



DAVID STEFFEN

STATE REPRESENTATIVE • 4th ASSEMBLY DISTRICT

October 3, 2023

Testimony to the Assembly Committee on Campaigns and Elections re: Assembly Bill 38

Chairman Krug and Committee Members,

Thank you for the opportunity to testify in favor of Assembly Bill 38, a bipartisan bill that would enhance absentee ballot tracking via an optional text messaging service.

Ensuring that the right to vote is accessible and that voters feel confident in our elections system are crucial components of a thriving, representative democracy. Assembly Bill 38 aims to bolster both these components by creating a user-friendly text message notification service for our state's absentee voters.

Over 800,000 Wisconsinites requested an absentee ballot for the November 2022 general election, which adds up to nearly a third of the total votes cast across the state. The number of residents choosing to vote absentee is only continuing to grow, and these voters deserve the assurance that their ballot has been properly received by the clerk.

AB 38 would allow absentee voters to opt in to text message alerts by providing their mobile phone number on their absentee ballot application. If a voter chooses to utilize this service, moving forward they would receive a text message when their absentee application is received by the clerk and when their absentee ballot is received by the clerk. Additionally, this would help reduce the number of calls to clerks from voters inquiring if their ballot has been received.

By using Wisconsin's existing MyVote system, this text messaging service can be easily and inexpensively implemented. Wisconsin Elections Commission (WEC) estimates a one-time implementation cost of \$25,000 and ongoing, annual costs ranging from \$10,000-\$30,000. WEC estimates these costs can be absorbed within their budget.

Senator Cabral-Guevara and I have introduced a simple amendment to AB 38. Assembly Amendment 2 to AB 38 is the result of ongoing discussions with colleagues and WEC and provides the following changes:

- 1) Ensures that whether a voter completes a written or electronic absentee ballot application, they may opt in to this text messaging service.
- 2) States that if municipalities have a website, they must post information regarding the text messaging service on their website, along with samples of what an official text would look like.



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- 3) Adds a delayed effective date of six months to ensure WEC has adequate time to implement this system.

AB 38 is supported by a multitude of voter rights groups and is a simple step towards ensuring every voter has easy access to the status of their ballot and the confidence to know their ballot has reached its destination.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak in favor of this bill. I encourage you to join me in supporting this legislation and am happy to answer any questions you have.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "David Steffen".

David Steffen
State Representative
4th Assembly District



RACHAEL A. CABRAL-GUEVARA

STATE SENATOR • 19TH SENATE DISTRICT

Testimony before the Assembly Committee on Campaigns and Elections

Senator Rachael Cabral-Guevara

October 3, 2023

Hello, Chairman Krug and members of the committee. Thank you for allowing me to submit testimony on Assembly Bill 38, an important piece of legislation that will help improve voter confidence about our elections process.

There have been concerns around the security and efficiency of absentee voting. This includes the worry if your request was received by the clerk, when your ballot is being mailed, and that the ballot got back to the clerk on time. Using their database, the Wisconsin Elections Commission created a “Track my Ballot” tool through the MyVote website to alleviate some of these concerns.

This bill goes a step further and offers voters the opportunity to receive texting notifications for these steps in the process. If a phone number is included with their absentee ballot application, they can receive these updates automatically via text. This added layer of tracking will help boost confidence in the absentee voting process and give voters ample opportunity to identify any unusual delays in the receipt of their request or ballot.

With absentee voting becoming more and more common, anything we can do to make the process more transparent is a step in the right direction. Assembly Amendment 2 is the result of input from stakeholders, expanding the opportunity for all absentee applicants to receive these texting notifications and requires samples of the texts to be included on absentee notices.

I am hopeful you will be able to support this critical piece of legislation that will help improve confidence in the absentee voting process. Thank you again for your time.

ROCK COUNTY, WISCONSIN

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October 3, 2023

Assembly Committee on Campaigns and Elections:

Testimony for Public Hearing

Chair Krug and Committee Members:

Thank you for allowing testimony today.

Assembly Bill 38 – Relating to: absentee ballot request and return confirmation.

- **Support**

This bill allows voter to receive text messages when their absentee ballot application has been received and when their absentee ballot has been returned.

This will be plus for our voters. Keeping voters informed of these two steps in the absentee process without needing to go to the myvote.wi.gov website to find the tracking online.

Note that education on the notification system as it corresponds within our state statutes would be beneficial to the voters.

Thank you for your consideration,

Lisa Tollefson, Rock County Clerk

To: Assembly Committee on Elections
Date: October 3, 2023
From: Paul Malischke malischke@yahoo.com
1120 Colleen Court, Platteville WI 53818

Subject: AB 38, text messages to voters who request an absentee ballot

Please include this letter with testimony for the October 3, 2023 public hearing on AB 38.

Please consider amending two aspects of AB 38 to extend its reach and to preserve voters' privacy.

1) Extend the effectiveness by adding a text message when the municipal clerk mails out the absentee ballot.

The bill currently calls for a text only at these times:

- When an absentee ballot request is received by the clerk.
- When the returned ballot is received by the municipal clerk.

Adding this third text message will provide the voter with important information regarding when they can expect to receive the ballot. The interval between a request and the clerk sending the ballot can vary significantly. If a voter requests an absentee ballot on August 15, the ballot will not be sent until more than a month has passed. If the voter requests an absentee ballot ten days before the election, it will be sent within a few days.

2) Add a provision guaranteeing privacy to all phone numbers and e-mail addresses in the entire voter registration database.

If AB 38 is passed as written, some voters (who request an absentee ballot) will have their phone numbers remain confidential, and some (who included it on the registration form) will not.

Currently, the EI-131 voter registration form has a space for the voter's phone number and e-mail. The instructions state: *"This information may be used by your municipal clerk to contact you about your voter record or absentee ballot request."*

Currently, there are no restrictions on who can purchase voter registration data, including voters' phone numbers, or how it is used. It is important to change the law to make **all** voters' phone numbers and email addresses confidential.



AB 38 Will Improve Voter Experience, Promote Transparency in Elections

Dear Chairman Krug and esteemed members of the Assembly Committee on Campaigns and Elections,

Thank you for the opportunity to provide written testimony in support of Assembly Bill 38.

My name is Peter Skopec, and I am the Director of Advocacy for Secure Democracy USA. Secure Democracy USA is a national, nonpartisan nonprofit organization that works with state leaders, election administrators, and policy experts on both sides of the aisle to build confidence in our elections and ensure all eligible citizens have the freedom to vote how they choose.

AB 38 is an excellent example of how promoting transparency in our elections can both improve the voter's experience and strengthen voter confidence.

AB 38 and its Senate companion, SB 39, would allow Wisconsin voters to receive automatic text message notifications about the status of their absentee ballot, if they so choose. By offering voters easier access to essential information about their absentee ballots, this proposal will give greater peace of mind to the many Wisconsinites who choose to vote absentee.

Wisconsin currently lets voters track the status of their absentee ballot through the state's voter website, MyVote Wisconsin. MyVote's service is enormously popular with voters: over 1.5 million users tracked their ballots through MyVote during the 2020 General election.

AB 38 will make ballot tracking even more convenient for Wisconsin voters. Rather than having to visit MyVote's website to track their ballot, AB 38 lets voters opt into automatic text message notifications when filling out an absentee ballot application. Voters would then get text notifications when their absentee application – and, especially importantly – when their returned absentee ballot is received by the municipal clerk.

In the future, the convenient, opt-in text messaging system created by AB 38 could be expanded to include additional notifications. For example, voters could receive a text when their requested absentee ballot is in the mail and on the way, or when there is an issue with their returned absentee ballot – such as a missing witness signature – that could prevent the ballot from being counted.

We thank the esteemed members of the Committee for the opportunity to submit written testimony on AB 38, and Representative Steffen and Senator Cabral-Guevara for their leadership in introducing this bipartisan bill.

We would be happy to provide you with any additional information, including on the implementation and effect of ballot tracking in other states.

We respectfully urge you to support AB 38.

Sincerely,

**Peter Skopec
Director of Advocacy
Secure Democracy USA**

Secure Democracy USA is a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization that works to build confidence in our elections and improve voter access across the United States. Our goal is to support local election officials and state lawmakers to make elections policy that ensures our country continues to be a beacon of democracy for the entire world.

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