



LEAGUE OF WOMEN VOTERS® OF WISCONSIN

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January 13, 2015

To: Joint Legislative Audit Committee
Re: Audit Report 14-14: Government Accountability Board

One of the best innovations in Wisconsin government was the creation of the nonpartisan Government Accountability Board. Launched in 2008, it was formed by a virtually unanimous, bipartisan vote in the legislature. All Senators voted in favor, as did 97 of 99 Assembly Representatives. Every legislator currently serving who was in the Legislature in 2007 supported SB 1 in the January 2007 Special Session.

The GAB was crafted in response to the caucus scandal which sent legislative leaders from both political parties to jail for campaigning on the taxpayers' dime. The new Board replaced separate ethics and election boards, which were populated with political appointees. The new Board was given the ability and the sum-sufficient funding to enforce ethics laws, and it was the first nonpartisan board nationally to oversee elections. The League of Women Voters of Wisconsin has worked with GAB staff and testified before the Board many times, mostly with regard to election administration.

The GAB is a big improvement over the old Elections Board, which was often deadlocked as its members sought to represent the partisan interests that appointed them. If you like the way Congress operated in the past session, you would like the old Elections Board.

In contrast, the GAB has been hailed nationally in 2013 as "America's Top Model."ⁱ A 2011 book about elections systems in five Midwestern states noted that the Wisconsin GAB "achieves something that up until now has been a rarity in the United States: election administration that is independent of partisan politics."ⁱⁱ

The GAB's six members are former judges. They have been nonpartisan elected officials who are experienced in making difficult decisions in a fair and thoughtful manner. The judges are nominated and confirmed through a process designed to minimize partisan influence.

A recent audit of the GAB by the Legislative Audit Bureau identified some areas where the agency needs to do a better job, as any audit should do. The audit revealed the GAB to be an effective agency which has been limited by an oversized workload and a barely sufficient level of staffing.

With almost 2,000 municipal and county clerks administering elections in Wisconsin, we need a strong state agency to ensure that every citizen has the same opportunity to vote, whether one lives in a big city or a small village. The GAB has lived up to that charge through tumultuous political times and many changes in election law and polling place procedures.

We have found GAB board members and staff very willing to listen to our concerns, and their response is always timely and clear. They don't agree with us on everything, but that is to be expected from an independent agency.

Let us not forget why the GAB was formed. Its mission is to "ensure accountability in government by enforcing ethics and lobbying laws, and to enhance representative democracy by ensuring the integrity of the electoral process." Indeed the GAB is living up to that mission and to the vision of its founders, many of whom continue to serve in our State Legislature today.

ⁱ *America's Top Model: The Wisconsin Government Accountability Board (2013)*, Daniel P. Tokaji, Professor of Constitutional Law, The Ohio State University, Moritz College of Law, <http://www.law.uci.edu/lawreview/vol3/no3/tokaji.pdf>

ⁱⁱ *From Registration to Recounts Revisited: Developments in the Election Ecosystems of Five Midwestern States (2011)*, Steven F. Huefner et al. <http://moritzlaw.osu.edu/electionlaw/projects/registration-to-recounts/2011edition.pdf>