

“Vote and Die”

# Wisconsin’s pandemic election: A public health disaster

Niles Niemuth  
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The decision by the political establishment in Wisconsin to hold in-person voting during the worst pandemic in a century is a criminal act for which both parties and the courts are responsible, guaranteeing more COVID-19 infections and deaths in the state. The primary election Tuesday was not only a travesty of democracy, the likes of which has not been seen in recent American history, but a public health disaster.

After back-to-back decisions by the Wisconsin State Supreme Court and the US Supreme Court, citizens of the state were forced to choose between forgoing their constitutional right to vote or risking their lives and the lives of their neighbors, families and friends in order to cast a ballot for their preferred candidates.

A local cultural news website, the *Milwaukee Record*, grimly dubbed it the “vote and die” election. Condemning the conditions under which they had to vote, one person held a sign while in line which read “RIP Voters.”

In a now infamous video, Republican State Assembly Speaker Robin Vos assured voters Tuesday that it was “incredibly safe to go out” and vote, even as he was decked out in a full suite of personal protective equipment. Last week Vos had opened and closed a special session of the legislature in a matter of seconds in order to avoid taking up the issue of delaying the election.

The *New York Times* remarked that the election was “almost certain to be tarred as illegitimate.” And by every measure it was illegitimate.

Polling locations were reduced from 180 to just five in Milwaukee, the state’s largest city, due to the lack of volunteers. Green Bay, the third largest city, had only two polling places, down from 31. In Milwaukee, a

nurse who tried to vote after her shift ended was turned away from the polls a few minutes after the official closure time, even though the line still stretched out the door.

More than 10,000 voters reported that absentee ballots which they had requested had never arrived in the mail, making it impossible to have them postmarked by Tuesday. On Wednesday several boxes of undelivered absentee ballots were found in a Milwaukee mail processing center.

Jessica Mirkes, a Milwaukee resident, told Madison 365 that after voting in every election for the last two decades she had decided not to vote after failing to receive a requested mail-in ballot in order to protect her eight-month-old daughter. “If it was just me and my husband, I’d be fine,” she said. “But if anything happened to my daughter, I could never forgive myself.” Thousands of others were forced to make a similar life and death decision.

Preliminary results indicate that in-person voting was down significantly from 2016, with turnout in the city of Milwaukee cut in half. Unofficial turnout in state capital Madison was just over 50 percent, compared to 66 percent in the 2016 spring elections. Official totals and winners will not be announced until Monday, April 13, when the last absentee ballots are due to be received.

Those voters who did turn out tried their best to protect themselves and others from coronavirus by donning medical face masks or cloth bandannas, as recommended by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Poll workers were outfitted with personal protective equipment, including medical gowns, gloves, masks and face shields. Voters were required to stand

six feet apart in line, causing lines to snake around city blocks in Milwaukee.

Protective plastic barriers were erected in polling places, hand sanitizer was available, and each voter was given their own pen for filling out ballots. In some locations, poll workers were instructed to wipe down voting machines with sanitary wipes every 15 minutes. However, the protective measures taken were almost certainly not enough to stop the spread of the deadly virus as thousands broke a stay-at-home order issued by the governor to gather in the thousands in order to vote.

The inevitable result of compelling voters to line up for hours in order to cast their ballots in high school gymnasiums and community centers across the state will be an acceleration of the spread of coronavirus in Wisconsin, throughout the Midwest and beyond. The impact of the election on the pandemic is expected to be reflected in the number of confirmed cases over the next two weeks, the approximate incubation time before those who are carrying the virus become symptomatic.

Among the races on the ballot were the Democratic presidential primary contest between former Vice President Joe Biden and Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders, as well as a closely contested race for a seat on the state Supreme Court between the incumbent Daniel Kelly, a Republican-appointed justice, and Jill Karofsky, the Democratic-backed candidate.

Even though Kelly recused himself from the court's decision Monday, his Republican colleagues still held a majority, allowing them to overturn an order by Democratic Governor Tony Evers to postpone in-person voting to June 9, forcing the election to go forward the next day.

While it was the Republican majority in the Wisconsin legislature and the state Supreme Court who maneuvered to ensure that the election went forward as scheduled, the blood of voters is just as surely on the hands of the Democratic Party.

Evers made a belated and halfhearted feint in trying to delay the election, unlike Ohio Governor Mike DeWine, a Republican, who took executive action three weeks ago to shut down that state's March 17 primary election, moving the voting first to April 28 and then to June 2.

During an online press briefing last week, former Vice President Biden gave the green light to holding

the election as scheduled despite the rampaging pandemic, telling reporters, "I think you could hold the election as well as dealing with mail-in ballots and same-day registration. I think it could be done..."

This travesty of an election makes clear that the ruling class has nothing but contempt for the vast majority of the population, including those who are most vulnerable to COVID-19, the elderly and the immune-compromised. The decision to hold the election is of a piece with the push to get workers back on the job even as the number of coronavirus infections in the US surpasses 400,000 and tens of thousands are projected to die.

Furthermore, the decisions by the courts make clear they are political bodies, making their decisions with definite political conclusions in mind, and working backwards to concoct a pseudo-legal rationale. The justices at the state and federal level made the decision to go forward with the election and to limit absentee ballots because the Republicans wanted to suppress the vote and maintain the composition of the state Supreme Court, as well as conducting a trial run for the forthcoming back-to-work campaign.



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