

2022 WCA Survey Identifies Trends in Membership Changes

It is important for the Wisconsin Counties Association to know who our members are so we can best meet your needs. To help with that, every two years, the WCA staff surveys county supervisors to get a picture of the group as a whole.

► Response rate

The 2022 survey was sent to 1,592 county supervisors in the state. Nearly 1,200 (74.7%) responded. This is a significant increase over the 2018 survey (68.8%), and far above the average 30% to 40% rate typical for a similar survey.

This year's survey was particularly important for two reasons. First, in 2020, the WCA was not able to complete the survey because many county organizations were working remotely and the WCA could not maintain the anonymity of the survey. Second, the turnover rate for county supervisors was higher in 2022 than in any year for the past decade. Over 30% of our county supervisors are new, compared to 21.7% in 2020 and 19.5% in 2018.

With so many new supervisors, it is important to look at the membership to understand who represents Wisconsinites at the county level and how their characteristics are changing.

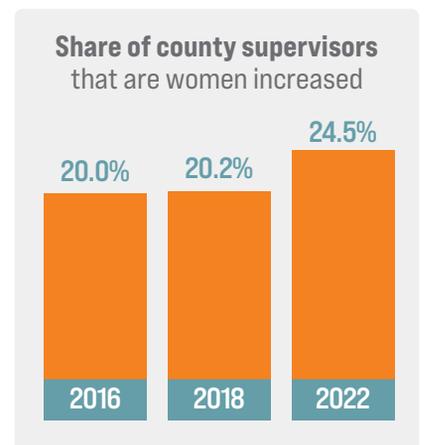
Overall, county supervisors continue to more likely be older, male, and hold a bachelor's degree or higher compared to the general population. Yet, these patterns have been changing over time.

► Gender

In 2022, the share of women serving as county supervisors increased to almost 25%, up from 20% in 2016. More and

more women are running for, and getting elected to countywide office.

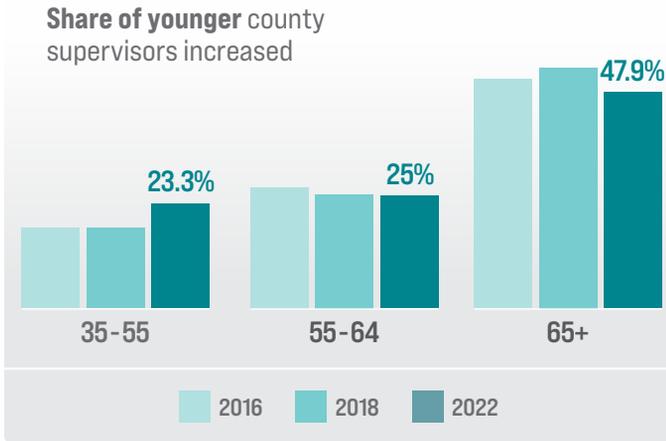
When the scope is narrowed to “newer” supervisors, meaning those who have just been elected or have served for fewer than five years, the share increases to just under 30%. Historically, the majority of county supervisors in Wisconsin has been men, but county government continues to advance towards gender parity.



► Age

The vast majority, about three out of every four county supervisors, are at least 55 years old. Indeed, nearly half (47.9%) are at least 65 years old. But with each election, the average age of elected county officials has been getting younger. Of course, as elected officials serve multiple terms, they age into older demographic groups. The longest serving county officials typically are the oldest. However, an examination of the newest county supervisors indicates that younger people are getting elected to office. This year, just 25.4% of new county supervisors were at least 65 years old while 42% were between 35 and 54 years old.

Historically, most elected county officials have been older than the average Wisconsinite. While nearly



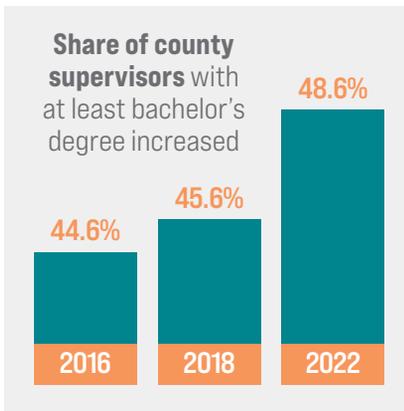
half of county supervisors are aged 65 or older (47.9%), that age group makes up just 17.9% of the state population. This pattern holds true for other elected office holders as well. In Wisconsin, the average age of a state senator is 56 and the average age of a member of the State Assembly is 51. County officials are, on average, older than our representatives in Madison.

As Wisconsinites elect younger county officials, representation in local government becomes more and more diverse. County officials in different age cohorts each bring varying levels of experience and knowledge to local government.

► **Education**

County supervisors typically have more formal education than the general population of the state. According to 2021 U.S. Census figures, around 31% of Wisconsinites held a bachelor’s degree or higher, yet nearly half (48.6%) of county supervisors attained that level of education.

More significantly, the share of county supervisors who hold college degrees



has been increasing each year in which the survey has been conducted. The increase signifies that more and more newly elected county supervisors

hold college degrees. Indeed, 53% of the cohort elected in 2022 had at least a bachelor’s degree.

► **Employment situation**

The survey asked county supervisors to identify as “self-employed,” “retired,” or “employed outside the home.” It should come as no surprise that, considering the age of most supervisors, a plurality — 47% this year — indicated they were retired. However, this share decreased from 53% in 2018. The share of county supervisors who are self-employed also dropped to 22% from 25% in 2018. (Note that percentages may total to more than 100% since some supervisors who are retired are also still self-employed or work outside the home.)

The employment sector that has shown the most growth is the share of county supervisors employed outside the home, which is the category that includes “typical employment.” This share increased to 35% this year, up from 26.8% in 2018. Employment diversity is important because work experience and values gained from various industries and forms of employment can benefit our local communities.

Differing opinions and values, whether those come from gender, age, education or work history, make county government stronger. Leadership in local government is more important than ever considering some issues facing the state, including a once-in-a-generation workforce shortage, transportation funding shortfalls, opioid and addiction challenges, and the overall funding of county services. ■

Forward Analytics is a Wisconsin-based research organization that provides state and local policymakers with nonpartisan analysis of issues affecting the state.