

Wisconsin Elections: "Don't Kill the Referees"

Posted on Oct 27, Posted by [Kathleen Vinehout, State Senator 31st District](#) Category [Wisconsin](#)



Bipartisan is not nonpartisan. When the Packers play the Vikings, we don't want each side to appoint half the referees. Sen. Vinehout reflects on the bills in the Legislature that would change Wisconsin's campaign finance laws, the Government Accountability Board and 'John Doe' process.

MADISON - "Just do the right thing," my doctor told me. We were discussing politics. We just finished reviewing the x-rays of my new hip replacement. My doctor wanted to offer a little advice to my colleagues in the Senate.

"People want you to think of them," he said. "They don't want you to make decisions on what's best for the party – whoever's in power. They want you to make the best decision for the people."

"The problem," I told him, "is that the interest groups are pulling the parties further and further apart. They don't want to compromise. It's very hard for the leaders of both parties to say 'No' to their favorite interest group."

Republicans are struggling to round up enough votes to pass a bill that dissolves the Government Accountability Board (GAB) and places elections and ethics under the control of boards appointed by political party leaders. Nonpartisan judges now oversee Wisconsin's elections, ethics and lobbying. Strongly GOP allied groups, like Americans for Prosperity and Wisconsin Manufactures and Commerce are pushing the change.

Conservative groups also support bills that open the door to political jobs in our civil service

system, opt political crimes out of 'John Doe' criminal investigations and allow unfettered and undisclosed money in campaigns.

Nonpartisan does not mean bipartisan. When the Packers play the Vikings we don't want half the referees appointed by the Vikings and half by the Packers. They would never agree on what was pass interference. It is the same with elections. We want the calls made by judges in pinstripes, not wearing the colors of the two teams.

'Do the right thing' means looking at the facts and acting to fix problems that are identified but not acting to advance one party over the other 'just because we can'.

Nonpartisan audits did indicate lapses in the GAB's performance. Seldom is there an audited agency that does not need improvement in performance. Even the best refs make some bad calls.

Wisconsin lived through extraordinary changes in elections in the past few years. The GAB was at the center of effecting these changes. Unprecedented recall elections happened in 2011 and 2012. During this time GAB oversaw a statewide recount; a redrawing of legislative boundaries that ended in court; an on-again, off-again voter ID that also ended in court and the enactment of 31 separate pieces of legislation affected the agency.

Overall, auditors identified a dozen problems in an agency with 154 separate responsibilities. Lawmakers themselves created some of these problems. For example, auditors pointed out the agency did not complete all the administrative rules related to the training of clerks. The GAB responded that the content of the training for clerks kept changing because of 31 new laws. When the GAB asked the legislature and Department of Administration officials for additional staff, they were told, "No".

Wisconsin has a decentralized election process: 1,853 municipal clerks and 72 county clerks conduct elections. Keeping clerks supported takes time and staff. The GAB used federal grant money to hire staff. The grant is running out. Lawmakers in the majority on the budget writing committee did not extend the positions beyond the current budget – leaving many GAB staff to wonder about their future.

In other controversial legislation, we see a similar pattern: some problems exist, but rather than tweak the law to fix the problems, conservative interest groups are pushing lawmakers to use the opportunity to tilt the system in favor of partisan advantage.

A hundred years of civil service ought to tell us the system should not be disbanded in favor of opening the door to political positions. Wisconsin's century and a half old "John Doe" process of investigating crimes may need tweaking. But not allowing investigations of political crimes opens the door to corruption. Couple the "John Doe" bill with unfettered, undisclosed money in campaigns – another bill waiting for Senate action- and Wisconsin will return to the big money heydays of the late nineteenth century.

No voter has told me they want that result.

Tags: Untagged