

Increasingly Absentee

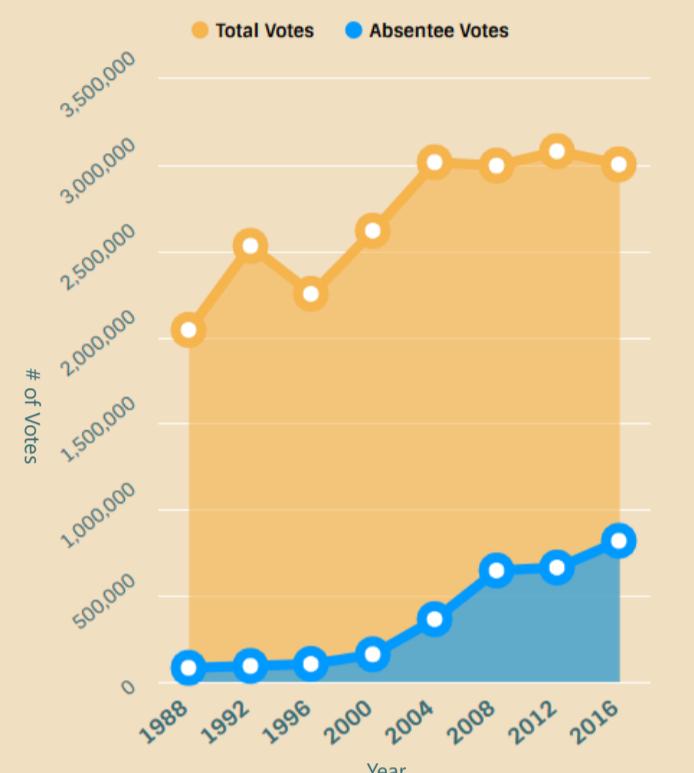
How has the change in Wisconsin voting options affected election participation?

In the State of Wisconsin, election officials take pride in the amount of access citizens have to the voting process. Much of that is due to the fact that Wisconsin has the most decentralized voting system in the country, with 1,850 local municipal clerks in charge of elections. Since 1976, Wisconsin has allowed registering at the polls on election day and since 2000, has allowed absentee voting without needing a specific reason. Because of this, and easier requests online, the number of voters choosing to not come to the polls has increased in the last 20 years.



Rising Absentee Numbers

Wisconsin general election absentee votes compared to total votes from 1988 - 2016

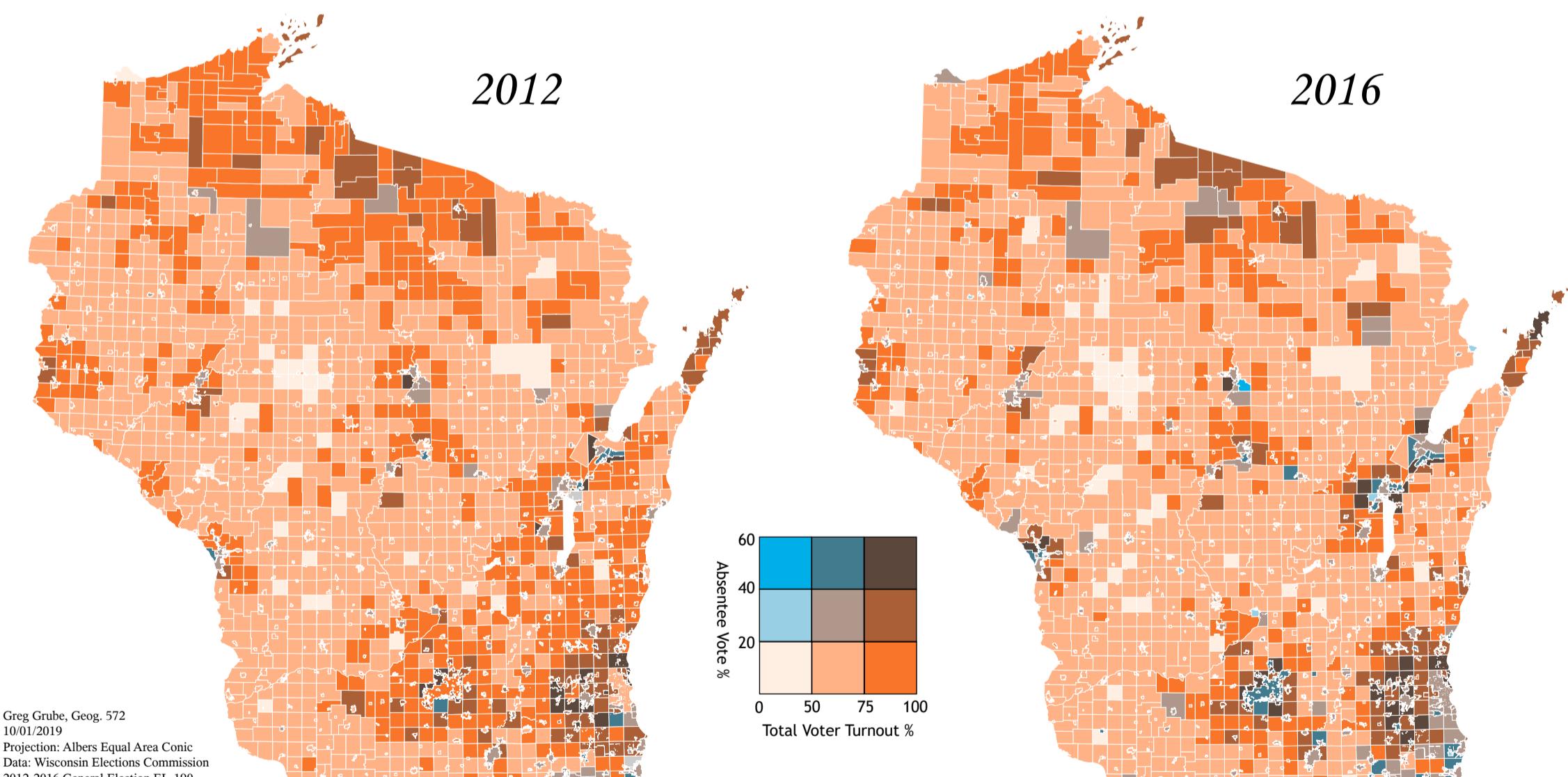


Data: Wisconsin Elections Commission
1988-2016 General Election Voter and Absentee

While absentee balloting is still done by putting a ballot in an envelope that opened and counted on election day, increasingly voters have the option of completing this process at the local clerk's office instead of through the mail (commonly referred to as early voting). These increased options make voting more convenient for voters, but do these changes make a difference when it comes to total turnout?

Since 2000, absentees have become a greater proportion each election, even as turnout rates have fluctuated up and down. However, because of the decentralized nature of elections in the state, we can examine these trends in both rural and urban settings to see if those trends hold true everywhere. How does absentee balloting compare to turnout as we look at different areas of the state? Did those trends change between elections?

Voting Results By Wisconsin Municipality



Trends:

- ① More populated suburban areas largely have the highest combination of absentee numbers and turnout percentage (dark brown)
- ② Rural Areas have lower absentee numbers overall, but some places still have high turnout (dark orange)
- ③ Rural Areas in Door and Vilas counties also have high absentee and turnout rates, perhaps due to seasonal residences
- ④ Comparing between 2012 and 2016, we see more blue colors overall, meaning absentees remained high despite lower turnout

Ultimately, despite increasing popularity, high absentee balloting overall does not seem to be correlated with higher turnout.