

# Promoting Democracy and Understanding Elections Starts with Education

**The State Bar’s advocacy team provides educational, nonpartisan resources to help lawyers, legislators, and the public better understand the democratic process and the issues important to lawyers and their clients.**

BY CALE BATTLES, LYNNE DAVIS, AND DEVIN MARTIN

Wisconsin residents need only turn on their TV or stream a show to know that Wisconsin continues to be a battleground state for national campaigns. Beyond the sheer volume of campaign advertisements, the amount of outreach through phone calls, door knocking, and mailings that residents receive is overwhelming. On top of that, campaign season seems to be never-ending. When one big election ends, another begins or is just around the corner. Inside the Capitol, elections are always at the top of everyone’s mind.

## Battleground State by the Numbers

Statistically, Wisconsin is the epitome of a battleground state. In 2016, Donald Trump won the state’s popular vote by only 0.77 percentage points. In 2020, Joe Biden’s win was even closer at 0.62 percentage points. Wisconsin has a history of close presidential races – the 2000 and 2004 presidential results were also extremely tight.

Based on campaign visits and campaign spending, the presidential campaigns clearly view Wisconsin as a crucial state to win the White House. Beyond the presidential race, the race for U.S. senator is also on the nation’s radar, as the result could play a pivotal role in determining which party controls the U.S. Senate in 2025.

While top-of-the-ticket campaigns receive a vast amount of discussion and attention, Wisconsin’s “down ballot” races will be some of the most competitive in years and could alter the majority of which party controls the state legislature. This is almost entirely due to the actions taken by the Republican-controlled Senate and Assembly last session when they voted to approve new maps drafted by Governor Evers.

The passage of the new maps came after the Wisconsin Supreme Court agreed to take a case regarding the construction of the state legislative maps that were in place for the 2022 elections. Election observers agree that there will be smaller majorities in both houses in 2025.

Understandably the final results will not be known until November, and if anything can be learned from the past decade of elections, it is to expect the unexpected. No matter how the elections shake out, the makeup of the legislature will be noticeably different. Twenty-eight members of the legislature will not return next session due to retirements or primary election losses. Depending on how races break on Election Day, nearly one-third of the current legislature could turn over.

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## Lawyer-Legislators Provide Unique Perspective

Regardless of the parties in charge of either legislative chamber, one of the key demographics the State Bar of Wisconsin pays close attention to is the number of lawyer-legislators who are elected. Attorneys serving in elective office, no matter their background or party affiliation, provide a unique perspective that helps other legislators understand the full effects of the bills that are considered and the laws that are passed. As observed over the past few decades, the number of attorneys serving in elective state positions continues to dwindle. Of the 132 elected State Senators and State Assembly members, the number of lawyer-lawmakers will likely be in single digits for the 2025-26 legislative session. Taking it even further, of the 226 major party candidates for office in the November 2024 general election, only 6% have a law degree.

While having more legislators who bring a variety of areas of expertise to the table should be celebrated, the importance and availability of those who practice law being involved in the lawmaking process in Madison cannot be understated. This is one of the driving forces for why the State Bar has sought to engage more members in understanding and participating in the political process. While not engaging in the elections itself, the State Bar's advocacy team works to provide opportunities to attend bipartisan programs to help State Bar members gain the knowledge and confidence to become civic leaders within their community. These educational programs provide members with the necessary information both to assist the general public in understanding elections and democracy and to contact their elected officials to share the impact that a current law or proposed legislation may have on their clients or the justice system.

## Partnerships Provide Statewide Programming

The State Bar began a partnership this

past year with WisPolitics.com, an online political news service based in Madison, to provide accessible statewide programming on several political and government-related topics. The first program was held in Milwaukee as a preview and promotion of the Republican National Convention, held at the Fiserv Forum. The second was a virtual program that occurred one week after Wisconsin's August partisan primary election to provide post-primary analysis of those results. The programming included viewpoints from lawmakers and pundits from both sides of the political aisle. The goal of past and future programs is to give not only attorneys but all voters a different perspective than a campaign flyer or advertisement and to educate on the issues and ever-changing status of the campaign.

To further engage the membership, the American Bar Association (ABA) Task Force for American Democracy held a listening tour event at the State Bar Center in early July. The half-day program included presentations from law professors on election law and litigation, provided education on how elections work at the local level with county clerks and city attorneys, and included a final program on media and civil discourse. That task force's work is ongoing as it continues on a national basis.

Efforts to engage and educate State Bar members are ongoing, so please watch your email for information about future events. The outreach will shift from political topics to public policy advocacy, but the State Bar is dedicated to keeping our members as informed and motivated as possible when it comes to protecting and preserving the justice system in Wisconsin.

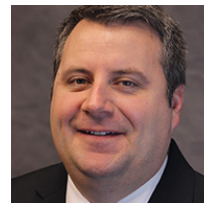
## Government Relations Website: A Year-round Resource

In addition to in-person and virtual advocacy efforts, the State Bar's Government Relations website ([www.wisbar.org/govrelations](http://www.wisbar.org/govrelations)) provides year-round resources on priority issues for

the profession. Fact sheets on justice system funding, criminal justice reform, and issues that support the legal profession include brief, easy-to-understand talking points. Members can use these fact sheets in a variety of ways to educate themselves on pending legislative issues as well as help educate those seeking or holding office about issues of importance to lawyers. And as always, we encourage our members to reach out to their lawmakers early and often by using the Advocacy Network, an online system that makes sending a message or phone call to your legislator as easy as a few clicks of a mouse.

Over the next few weeks, candidates all over the state will be asking to earn your vote. With so few candidates running for office having a background in law, it is important to help educate them not only on the profession but also on other issues that are important to you or your clients. Our members are and will always be the best advocates for the profession and the vital issues you face every day as lawyers.

We are grateful for everything our members have contributed to our past legislative successes and look forward to working together on many more in the upcoming legislative session. **WL**



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