



Youth Participation in the Electoral Process

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Under current law, a person must be at least 18 years old to vote in a local, state, or federal election. However, Wisconsin offers opportunities for people who are younger than 18 to become engaged in the electoral process, to serve their communities, and to prepare to vote when they become of age.

Wisconsin residents who are 16 or 17 years old may, under certain circumstances, serve as poll workers in local, state, or federal elections; residents of any age may serve as election observers; and a person who is 17 years old may register to vote if he or she will turn 18 before the first election held after he or she registers.

POLLING PLACE WORKERS

Generally, a person must be a “qualified elector” in order to serve as an election official. A qualified elector is a U.S. citizen who is age 18 or over, who has resided in an election district for at least 28 days,¹ and who is not disqualified² from voting.³ However, under certain circumstances, high school students ages 16 and 17 may serve as polling place workers for the municipalities where they reside.

A person who is age 16 or 17 and who wishes to serve as a polling place worker is subject to the following requirements and limitations:⁴

- The person must be a student enrolled in grades 9 to 12 in a public or private school, in a home-based private educational program, or in a tribal school.
- The person must obtain the written approval of his or her parent or guardian to serve as a polling place worker.
- The person must have at least a 3.0 grade point average or the equivalent, except that a school board or a governing body of a private school, tribal school, or administrator of a home-based private educational program may establish criteria for service by a pupil who does not have at least a 3.0 grade point average or the equivalent.
- The person may serve only at the polling place serving the pupil’s residence.⁵
- The person may not serve as the chief inspector for a polling place and may only serve at the polling place if at least one other poll worker is a qualified elector for the polling place.

Additionally, while election officials generally may challenge the qualifications of a voter, a person serving as a student poll worker may not do so.⁶

POLLING PLACE OBSERVERS

Current law provides that “any member of the public” may be present to act as an observer whenever and wherever absentee ballots or Election Day ballots may be cast or processed. So long as the person is not a candidate in the election being observed, the person identifies himself or herself to the municipal clerk or chief election officer serving the location, and the person is not disruptive, the statutes place no limitation on the age or other qualifications for serving as an election observer.⁷ However, election observers who are under the age of 18 are prohibited from taking certain actions. While generally, an election observer or other qualified elector may make a challenge for cause of any person voting at a polling place or any absentee ballot being canvassed, a polling place observer who is under the age of 18 is not a “qualified elector” and is therefore not authorized under current law to make these challenges.⁸

VOTER REGISTRATION

A person may not cast a vote until he or she is 18 years old. However, a person may register to vote when he or she is 17 years old if he or she will be 18 before the next election after the registration is made.⁹

In order to register to vote, a person must produce an unexpired Wisconsin driver's license or identification card or provide the last four digits of his or her Social Security number.¹⁰ Additionally, a person who wishes to register must provide proof of his or her residence. Current law authorizes several types of proof of residence: a registrant may use a driver's license or identification card or produce one of several documents authorized under the statutes.¹¹ Commonly used documents include a property tax bill or residential lease, utility bill, bank statement, paycheck, or a university, college, or technical college identification card.

Generally, a person who is 17 years old and who does not live independently from his or her parent or guardian will produce a driver's license or identification card or a paycheck that shows his or her current address in order to prove his or her residence. A person who registers to vote when he or she is 17 years old may cast a vote in any election when he or she attains the age of 18; the registration is valid so long as the person does not change his or her address or become ineligible to vote.

¹ A voter who has resided in the state for fewer than 28 days may vote for the offices of President and Vice President, so long as the voter does not cast a vote in another state. [s. 6.15, Stats.]

² A person is disqualified from voting if he or she has been convicted of a felony and has not completed serving the sentence for the felony, including time on community supervision, if he or she has been adjudicated by a court to be incompetent to vote, or if he or she engages in a bet or wager relating to the election. [ss. 6.03 and 304.078, Stats.]

³ ss. 6.02 and 7.30 (2) (a), Stats.

⁴ s. 7.30 (2) (a), Stats.

⁵ Generally, a poll worker may reside in the county served by the polling place or, if he or she is the chief election inspector for the polling place, must generally reside in the municipality served by the polling place. [s. 7.30 (2) (a), Stats.]

⁶ s. 6.92 (2), Stats.

⁷ ss. 7.41 and 7.52 (1) (a), Stats.

⁸ For more information on challenges to votes, see ss. 6.925 and 6.93, Stats.

⁹ s. 6.05, Stats.

¹⁰ s. 6.33 (1), Stats.

¹¹ s. 6.34 (3), Stats.