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Ohio State study finds strengths, room for improvement in Wisconsin's electoral system

Analysis praises reforms, warns of problems with voter database

MADISON – The Wisconsin Democracy Campaign today called for heightened attention to the condition of the state's electoral system after a new study by The Ohio State University's Moritz College of Law offered both words of praise and warning to the state.

The study commended Wisconsin's strong history of progressive election reform, including the implementation of election-day registration and the recent creation of a new Government Accountability Board, which the report's authors said could serve as a model for other states. However, the study also pointed to trends that could potentially jeopardize future elections. Chief among those concerns is the State's continued failure to establish a federally mandated voter registration database, which increases the potential for errors or fraud that can alter elections and deny some people their right to vote.

Among five large Midwestern states, Ohio State study found only Minnesota's electoral system ranked higher than Wisconsin's. In contrast, Ohio was dubbed a "poster child for reform" and Illinois was found to be "mismanaged" and rife with "political influence." Michigan's system ranked in the middle of the pack.

"It is encouraging to know that Wisconsin's election system is one other states can look to as a model in some regards," said Mike McCabe, executive director of the Wisconsin Democracy Campaign. "However, the study also validates our long-time concerns about the state's voter registration project. Our lack of a statewide registration system that works properly is an unacceptable threat to the fairness of our elections."

In November 2004, the State Board of Elections entered into a contract with the global outsourcing firm Accenture to develop a computerized statewide voter registration system that complies with the federal Help America Vote Act (HAVA) of 2002. To this day, the database is not yet fully compliant with HAVA and lacks fundamental components aimed to improve the overall electoral system.

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The Ohio State researchers praised Wisconsin's Election Day Registration (EDR) system established in 1976. The findings showed that EDR has successfully increased voter participation, without increasing voter fraud. In fact, the study found voting fraud in Wisconsin to be "exceedingly rare." The authors also addressed the ongoing voter ID debate and concluded that the requirement would do nothing to address problems that have resulted in ballots being cast by ineligible voters.

"Although some have claimed that same-day registration leads to voter fraud, it couldn't be farther from the truth," McCabe said. "We should continue to tear down barriers to registration, not build them."

The study also pointed to Wisconsin's newly created Government Accountability Board (GAB) as a potential model election administration entity. Most importantly, the study's authors noted, the structure of the GAB ensures politically independent leadership. The authors recommended that close attention should be paid to the workings of the GAB in the coming year.

The full Ohio State study, *From Registration to Recounts: The Election Ecosystems of Five Midwestern States*, can be found at www.electionlaw.osu.edu.

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