

Want to run for state Legislature? Here are 5 things to consider

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FULL TEXT

This story was produced as part of the NEW (Northeast Wisconsin) News Lab , a consortium of six news outlets covering northeastern Wisconsin.

New legislative maps, paired with a wave of state lawmakers leaving their posts, mean November's general election ballot could feature plenty of new faces vying for seats in the Legislature.

Are you considering running for a seat in the Assembly or state Senate (or another local office)? Here are some things to know before launching your campaign.

Eligibility

Different public offices in Wisconsin have different conditions for candidate age, residency and other special requirements, according to the Wisconsin Elections Commission, but there are some minimum eligibility requirements.

Those include being a U.S. citizen, at least 18 years old (though some offices require you to be older) and meeting residency requirements.

For example, people considering running for the Assembly or state Senate must be a Wisconsin resident for one year—a constitutional requirement lacking clear definition—and be a qualified elector of the district they would represent on the day they would be sworn into office.

Qualified electors, or voters, are U.S. citizens, 18 and older, who have resided in the election district for at least 28 consecutive days before any election, according to state law.

To be eligible to run for office in Wisconsin, you cannot have been convicted of a felony (unless you've been pardoned of the conviction).

Wisconsin residents interested in running for state-level offices can learn more about eligibility requirements on WEC's website. Residents interested in running for county or municipal offices can get additional information from their county or municipal clerks.

Nomination papers

Except in some communities that hold caucuses and in some school board elections, "all candidates seeking elected office in Wisconsin must submit nomination papers as part of the ballot access process," according to the Elections Commission.

A key part of the process is gathering enough signatures from qualified electors residing in the district a candidate wants to represent. The number of signatures needed to appear on the ballot varies by office. For candidates running for state representative, they must submit at least 200 (but not more than 400) valid signatures to gain access to the ballot. Candidates running for state Senate must submit at least 400 (but not more than 800) valid signatures.

The validity of signatures can be challenged. If a review shows the minimum number of valid signatures is not met, a candidate won't be listed on the ballot. In 2011, GOP Rep. John Nygren was barred from the Republican primary in a recall challenge of Democratic state Sen. Dave Hansen after 26 of the signatures he submitted were deemed invalid. That left him two short of the 400 needed to qualify for the ballot.

Filing deadlines



For November's election, the window to gather signatures started April 15, and concludes on June 1. Candidates must file nomination papers with the Elections Commission by 5 p.m. June 3, according to a ballot access checklist created by the commission.

Candidates running for legislative seats must also register a campaign committee with the Wisconsin Ethics Commission and submit a completed declaration of candidacy with the Elections Commission by 5 p.m. June 3. Candidates have until 4:30 p.m. June 6 to submit a completed statement of economic interests form with the Ethics Commission.

Economic interest statements

Statements of economic interests are filed by state officials and candidates "for public inspection at the time they enter the public arena," according to the Ethics Commission. "The purpose of the statement is to disclose the official's or candidate's financial relationships."

A statement identifies a public official or candidate's employer, investments, real estate, commercial clients and creditors. They also include the previous information for a public official or candidate's immediate family.

Candidates file the economic interests forms online, where they are available for public review.

In 2020, a watchdog group filed a complaint with the Ethics Commission against Assembly Speaker Robin Vos, citing the financial disclosure forms. The complaint alleged Vos excluded multiple business holdings from his disclosure forms, something the speaker's office said was a "clerical error."

Campaign finance

Candidates running for the Legislature must also file regular campaign finance reports.

For example, candidates will have to file reports about the money raised and spent by their campaigns seven times between now and January 2025. There are limits to how much candidates can raise from individuals, other candidate committees and some outside groups.

Candidates for state Senate can accept a maximum of \$2,000 from each individual, other campaign and political action committee. Assembly candidates can accept up to \$1,000 from each of the same groups.

Political parties and legislative campaign committees —third-party groups that work to get candidates of a certain party elected —can accept unlimited amounts of money. In turn, they can contribute unlimited amounts of money to candidates, creating a sort of workaround to contribution limits that empower the parties to control the candidate selection process. Republicans adopted those rules in 2015.

More information about what needs to be reported by campaigns and when reports need to be filed is available in this Ethics Commission campaign finance checklist.

This story is part of the NEW (Northeast Wisconsin) News Lab's fifth series, covering issues important to voters in the region. The lab is a local news collaboration in northeastern Wisconsin made up of six news organizations: the Green Bay Press-Gazette, Appleton Post-Crescent, FoxValley365, The Press Times, Wisconsin Public Radio and Wisconsin Watch. The University of Wisconsin-Green Bay's Journalism Department is an educational partner. Microsoft is providing financial support to the Greater Green Bay Community Foundation and Community Foundation for the Fox Valley Region to fund the initiative. The mission of the lab is to "collaborate to identify and fill information gaps to help residents explore ways to improve their communities and lives —and strengthen democracy."

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