municipality. In an effort to protect their residents and combat the spread of misinformation, clerks often issue press releases, social media blasts, and newsletter articles to get their voters accurate information about registering to vote using secure methods such as: online at MyVote, at the polls, or at the Clerk's Office. Additionally, clerks recommend voters only give their personal information including their date of birth and driver's license number to someone they know and trust.

Preparing Poll Layout Plans

Planning for multiple polling locations includes creating a well-defined layout and line management plan for each polling location based on the unique characteristics of that premise. The plan identifies where equipment is to be located as well as tables, chairs, polling booths, and signage; and designates areas for each activity such as poll book check-in, voter registration, absentee ballot processing, and observer areas. The plan also identifies areas for the staging of voters for line management and orderly entrance to exit flows with an eye for egress and ADA accessibility including sufficient wheelchair access and turn radius throughout the site as required by state and federal accessibility laws.

The "Day Before" - Preparation, Troubleshooting, and Securing Equipment

Troubleshooting, finding replacement workers, setting up polls, and securing equipment are the main activities the day before Election Day. Setup and securing polling locations along with troubleshooting issues makes the Monday prior to Election Day one of the busiest. It is critical that each site, as well as those with a central count location, receive the correct programmed equipment for that site along with the correct ballots and poll books. Tables, chairs, poll booths, signage, postings, and line management methodologies all need to be set up appropriately, and each location and its equipment needs to be secured. Many small communities that have a single polling location are also busy the day before as a growing number of them utilize the optional electronic poll books system, called Badger Books. In addition to setup activities, clerks in those communities are downloading e-poll books onto electronic equipment as well as testing its function

between several units, its printer, and local area network system. They must then program the unique credentials and passwords for all poll workers who will be utilizing the system. Clerks using Badger Books must also put into place their backup systems prior to securing the location for the night.

Election Day

Election Day is often spent responding to voters looking for polling sites or questions regarding proof of residency and photo ID. Clerks must also make secure delivery of absentee ballots to central count or polling locations. They respond to chief inspectors with procedural questions and provide support and assistance at polling locations for emergencies or other issues. Additionally, clerks often respond to media requests for interviews; complaints; jammed or non-functioning equipment; depleted forms or ballot stock replacement if necessary; procedural or technical assistance in balancing; and results reporting. Clerks remain on the job until Election Day results reporting is complete and may work late into the evening or early morning hours when there are balancing issues or delays in processing very high numbers of absentee ballots.

The Days and Weeks After

With a 4:00 p.m. statutory deadline the day after Election Day to organize and submit election returns to county and school officials, clerks are right back at the office early the next day. The higher the volume of returns, the more complex and time-consuming the process. Data entry into the WisVote Systems consumes the days and weeks that follow. This is done for historical accounting of election participation, reconciliation of returns, canvassing and certification of winners, as well as state reporting requirements. At this point, audit processes start for all new registrants and 5 percent of communities (approximately 183), are drawn randomly for audits of election results by ward. Municipalities with multiple wards can and often are, selected for audit of more than one ward. Clerks begin planning for the audit upon notification by state officials that their ward was drawn. Clerks may also be involved in planning for a recount event should there be a close candidate race involving their ballots.

Election Season has begun, so thank your professional municipal clerk!

About the Author:

Kelly Michaels began serving as the Municipal Clerk for the City of Brookfield in 2011. Her 30-year career in local government includes prior appointments as the Clerk/Personnel Director for the City of Stoughton and Municipal Clerk for the City of Wausau. She also served as the County Board Supervisor for District 13 in Marathon County (2004-2009). Kelly is on the Board of Directors for the Wisconsin Municipal Clerk's Association serving as its immediate Past President (2018-2019). She currently serves as the Chair of the WMCA Legislative Communications and Advocacy Committee. Contact Kelly at michaels@ci.brookfield.wi.us