

NO CONTEST

Local Spring Elections Feature Few Choices for Wisconsin Voters

While state and federal elections grab much of the attention, Wisconsin voters will also see local races on their spring ballots, including seats on county boards and city councils. Yet despite the key role these officials play in overseeing critical services (including those directly related to the COVID-19 response), most races on the April ballot feature only one candidate. This reflects a dearth of competition that limits the role of voters and may impact the quality of office holders.

On April 7, Wisconsinites are still expected to vote in elections ranging from a U.S. presidential primary to a seat on the Wisconsin Supreme Court to seats on municipal and county boards and councils. Yet, while a number of these offices will appear on the same ballot, many of the local races will offer voters no alternatives.

Only about one out of every five board of supervisor races in the state’s 10 most populous counties will have more than one contender. While there is more competition in city council races in the state’s 10 most populous cities, nearly half of upcoming city council seats will be uncontested.

In this analysis, limited to the state’s largest cities and counties to ensure a manageable scope, we examine competition for board and council seats since 2012. While at first glance the ongoing COVID-19 crisis might seem to overshadow such concerns, it also could be argued that effective leadership at the local level has never been more critical. Consequently, a decline in the number of contested elections is worthy of deliberation and possible action by policymakers in the future.

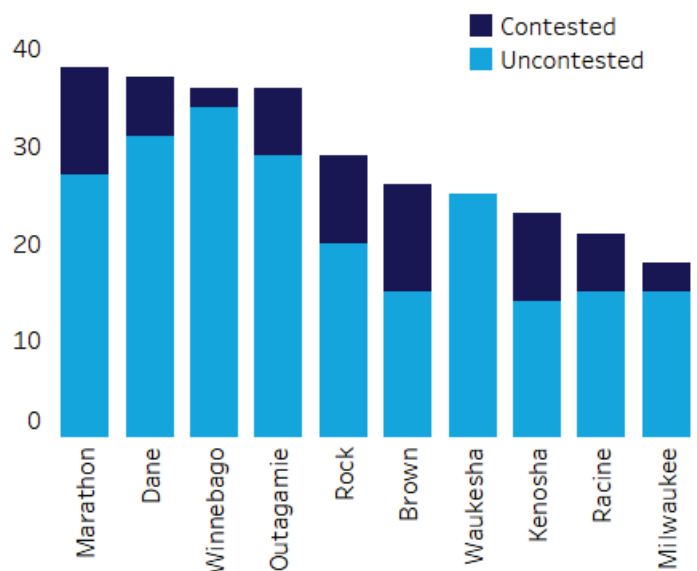
HOW COMPETITIVE ARE CITY AND COUNTY LEGISLATIVE SEATS?

Per state statutes, county board races are held every even-numbered year, meaning each county will elect all its seats this spring assuming no change in the election. County district maps are drawn every 10 years; the current maps have been in place since the 2012

election. For this analysis, we look at Wisconsin’s 10 most populous counties. In 2017, the estimated population of these counties was 3.2 million, or 54.7% of the state population.

In these counties, as shown in Figure 1, 289 seats are up for grabs in April, but just 64 (22.1%) will feature more than one candidate. The number of county supervisors ranges from 18 in Milwaukee to 38 in Marathon.

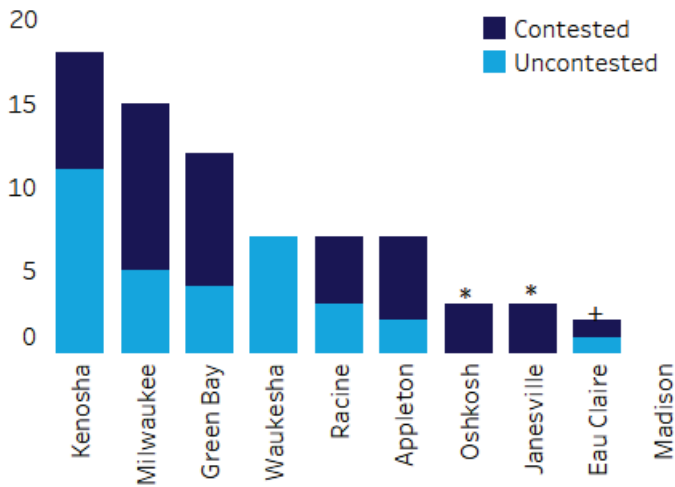
Figure 1: Uncontested County Board Elections
Seats up for election, Spring 2020



Source: Individual county elections websites



Figure 2: Variance in City Councils
Seats up for election, Spring 2020



* Multiple candidates up for at-large seats
+ Council president plus one at-large seat
Source: Individual city and county elections websites

The level of competition varies in these counties, but in none are even half the seats contested. Eleven of Brown County's 26 seats (42.3%) are contested placing it at the top of the list, while none of Waukesha County's 25 seats are competitive. In Wisconsin's two largest counties, few seats are up for grabs: only three out of the 18 Milwaukee County seats (16.7%) are contested, while Dane County features six competitive races out of 37 (16.2%). Assuming each seat represents the same number of people in a county, more than 80% of the 10-county population – or 2.56 million residents – will not get a choice for their supervisor in April.

Using 2017 population estimates, Milwaukee County supervisors represent 52,894 people on average, while each of Marathon County's supervisors represents just 3,572. While many smaller counties' supervisors volunteer, some are paid. Milwaukee County pays its supervisors a salary of \$25,924, the most on our list.

Due to a constitutional provision called home rule, cities have broader authority to govern themselves than counties, meaning municipal elections are not uniform. For this analysis, we look at Wisconsin's 10 largest cities.

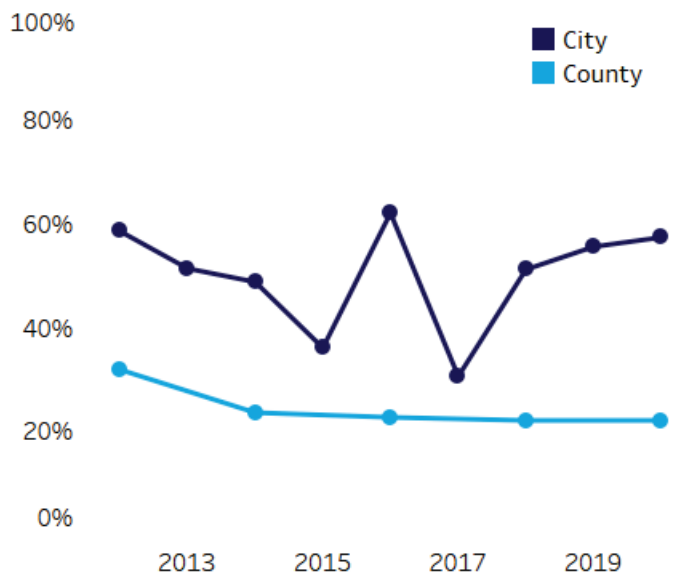
In these cities, council seats are determined by geographic district or through "at-large" races. Some councils include the mayor or other leadership

positions, and term length ranges from two years in many cities to four in Milwaukee. Some cities will have all council seats on the ballot in April, while others will have some or none at all. The size of the 10 city councils ranges from seven in Oshkosh and Janesville to 20 in Madison. Salaries also tend to be modest with the notable exception of Milwaukee, which considers its council seats to be full-time positions and pays a yearly wage of \$73,222.

Removing at-large races – all of which have more competitors than seats available - 68 seats will be up for grabs in the aforementioned cities, and 35 (51.5%) will be contested (see Figure 2). Ten of Milwaukee's 15 seats will have two competitors, while none of Waukesha's seven up-for-grabs seats have contested elections. Madison holds city council elections in odd-numbered years and is the only one of these cities to have no seats on the ballot this spring. In addition to Milwaukee, Green Bay and Kenosha will hold elections for their entire council; the rest will elect half or fewer.

Trends in electoral competition within the state's largest cities and counties show variation between the two types of government since 2012. Available data suggest competition for county board seats has dropped from 31.9% of seats in 2012 to 22.1% in 2020 (see Figure 3). However, city council seats show a different pattern. Excluding Waukesha (for which historic data were unavailable) and just looking at cities with

Figure 3: Cities More Competitive
Percentage of City and County races contested, 2012-2020



Source: Individual city and county elections websites



geographically-determined councilors, the years of highest competition were those in which a federal election was occurring. That said, city council seats are more competitive than county supervisor seats, surpassing 30% in each of the past nine years and 50% six times. Overall, while city council elections remain about as competitive as they were in 2012, county board seats are seeing even less competition.

We also briefly analyzed the longevity of legislative office holders in the 10 largest cities and counties. We found that of the 251 county supervisor seats for which we have data, 100 individuals (39.8%) running in 2020 held the same seat in 2012. In cities, this drops somewhat to 20 out of 59 (33.9%).

Though the larger cities we analyzed tend to see some competition, that may not be as true among smaller cities and villages. [A Forum survey](#) with the Wisconsin League of Municipalities found that officials in 62.4% of municipalities reported averaging one or fewer candidates per city council or village board seat in 2017, with smaller communities reporting less competition. The study also found that 44.3% of all cities and villages reported decreasing competition over the course of the past decade, compared to just 14.3% that saw an increase.

CONCLUSION

City councils and county boards adopt budgets that collectively exceed several billion dollars each year. Though their functions differ, both supply critical services to residents that impact their day-to-day lives and local economies. Indeed, recent days have shown how local leaders make critical decisions such as how to effectively provide emergency medical services, keep transit services running, and whether to close public spaces.

Of the \$6.4 billion spent by municipalities in 2018 (not counting debt payments), nearly half (44.3%) was devoted to police, fire, and general government functions. Highway administration, maintenance, and construction – of particular importance in rural villages and towns – accounted for another 21.6% of spending. Meanwhile for counties, health and human services took up 35.9% of the \$5.2 billion spent in 2018, by far the largest spending category.

Beyond the presidential primary, spring elections in Wisconsin choose most local leaders. Citizens are more likely to know who their federal or state elected leaders are, but many government services they use on a daily basis are administered by local entities. While choice does not guarantee better governance, competitive elections tend to produce healthy debate and encourage an engaged citizenry. Moreover, having multiple candidates may be the best way to ensure that at least one is truly qualified to be an effective leader.

Unfortunately, many Wisconsinites will find that their spring ballots contain many questions but only one possible answer.

2020 SPRING ELECTIONS

- Federal
 - Democratic Primary (statewide)
 - Republican Primary (statewide)
- State
 - State Supreme Court (1, statewide)
 - Court of Appeals (3, many counties)
- Local
 - Circuit Court (33, 26 counties)
 - County Board (all)
 - City Council (some)
 - School Board (some)
 - Other municipal positions (some)
 - Referendum questions (some)

