

Wisconsin At A Glance



County Board Sizes, April 2006

Each of Wisconsin's 72 counties is governed by an elected board of supervisors. The county board is responsible for the administration of justice and social services programs and for establishing county policies in the areas of planning and zoning, economic and industrial development, solid waste management, environmental protection and land use, transportation, and recreation. Most counties have part-time boards with relatively low pay, while Milwaukee County has full-time supervisors with higher salaries. Supervisors are elected from single-member districts in the spring nonpartisan elections for two-year terms, except for Milwaukee County's supervisors, who serve four-year terms.

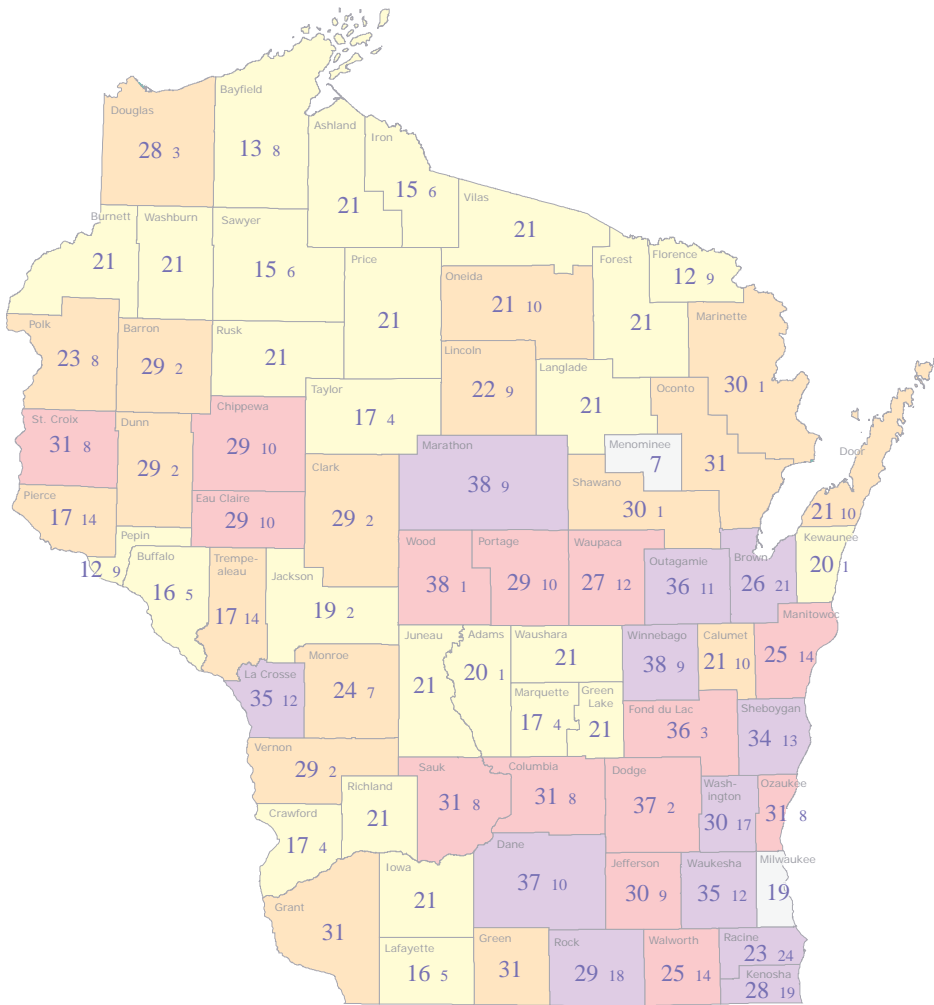
County boards in Wisconsin are generally large compared to those in other states. Ranging in size from 7 to 38 seats, they include seven of the ten largest boards in the nation. By contrast, Iowa law restricts board size to either three or five members. Larger boards, on which each supervisor represents a smaller number of citizens, reflect a Wisconsin tradition of keeping local government "close to the people." (This same tradition accounts for the relatively large number of cities, villages, towns, and other local governmental units in Wisconsin, most of which serve small populations.) Indeed, under Wisconsin law, many counties could have even larger boards if they so chose (the maximum permitted sizes are shown on the map).

A county may change the size of its board every ten years when it redistricts following the federal census. In addition, recent legislation has made board reductions (but not increases) possible at other times. 2003 Wisconsin Act 32 permitted Milwaukee County to reduce the size of its board one time between the 2001 and 2011 rounds of redistricting. (Milwaukee used this permission to drop six seats from its 25-seat board.) More generally, 2005 Wisconsin Act 100 permits counties other than Milwaukee and Menominee to reduce the size of their boards one time between any two rounds of the regular, ten-year redistricting cycle. The reduction may be made by the county board by resolution, or by the county's electors through a petition and referendum procedure. For a referendum to be held, a petition must be signed by a number of electors equal to 25 percent of the total vote cast for the office of county supervisor at the most recent spring election. During the period between the filing of a petition and a referendum, the county board may not reduce its size on its own.

Since January 2006, when Act 100 took effect, the Waukesha County board adopted a resolution to reduce its size from 35 to 25 seats, and the Green Lake County board adopted a resolution to reduce its size from 21 to 19 seats, beginning with the 2008 elections; the Dane County board considered, but voted against, a resolution to reduce its size, in March 2006; an elector-initiated referendum to downsize the Price County board was held, but defeated, in April 2006; and an elector-initiated referendum to downsize the Wood County board was scheduled to be held in November 2006. Proponents of smaller boards argue that they promote legislative efficiency and encourage more contested elections, while supporters of larger boards assert that they better represent diverse constituencies and that it is more difficult for special interests to influence a larger number of supervisors.

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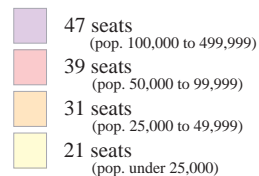
WAAG-06-1/ May 2006



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The **large number** in each county shows how many seats are on the county board.

The **color** in each county shows the maximum number of seats the county board is permitted to have under Wisconsin law. The maximums are based on a county's population at the most recent ten-year federal census. The maximums do not apply in Milwaukee and Menominee counties. The Milwaukee County board is not subject to a size limit. The Menominee County board is composed of the same members as the Menominee town board (the county and the town are coterminous).



A **small number** in a county shows the difference, if any, between the number of seats on the county board and the maximum permitted number.

