

ELECTIONS

Bipartisan group of Wisconsin lawmakers join pro-democracy effort



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MADISON – Hailing from one of the few battleground states that will decide the Nov. 5 election, a bipartisan group of current and former Wisconsin elected officials is joining a national effort to preserve free and fair elections by encouraging voter participation.

Republican former U.S. Rep. Reid Ribble and Democratic U.S. Rep. Mark Pocan are spearheading the launch of the state's chapter of democracyFIRST, a Washington-based organization with coalitions in Arizona, Michigan and Pennsylvania that seeks to "restore the political consensus for the central pro-democracy principles underpinning our electoral process."

The group aims to do so by asking candidates and elected officials to publicly pledge to:

- Protect the right to vote for eligible citizens.

- Denounce political violence against election workers and political opponents.

- Stop the spread of election disinformation.

- Accept the election outcome, certify the result when all the votes are counted, and support the peaceful transfer of power.

"I think what what we're all trying to accomplish here is to get elected officials and candidates to agree to some bare democratic principles, and voters get to decide," Ribble told the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel. "We don't want illegal votes going on, but we want everybody to participate, and my concern is, if you keep telling people their vote doesn't count because it's been stolen, why in the world should you vote?"

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The more people who legally vote, Pocan said, the more certain the results of an election will be.

The coalition aims to promote the idea "that we all have a common truth, which is, whoever wins the election is the winner of the election," Pocan said.

"You don't tear down institutions in order to make other points," he continued. "At some point, you need certain rules and institutions in society to function. And our elections have been fairly run, especially in places like Wisconsin. We have every reason to have confidence, and I think the more people who say that in a bipartisan way, the more confidence it will give people to come out and vote in November."

The Wisconsin coalition includes a number of former and current elected officials.

Republican members include former U.S. Rep. Tom Petri, former state Rep. Mark Honadel, former state Sen. Kathy Bernier, former state Sen. Luther Olsen and former state Sen. Dave Zien. No current Republican officer holders have signed onto the effort.

Democratic members include Assembly Minority Leader Greta Neubauer, state Rep. Jodi Emerson, state Rep. Francesca Hong, state Sen. LaTonya Johnson and state Rep. Lisa Subeck.

Wisconsin was central to Republican former President Donald Trump's 2020 effort to stay in power through an unsuccessful plan to have then-Vice President Mike Pence accept slates of false GOP electors and refuse to certify the election for Democratic President Joe Biden.

Trump has continued to falsely claim he defeated Biden in 2020. In an interview with the Journal Sentinel in May, the former president wouldn't commit to accepting the 2024 results in Wisconsin if he loses.

The effects of Trump's falsehoods about the 2020 election have been lasting, with just 19% of Republican voters reporting feeling "very confident" in the election result, according to a January survey of registered voters by the Marquette University Law School poll.

Recounts, court rulings, state audits and a study by a prominent conservative group have confirmed Biden won Wisconsin in 2020 by nearly 21,000 votes.

In recent visits to Wisconsin, Trump has also mentioned ballot "dumps" during the 2020 election — a misleading reference to a Milwaukee practice of reporting the results of all absentee ballots in a single update that often takes place later at night because election workers wait until the counting is complete to report results. Trump has falsely claimed this practice amounts to fraud.

In March, the Republican-led state Senate adjourned for the year without approving a bipartisan bill that would have allowed election clerks to start processing absentee ballots the day before Election Day.

Under current law, Wisconsin election workers may not count absentee ballots until Election Day. In Milwaukee, that means processing at times more than a hundred thousand ballots while also administering the polls. The absentee ballots in Milwaukee and several other Wisconsin cities are counted at a central facility and the ballots' results are posted all at once. During large elections, like the presidential in 2020, results are often not ready until late at night or early morning.

Approving that proposal would have helped address some voters' distrust, Ribble said.

"That's a pretty simple thing to ask, but they don't seem to be willing to do it."

Several other bipartisan groups with similar missions have emerged in the aftermath of the 2020 election, including Keep Our Republic and the Democracy Defense Project.

More: Voter education group works to pierce distrust in elections in Wisconsin, one meeting at a time

Despite the prevalence of conspiracy theories and distrust in election administration, both Pocan and Ribble are optimistic and maintain faith in the system.

"I think the system has always worked," Ribble said. "I think the system worked in 2020. I think it works exactly as it was intended by our founders, and I think this idea that we've got 50 states with their own methods is the one thing that really protects the voters in the country in national elections, because you'd have to create 50 different conspiracy theories to (scam) it."

"I just believe in the people," Pocan said. "I trust people. I don't necessarily trust some of the political organizations that may be trying to manipulate the process, but I ultimately trust people that they'll get it right."

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