



WHAT WISCONSIN WANTS

THE VIEWS OF COLLEGE-EDUCATED WOMEN IN
THE MILWAUKEE SUBURBS

NOVEMBER 2023



INSTITUTE FOR
REFORMING GOVERNMENT



STATE POLICY
NETWORK
State Voices
collaborative

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OUR HOME, IN THE SPOTLIGHT

As we round out 2023 and head into a presidential election year, many eyes will be on Wisconsin, one of only a handful of states considered to be a true toss-up for the 2024 presidential contest. While the broader nation only turns its attention to our state sporadically, IRG continuously seeks to understand the people of Wisconsin and their needs.

Our 2023 report, [What Wisconsin Wants](#), details our travels through the state to meet with community members, truly hear their concerns, and amplify their voices in Madison.

Our listening and learning never ends, which is why in the summer of 2023, IRG undertook an initiative to understand a key audience changing the political profile of Wisconsin: college-educated women in the Milwaukee suburbs. This research is described in this publication.

The findings show that change is happening, which to us is evidence of unfulfilled needs and an opportunity to better serve the people of the Badger State. We hope this report helps inform those in leadership positions to better serve the people of Wisconsin.



CJ Szafir

CJ Szafir
CEO

WHAT WE DID

State Policy Network (SPN) assisted the Institute for Reforming Government (IRG) in holding three small discussion focus groups designed to understand how previously right-leaning, college-educated women in the Milwaukee suburbs feel about politics and key issues affecting their lives.

These discussions were held in person on July 18 and 19, 2023, and were led by a professionally trained moderator. Participants lived in Waukesha, Ozaukee or Washington counties and had previously supported Republican candidates but moved away from them in more recent years. The groups lasted approximately 90 minutes and covered a broad range of topics.

We followed the small group discussions with an online survey of 315 college-educated women in suburban Milwaukee (of all political leanings). The quantitative survey covered all of Waukesha, Ozaukee and Washington counties as well as certain parts of Milwaukee county (City of Cudahy, City of Franklin, Village of Greendale, City of Greenfield, Village of Hales Corners, Oak Creek, City of St. Francis, City of South Milwaukee, City of Wauwatosa and City of West Allis) chosen for their voting history and change over the last 10 years. The survey was fielded from August 17–25, 2023.

Methodological note: Netted figures in this report may not match the [topline report](#) due to rounding.



This report was authored by **Erin Norman**, Senior Messaging Strategist at State Policy Network.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Since 2000, four presidential elections in Wisconsin have been decided by less than one percentage point. And in the last two elections, the margins of victory for Donald Trump in 2016 and Joe Biden in 2020 were both less than 23,000 votes. In this current era, Wisconsin has the distinction of being a true presidential swing state where statewide contests are consistently close.

While the statewide vote totals would seem to suggest two voting blocs locked in something like trench warfare, the reality is that significant realignments are occurring beneath the surface. And the Milwaukee suburbs are where the realignment portends profound challenges to Republicans and new opportunities for Democrats. Parts of the state that were once solidly Republican are increasingly a battleground.

An influential group in these suburban communities is college-educated women, who—despite seeing themselves as moderates and preferring conservative economic policy—are increasingly voting for Democratic candidates whom they see as doing a better job representing their overall needs and visions for their communities.

Like most Americans, the suburban women we talked to for this report have more complicated views on politics and policy than most media narratives portray. Some key findings from the research include the following:

1. College-educated women in suburban Milwaukee are politically moderate and care most about solving problems. They want elected officials to find compromises on controversial issues.
2. Trust in both major political parties is low but, when forced to choose, these women believe Democrats will do a better job in office than Republicans.
3. Deeper conversations reveal this group has reservations about how Democrats approach many issues—often by spending more money without critical thinking or a problem-solving mentality—but Wisconsin Republicans are not countering with solutions-oriented ideas. Mental health, healthcare, education, and childcare are issues on which there is a dearth of proposed solutions.
4. Healthcare and abortion are top-of-mind issues among this group, the latter more so here than in other parts of the country, even among self-identified liberals. Wisconsin's near total ban on abortion after the 2022 Dobbs decision and the prominence of the issue in the 2023 state Supreme Court elections, as well as continuing legal battles¹, likely contribute to the sharp focus on this issue. These women acknowledge it will be a key consideration for them in the 2024 presidential election and the 2026 Wisconsin gubernatorial election. Budget and fiscal concerns are also important, but they are currently overshadowed by concerns about abortion policy.
5. There are significant differences in attitudes among women in suburban areas of Milwaukee County and the WOW (Waukesha, Ozaukee, and Washington) counties, which are driven in large part by differences in political affiliation and self-identification.

1. "Abortions Resume in Wisconsin after 15 Months of Legal Uncertainty," NPR.org, Sept. 21, 2023, <https://www.npr.org/sections/health-shots/2023/09/21/1200610927/abortions-resume-in-wisconsin-after-15-months-of-legal-uncertainty>.

CHANGE IN THE WOW COUNTIES

“WOW counties” is a term used to summarize three counties circling the city of Milwaukee: Waukesha, Ozaukee, and Washington. The WOW counties are not carbon copies of one another, but generally they are suburban, small-town communities with household incomes, home values, and educational attainment above statewide and national averages.

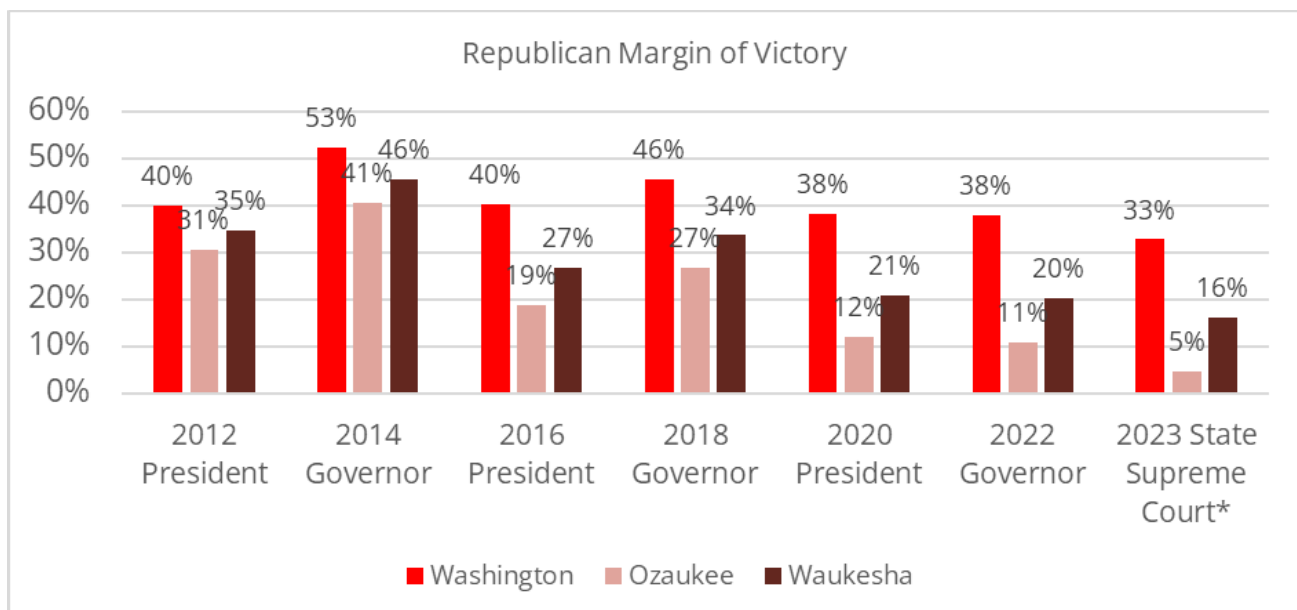
WOW counties also used to anchor Republican statewide victories in Wisconsin with large margins of victory fueled by some of the highest voter turnout in the country. Just a decade ago, Republican vote totals in the WOW counties could largely offset the Democratic voting totals from Milwaukee County. But that math has changed, and Democrats are seeing larger margins in their favor, as Figure 1 illustrates.

Figure 1

Election	WOW GOP Votes	Milwaukee Dem Votes	Margin
2010 Governor	208,709	209,932	D+ 1,223
2012 Governor (Recall)	241,025	250,476	D+ 9,451
2014 Governor	229,966	230,997	D+ 1,031
2018 Governor	229,726	262,124	D+ 32,398
2022 Governor	213,783	246,332	D+ 32,549

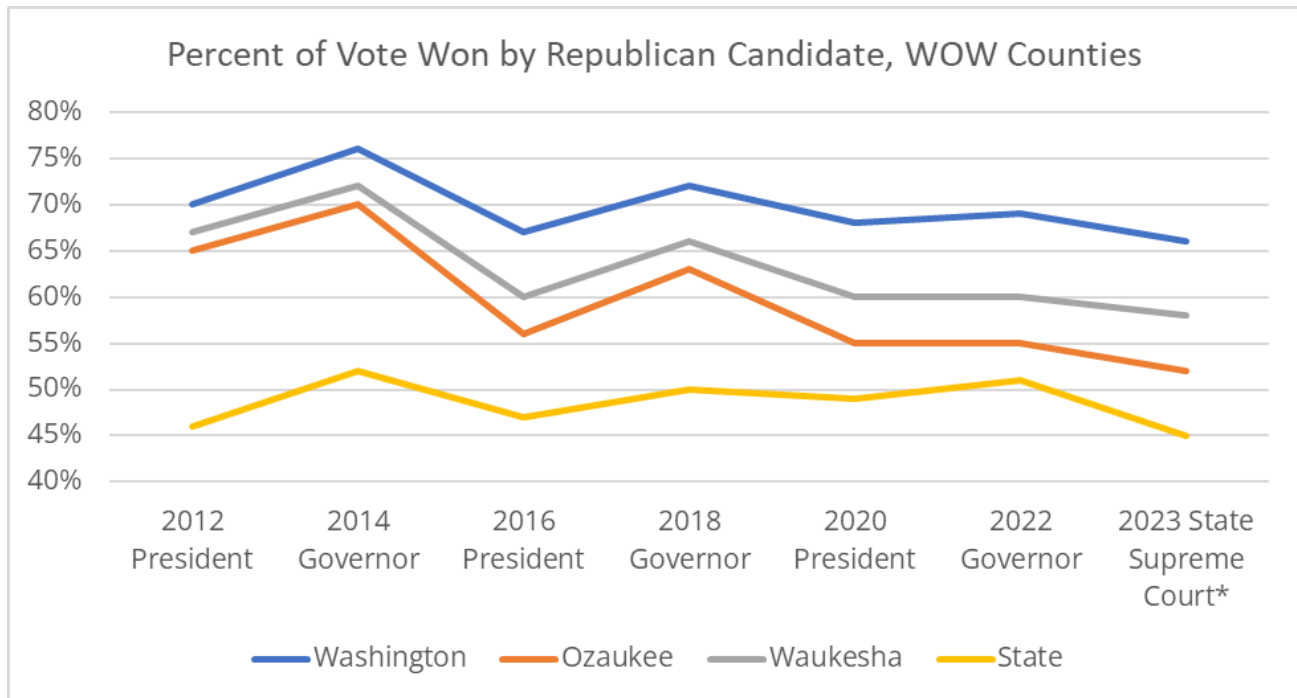
It is in the margins of victory that the trend is further illuminated. Governor Scott Walker’s margin of victory in the WOW counties was 40 or more percentage points in 2014. By the 2022 gubernatorial election, Republican Tim Michels won Ozaukee County by just 11 percentage points, Waukesha County by 20 percentage points, and Washington County by 38 percentage points (Figure 2).

Figure 2



In the last decade, there has been a healthy split between how the WOW counties vote in presidential elections and statewide elections, with larger Republican peaks in state races. But in the most recent Wisconsin elections, that state-level Republican advantage has declined, suggesting Wisconsin voters see less difference between political parties and their platforms at the state and national level than they once did (Figure 3).

Figure 3



*Supreme Court elections in Wisconsin are nonpartisan. Party association of candidates decided based on endorsements.

WOMEN IN SUBURBAN MILWAUKEE

General Profile

This research looked at college-educated women in suburban Milwaukee to understand how changes in this group might be driving broader trends seen in the WOW counties. Most of the women interviewed are between 25 and 54 years old (Figure 4), and 67 percent are married or living with a partner. While all of the survey participants have a college degree, one-third have education beyond a bachelor’s degree (Figure 5).

Figure 4

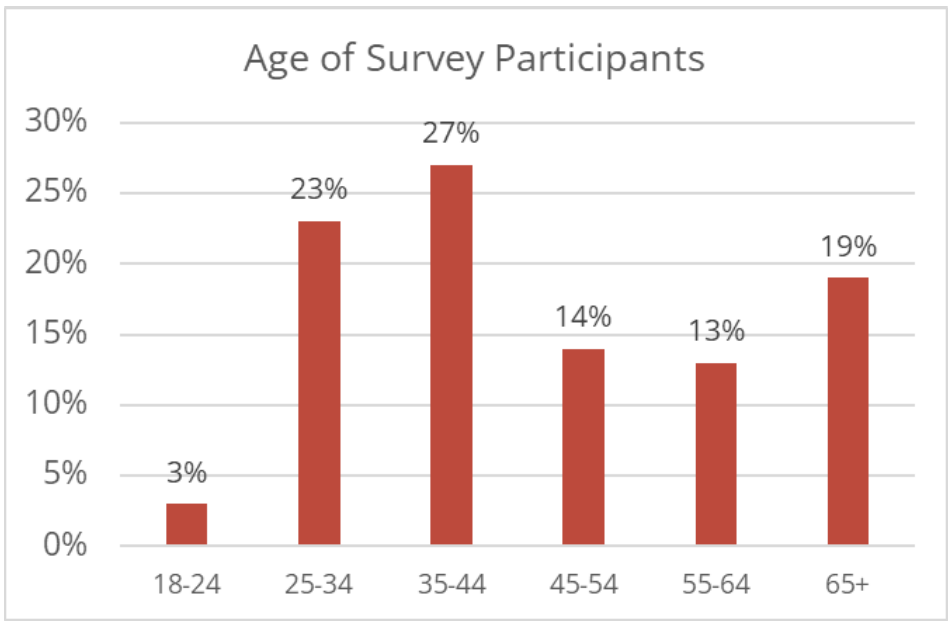
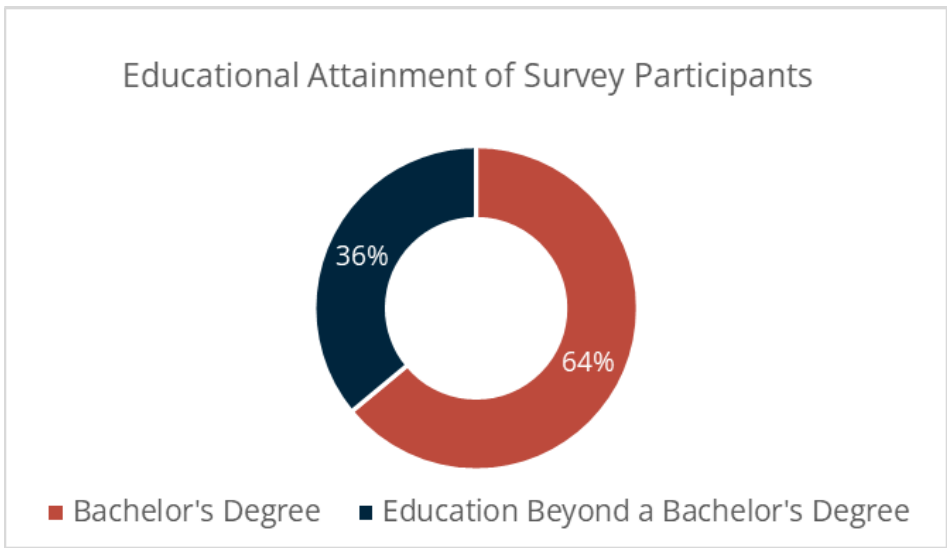
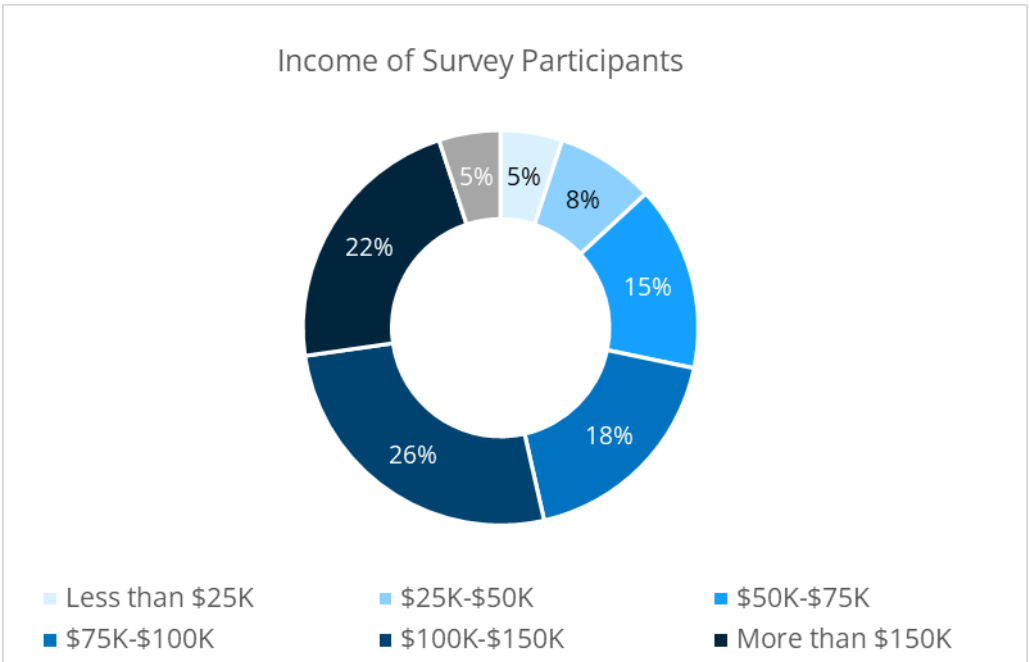


Figure 5



College-educated women in suburban Milwaukee are generally affluent, with nearly half having a household income of over \$100,000 per year and one in five exceeding \$150,000 in annual income (Figure 6).

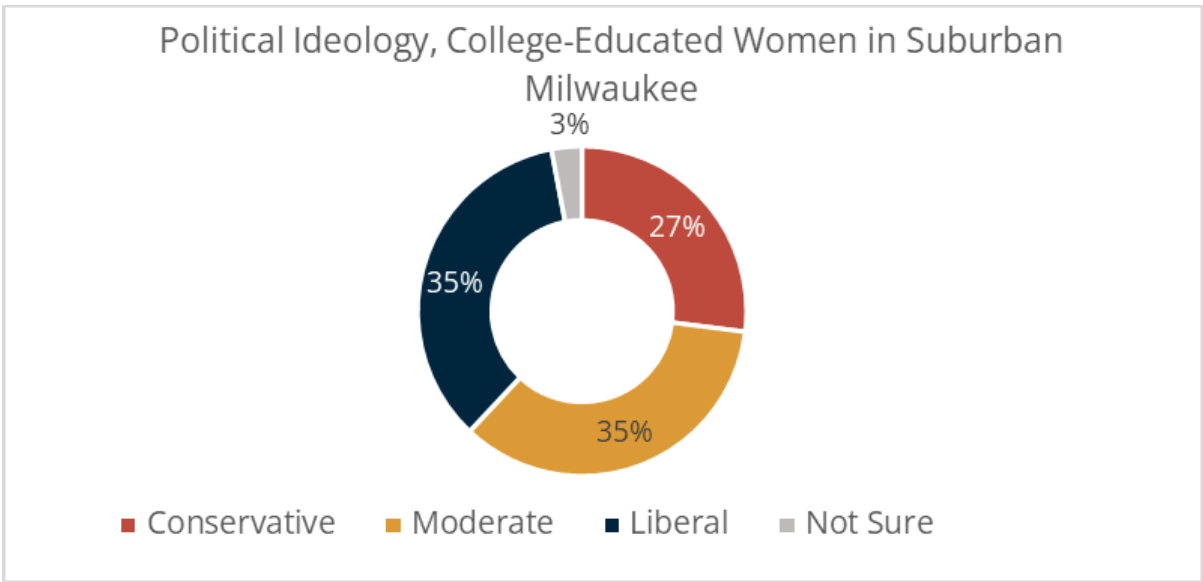
Figure 6



Political Identity

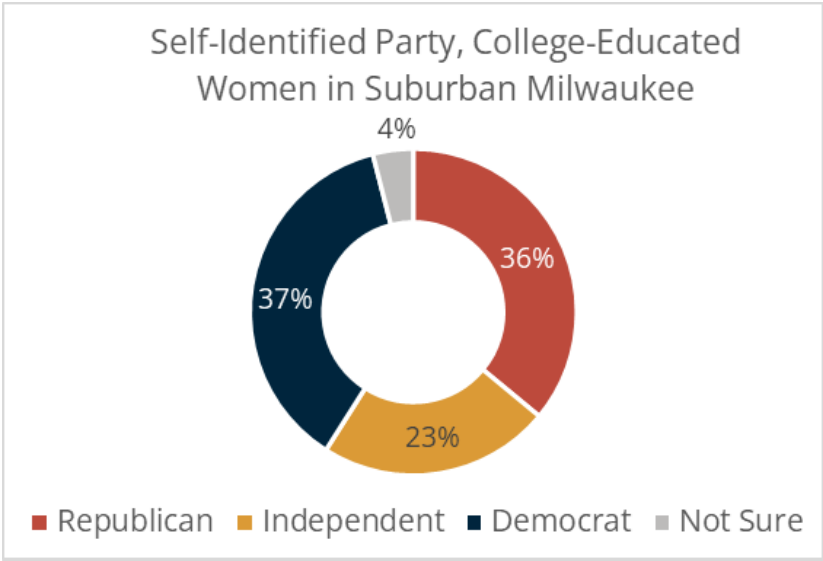
Although well over half of the general population in the WOW counties voted for Republicans in all major recent elections, college-educated women in these suburbs do not see themselves as particularly conservative. In fact, they are more likely to identify as liberal or moderate than conservative (Figure 7).

Figure 7



Despite a liberal ideological lean, these women are about equally as likely to consider themselves Republicans as Democrats. Among this group, political Independents lean liberal and ideological moderates lean Republican—both trends that counter long-standing associations in broader political research. This means suburban Wisconsin women, especially those who identify as Republicans, are largely moderate, regardless of how they self-identify in politics. Focus group data suggest they are also extremely pragmatic about politics (Figure 8).

Figure 8



“I think I said I was an independent, but I was always Republican and now I voted Democrat. But I’ve got like one foot in the door. I think I’d like a moderate Democrat or a moderate Republican.”

- Waukesha Independent

“That was the turning point for me of when I was looking at just not voting all Republican forever. Then it was the issues that became more important.”

- Waukesha Independent

It is important to note that the attitudinal differences observed between suburban Milwaukee County and the WOW counties are likely due to the fact that the areas of Milwaukee County surveyed are significantly more Democratic and liberal than the WOW counties (60 percent compared to 29 percent) (Figure 9).

Figure 9

Ideological and Partisan Advantages Among College-Educated Women		
	Surveyed Areas of Milwaukee County	WOW Counties
Self-Identified Liberal	+33	-3
Self-Identified Democrat	+41	-14

Positive numbers indicate a skew towards Liberals/Democrats and negative numbers a skew towards Conservatives/Republicans.

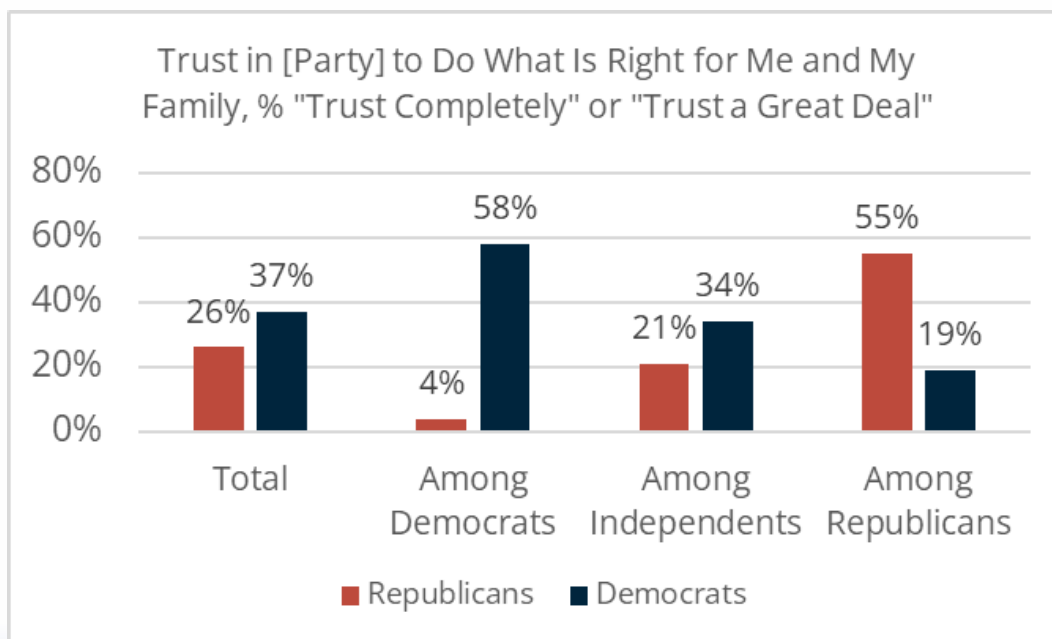
Views of Political Parties

Like most Americans, college-educated women in suburban Milwaukee have little trust in political parties. Just over one in three trust Democrats to do what is right for their families and only one-quarter trust Republicans.

The trust deficit becomes starker when looking at how self-identified partisans feel. Fewer than two-thirds of Republicans and Democrats trust their own party to do what is right.

The survey responses complement data showing the decline in Republican voting over the last decade. While both parties are viewed with skepticism by suburban women, Democrats have an 11-point advantage overall and a 13-point advantage among political Independents. Furthermore, there is more than four times as much cross-party goodwill for Democrats as there is for Republicans—one in five Republicans generally trust Democrats to act in good faith for Wisconsin families but almost no Democrats feel the same about their GOP counterparts (Figure 10).

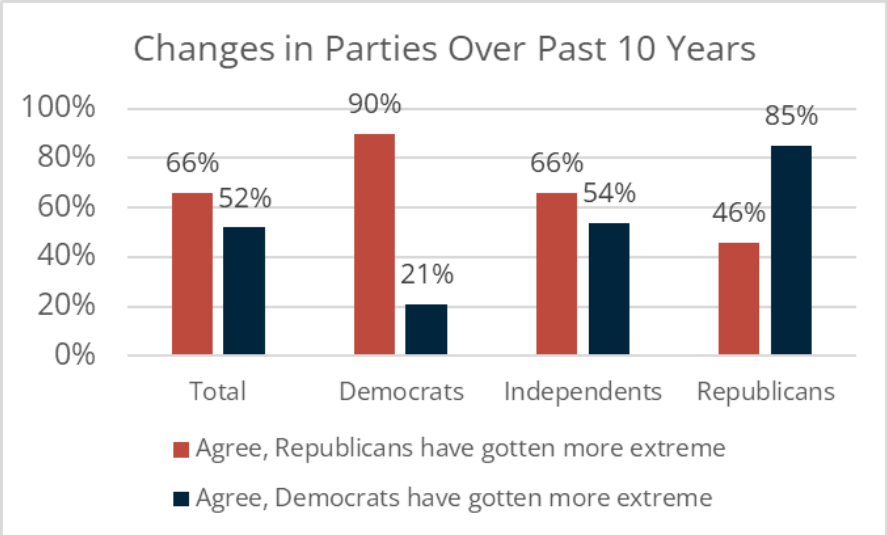
Figure 10



The same patterns emerge regarding changes in the parties over the last 10 years. A majority of college-educated women in the Milwaukee suburbs believe both parties have gotten more extreme over the last 10 years but significantly more see Republicans in the state as more extreme than they used to be. There is a large Democratic advantage on this point among political Independents. Most concerning for Wisconsin Republicans is that nearly half of self-identified Republicans believe the party is more extreme than it was 10 years ago, while just one in five Democrats feel the same way about their own party (Figure 11).

College-educated women in the selected areas of Milwaukee County are more likely to see Republicans as being more extreme than 10 years ago – 74 percent believe this to be the case compared to just 33 percent of this group that see Democrats as being more extreme. However, given that college-educated women in this part Milwaukee County are Democrats by a margin of +41, these numbers are consistent with general partisan patterns.

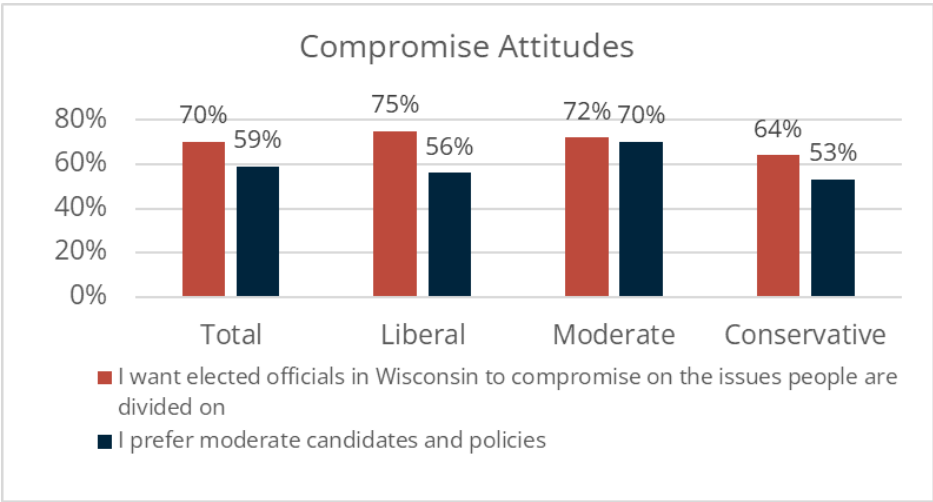
Figure 11



Compromise

Women in suburban Milwaukee are largely looking for politicians who will compromise and solve problems rather than strictly adhere to ideological beliefs. Seven in 10 women want to see state officials find a way to compromise on the most divisive issues. A majority, 59 percent, also say they prefer more moderate policies and candidates, including over half of self-identified conservatives and liberals (Figure 12).

Figure 12

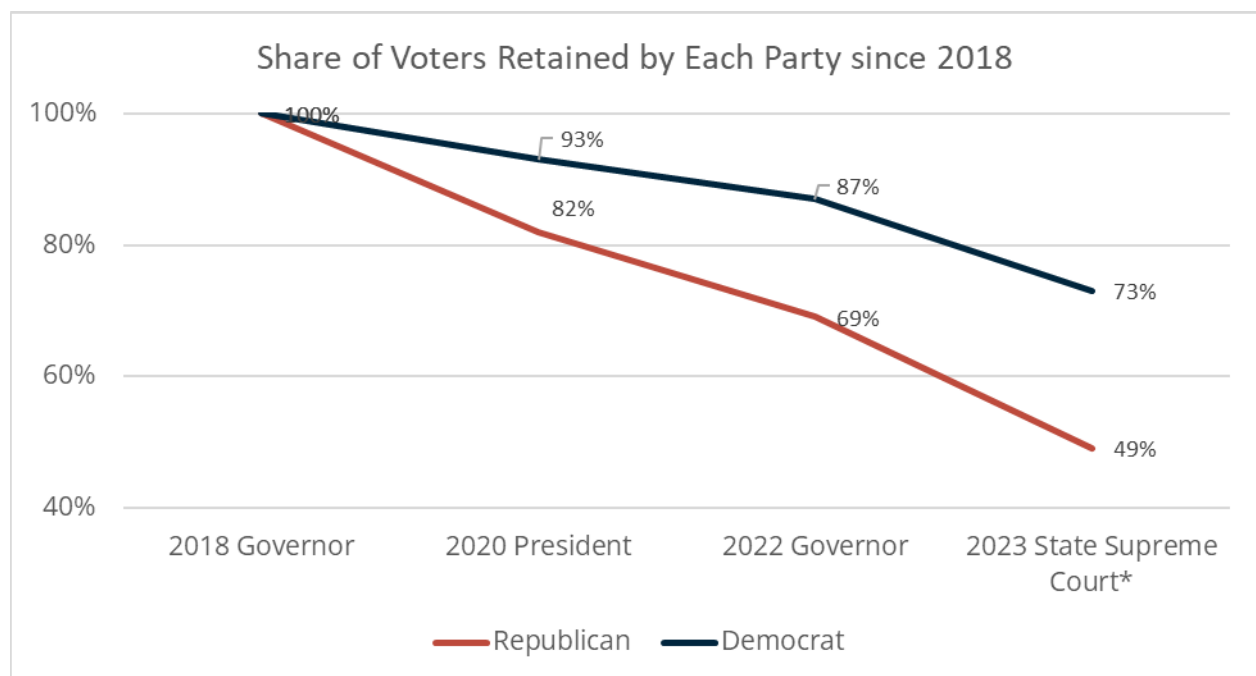


Vote Shifting

The voting patterns of college-educated women in suburban Milwaukee certainly have an impact on the overall trends in the WOW counties over the last decade. In the quantitative survey, participants answered questions about voting behavior in four recent elections. Figure 13 shows the drop-off for both parties from the 2018 gubernatorial contest to this year's state Supreme Court election. The 2018 gubernatorial election serves as a baseline and subsequent data points show the percentage of that voting cohort that stayed with the party in later elections. Some of the drop-off is from survey respondents who did not vote in later elections or did not remember how they voted.

The graph shows that Republicans have had a harder time holding on to suburban, college-educated women than Democrats. Both parties had the sharpest decline from the 2022 election to the 2023 state Supreme Court election. However, among Democrats, nearly all of that drop-off is from women who did not vote or did not remember how they voted, while it only accounts for half of the change among Republicans. While this is an imperfect measure of drop-off, it is clear Democrats are holding on to more of their suburban women voters than Republicans in the Milwaukee area.

Figure 13



*Supreme Court elections in Wisconsin are nonpartisan. Party association of candidates determined by endorsements.

There is directional evidence in the data that the sharp decline among Republicans from the 2020 election to the 2022 gubernatorial contest comes from women who name abortion as a top issue and believe the Republican party in Wisconsin has gotten more extreme over the last 10 years. Abortion is also a higher priority among the Republican base who voted for the liberal candidate in the 2023 Court election. Despite becoming swing voters, these women still place significant importance on fiscal issues and taxes.

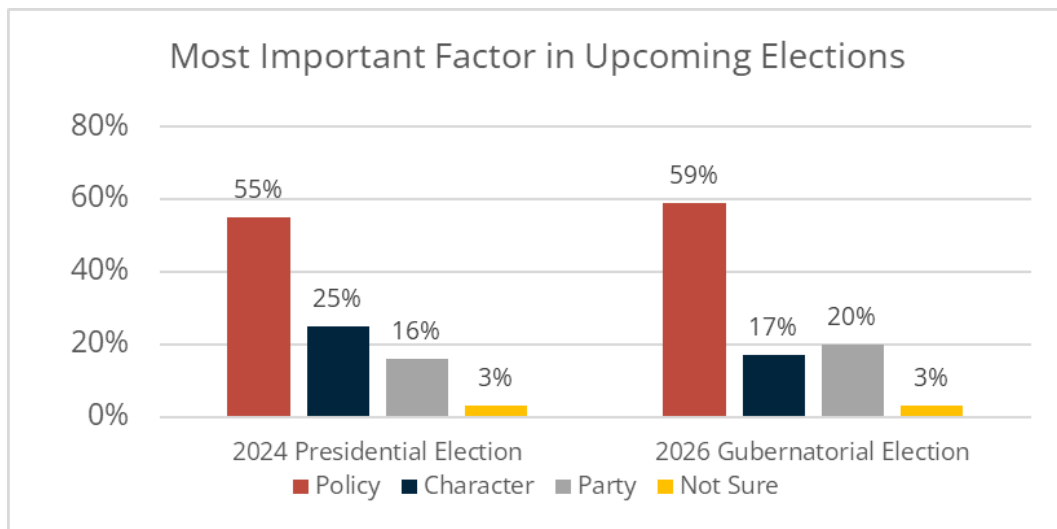
VOTING FACTORS AND ISSUE PREFERENCES

Focus groups and quantitative polling show women in suburban Milwaukee prefer to make their decisions on whom to vote for based on key issues rather than political party. Character is a major factor for one in four women at the presidential level, likely because of the scandals and personalities associated with candidates in the last few election cycles (Figure 14).

"I didn't think I'd have to consider how someone portrays themselves or how they exude themselves because it's just expected politicians are supposed to represent themselves well and represent the United States well."

– Cederburg Democrat

Figure 14



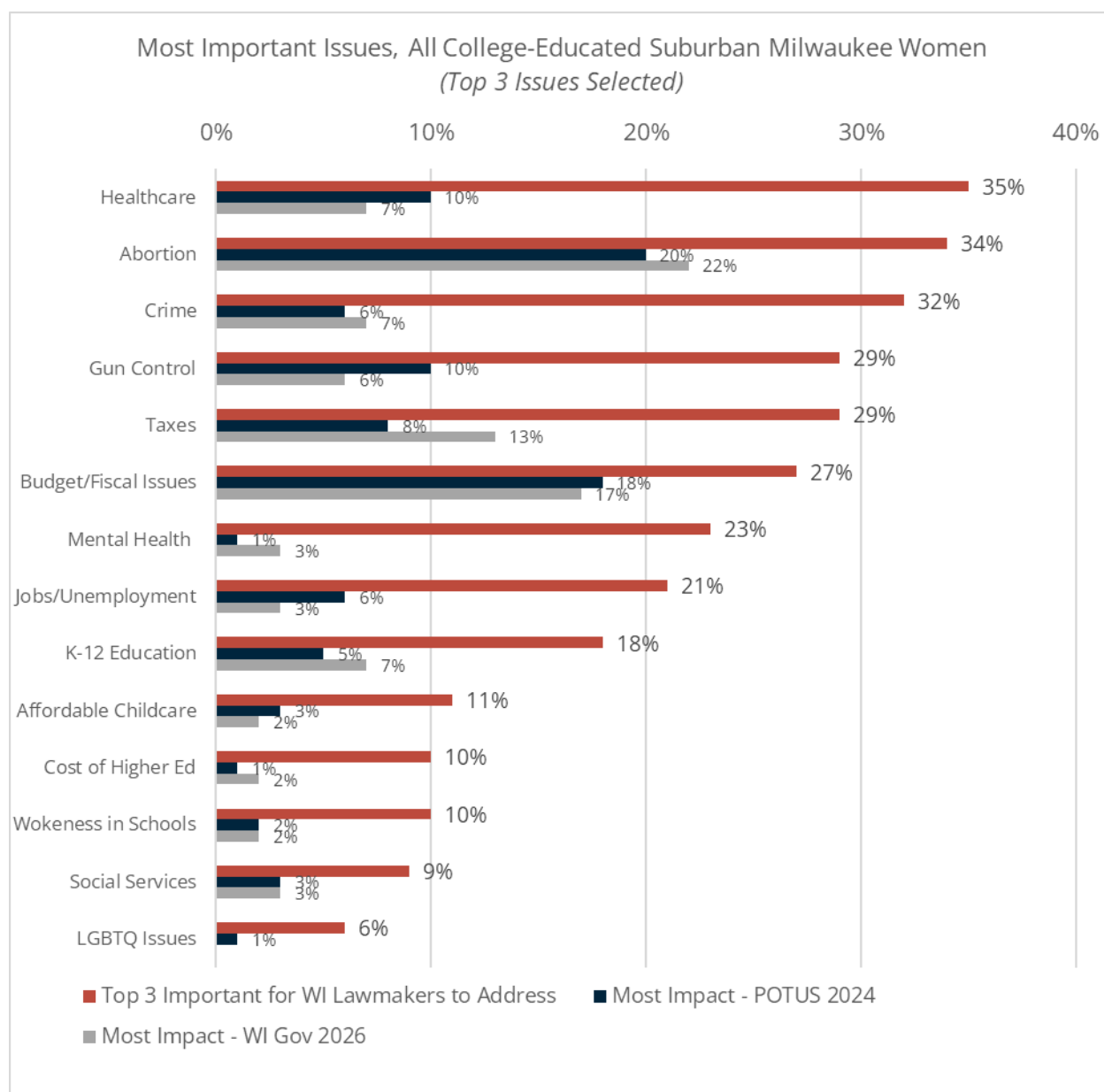
With policy dominating how suburban women expect to decide their vote, it is important to understand which issues will carry the most weight. Among this audience, healthcare, abortion, and crime are top-tier issues.

While healthcare ranks as the top issue, this audience expects that abortion will be the most impactful issue when deciding whom to vote for in the 2024 presidential election and the 2026 Wisconsin gubernatorial election. Despite being ranked less frequently as a top issue, fiscal concerns are a close second for the most important factor college-educated suburban women will consider in upcoming elections. For the 2024 presidential contest, 20 percent will use abortion as their key deciding factor compared to 18 percent who plan to look at stances on fiscal issues. Numbers are similar for the 2026 race for governor in the Badger State: 22 percent will use abortion as deciding factor and 17 percent will consider fiscal issues (Figure 15).

"It would push me to the Democratic side even though I don't like their financial [positions]. I'd rather have that than this treatment of women's rights going backwards."

– Wauwatosa Independent

Figure 15



The top issue for college-educated suburban women varies by how they identify both in terms of political party and political ideology. Self-described moderates and liberals put abortion at the top of their list of concerns while political Independents and Democrats rate it lower on their list but still in the top three issues. Conservatives are most concerned about taxes while Republicans are equally concerned about taxes and crime. It is notable that abortion is not a top issue for Republicans or conservatives. Self-identified right-of-center women would likely have a different position on the issue than their more liberal counterparts but could still find the issue important. However, the data show their top concerns are elsewhere (Figure 16).

Figure 16

Top Issues by Political Ideology			
Conservatives	Taxes (56%)	Crime (48%)	Budget/Fiscal (47%)
Moderates	Abortion (34%)	Taxes (31%)	Crime (30%)
Liberals	Abortion (52%)	Gun Control (50%)	Healthcare (49%)
Top Issues by Party			
Republicans	Crime (48%)	Taxes (48%)	Budget/Fiscal (36%)
Independent	Budget/Fiscal (41%)	Abortion (37%)	Healthcare (32%)
Democrats	Healthcare (54%)	Gun Control (50%)	Abortion (49%)

When it comes to deciding the 2026 gubernatorial contest, economic issues will be the deciding factors for conservative and Republican college-educated women, and abortion the focus of other political and ideological subgroups. Among moderates and Independents, economic issues are the most important factor after abortion (Figure 17).

Figure 17

Top Factors for 2026 Governor Vote by Ideology			
Conservatives	Budget/Fiscal (27%)	Taxes (23%)	Crime (14%)
Moderates	Abortion (23%)	Budget/Fiscal (17%)	Taxes (15%)
Liberals	Abortion (31%)	Gun Control (13%)	Budget/Fiscal & Healthcare (both 11%)
Top Factors for 2026 Governor Vote by Party			
Republicans	Budget/Fiscal (25%)	Taxes (20%)	Crime (14%)
Independent	Abortion (25%)	Budget/Fiscal (18%)	Taxes (17%)
Democrats	Abortion (30%)	Healthcare (14%)	Gun Control (12%)

Participants were also asked which major party came closest to representing their views on each issue. Among the top two tiers of issues (six issues total), Democrats have significant advantages in three—abortion, gun control, and healthcare. This is due in large part to political moderates, who are not more likely to place importance on these issues but have more trust in Democrats to address them.

On crime, which Republicans seemed to have a significant advantage on in the 2022 midterms, college-educated women in suburban Milwaukee actually give Democrats a slight advantage. In this top tier, only on budget and taxes are Republicans more in line with suburban women and even then, the preference for the GOP is relatively small compared to advantages Democrats have among this audience.

Education, mental health, and social service issues—like adoption, childcare, and financial assistance for low-income families—do not emerge as top concerns for most women in suburban Milwaukee. However, these issues did come up frequently in the focus group research. This audience believes there are many serious problems to address in these areas, but they are drowned out by issues discussed more often, and with more ferocity, at the state and national level.

“If you want parents to work, they have to have the ability to have good childcare. If we want them at home, they can’t be working third shift [to navigate the childcare issue].”

– **Waukesha Republican**

“At the time I was having a hard time in a public school with my son, and he wasn’t getting the services he needed.”

– **Wauwatosa Independent**



Figure 18 shows the relative advantages on all of the issues tested, calculated by subtracting the percent who said Democrats were closer to their personal views on the issue from the percent who said Republicans were closer to their personal views on the issue. A negative score shows an advantage for Democrats and a positive score shows an advantage for Republicans.

Unsurprisingly, Democrats have a significant advantage on abortion and LGBTQ issues. These two issues are central to their party and overall platform. However, the massive advantages Democrats have in addressing mental health and affordable childcare speak to a lack of solutions coming from the right.

Figure 18

	All College-Educated Women in Suburban Milwaukee		Moderate College-Educated Women in Suburban Milwaukee	
	Republican Advantage on Issues, Percentage Points*	Percent Saying Neither/Not Sure	Republican Advantage on Issues, Percentage Points*	Percent Saying Neither/Not Sure
Healthcare	-12	31%	-16	43%
Abortion	-34	19%	-41	29%
Crime	-2	40%	-2	47%
Gun Control	-23	23%	-27	37%
Taxes	+5	35%	+7	50%
Budget/Fiscal Issues	+11	33%	+11	45%
Mental Health	-24	39%	-30	50%
Jobs/Unemployment	-6	32%	-8	48%
K-12 Education	-16	31%	-27	44%
Affordable Childcare	-23	39%	-32	42%
Cost of Higher Education	-14	36%	-18	45%
Wokeness in Schools	-5	35%	-9	47%
Social Services	-18	32%	-29	45%
LGBTQ Issues	-31	28%	-39	39%

*Republican minus Democrats in "closer to representing my views" on issue. Those responding "Neither" or "Not Sure" are not included in the calculation.

A 16-point advantage for Democrats on K-12 education indicates that Republican solutions, right now focused on school choice and addressing curriculum and parental rights within public schools, are not well aligned with current concerns among suburban women. In focus groups, nearly all participants questioned the Democrats' approach to the budget and cited runaway spending. Yet Republicans have just a 10-point advantage on the issue, compared to Democrats' 30-point advantages on their strongest issues, signaling a lack of trust in the Republican party or perhaps perceptions of extremism carrying over to issues where Republicans are otherwise believed to have a good approach.

Among moderate college-educated suburban women, Republicans do slightly better on taxes, the same on fiscal issues and crime, and worse on everything else. Women in the Milwaukee County suburbs significantly align better with the Democratic Party, due to their stronger self-identification as part of that party. In the more Republican WOW counties, college-educated women are more aligned with Republicans on issues but still favor Democrats on a variety of topics included abortion, LGBTQ issues, gun control mental health and affordable childcare. Even in the more favorable WOW counties, Republicans do not have the same magnitude of advantage that Democrats have in their suburban strongholds (Figure 19).

Figure 19

	Milwaukee County College-Educated Women in Suburban Milwaukee		WOW Counties College-Educated Women in Suburban Milwaukee	
	Republican Advantage on Issues, Percentage Points*	Percent Saying Neither/ Not Sure	Republican Advantage on Issues, Percentage Points*	Percent Saying Neither/ Not Sure
Healthcare	-55	25%	+4	33%
Abortion	-68	16%	-20	21%
Crime	-20	52%	+5	35%
Gun Control	-53	22%	-12	23%
Taxes	-22	42%	+14	32%
Budget/Fiscal Issues	-10	44%	+19	29%
Mental Health	-58	33%	-11	41%
Jobs/Unemployment	-22	42%	+0	28%
K-12 Education	-51	28%	-2	33%
Affordable Childcare	-50	39%	-12	39%
Cost of Higher Education	-39	43%	-5	33%
Wokeness in Schools	-35	40%	+6	33%
Social Services	-58	31%	-2	33%
LGBTQ Issues	-64	25%	-19	30%

*Republican minus Democrats in “closer to representing my views” on issue. Those responding “Neither” or “Not Sure” are not included in the calculation.

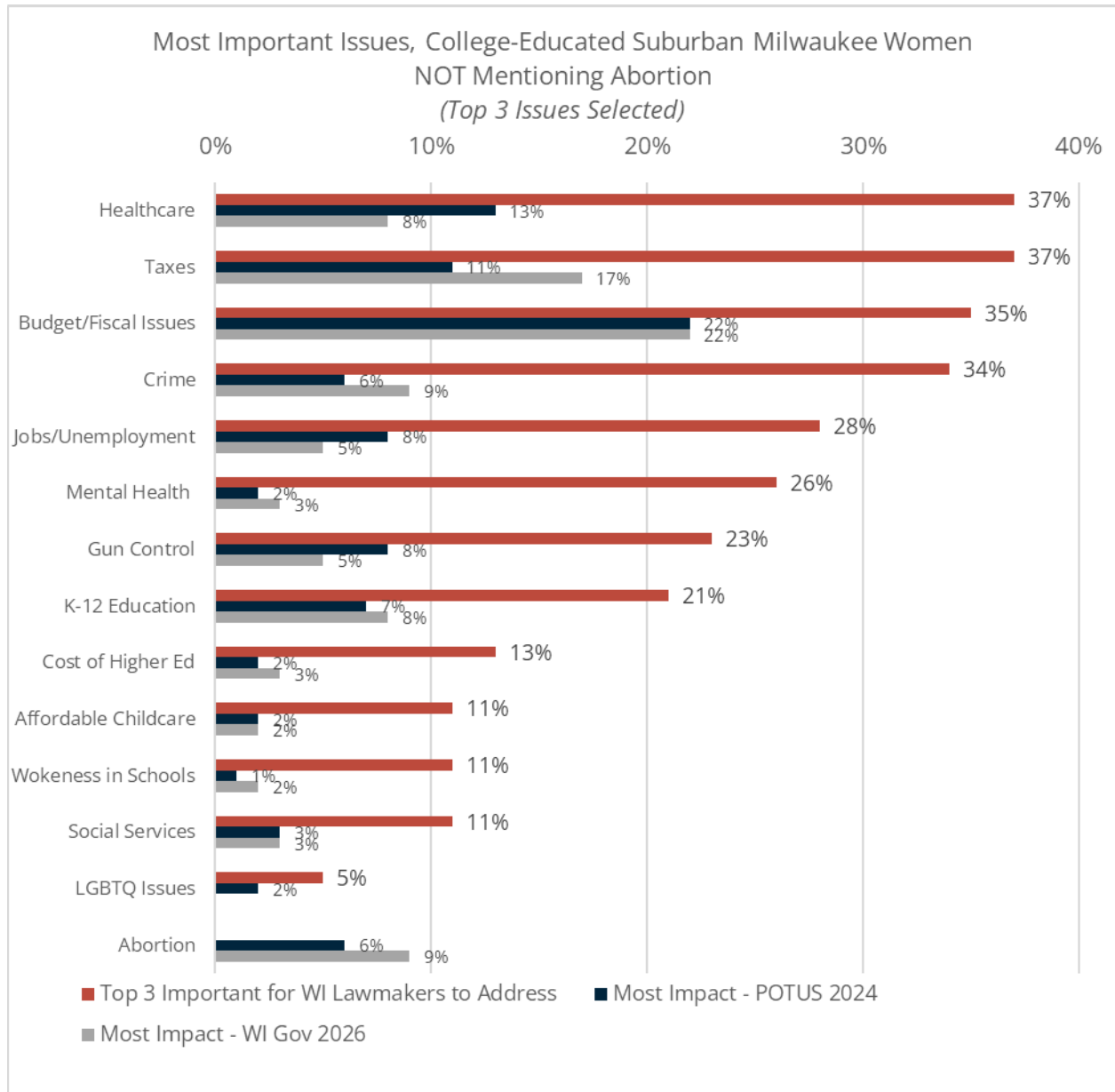
“[The Democrats] are probably more apt to take action on a social issue than the Republican party is, but they’re also more apt to kind of just throw money at it and not really find a creative way to handle it.”

– Waukesha Independent

Abortion as a concern has gained prominence in the political debate since *Dobbs v. Jackson* overturned *Roe v. Wade* and gave states the primary right to regulate abortion. In this new and still unsettled landscape, it is worth looking at priorities among suburban women not focused on abortion as a top issue. Figure 18 shows a graph of top issues and how they will impact the 2024 presidential and 2026 gubernatorial race among suburban Milwaukee women who did not select abortion as a top-three issue.

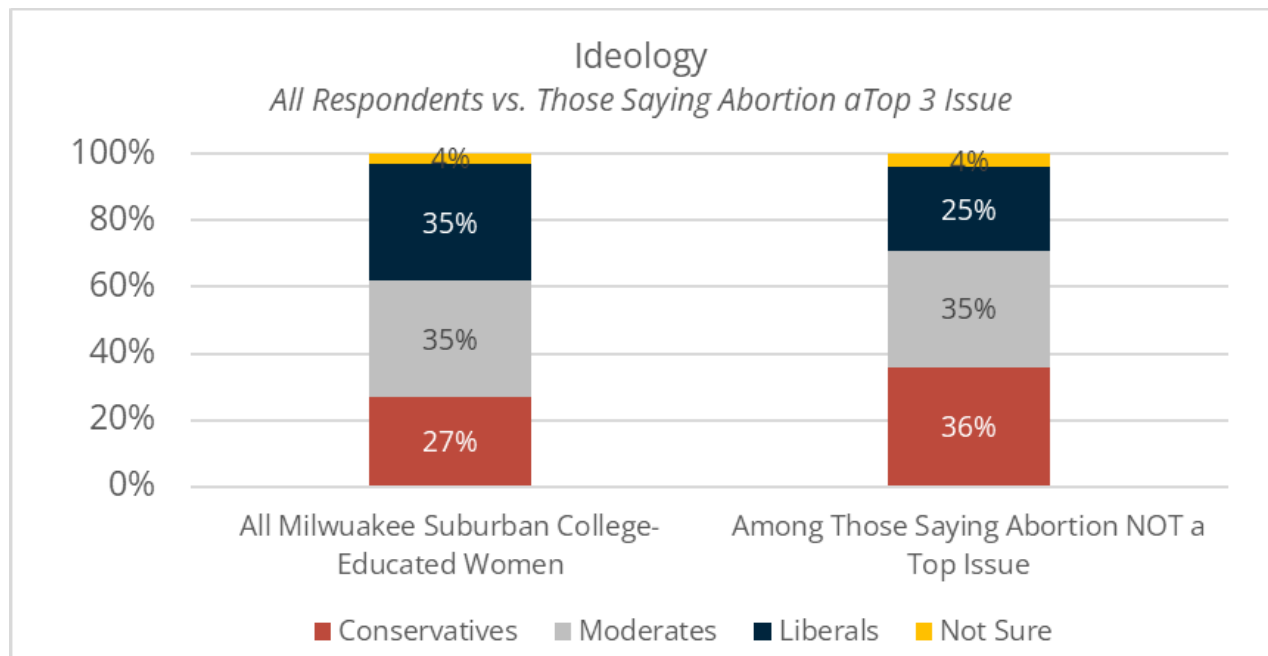
For suburban women not focused on the abortion issue, healthcare, taxes, and fiscal issues are the top concerns, and of those, fiscal issues will have the most impact on their votes for both president and the next governor of Wisconsin. Jobs and unemployment are also considered a more important issue among this group, while gun control is less of a concern.

Figure 20



College-educated suburban women who did not list abortion as a top issue are more conservative generally—36 percent of women saying abortion is not a top issue describe themselves as conservative compared to 27 percent of all of the suburban women surveyed. This skew may contribute to economic issues like taxes and budget being more commonly cited. However, even among this more conservative audience who do not see abortion as a top issue, one in 10 say it will be the most important factor in the 2026 Wisconsin governor’s race. Even among suburban women who are not highly focused on the abortion issue, it is a factor (Figure 21).

Figure 21



Economic and Social Issue Tradeoffs

Voters often make tradeoffs when deciding which politicians to support, as few people can identify a candidate who exactly represents their views. Women in the Milwaukee suburbs are slightly more likely to support candidates they agree with on social issues, even if it means compromising their economic views.

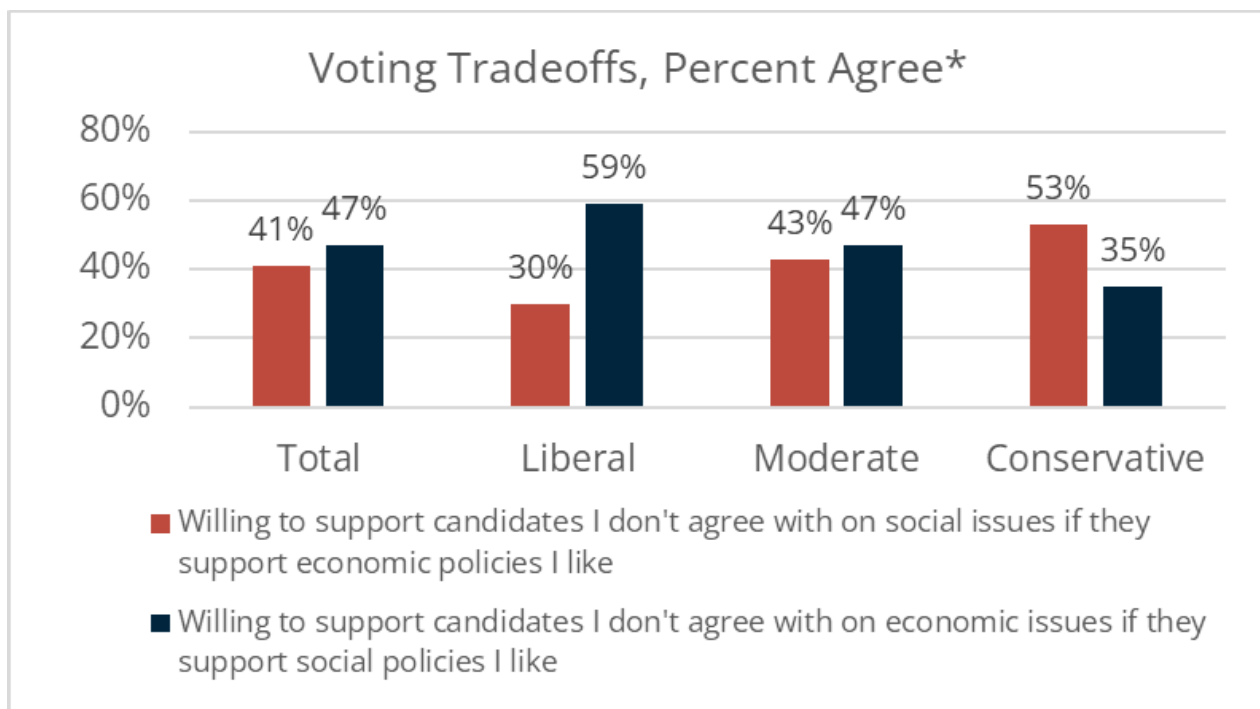
One in three conservative women say they are willing to support candidates they don’t agree with on economic issues if views on social policy line up. This is slightly higher than the number of liberals who say they prioritize economic policy (30 percent). Moderates are evenly split on which set of issues they lean toward when forced to choose.

On balance, this means if voters cannot find a candidate they agree with completely, they are slightly more likely to vote for the candidate who shares their views on social issues (Figure 22).

“I was more socially Democratic but fiscally conservative and now I feel like I’ve just kind of swung completely in support of Democrats because of how irrational sometimes the Republicans have been on certain policies.”

– Cederburg Democrat

Figure 22



*Respondents saw each statement independently and could agree with both.

WISCONSIN WOMEN DIFFER FROM NATIONAL TRENDS

Some of the same questions asked in the survey of college-educated women in suburban Milwaukee were asked of a nationally representative sample of registered voters. National comparison data solidify the picture of women in suburban Milwaukee as pragmatic moderates who see more of their needs being met by Democrats.

Women in the Milwaukee suburbs are much more likely to want compromise from their elected officials, moderate candidates, and moderate policy than the nation as a whole (Figure 21). Furthermore, it seems that these Wisconsin women see Democrats as being in line with these values more than the average American: they are more likely to trust Democrats to do what is right for their family than a national audience. They are also significantly more likely to see Republicans in their state as being more extreme than they were 10 years ago (Figure 23).

Figure 23
Compromise Attitudes

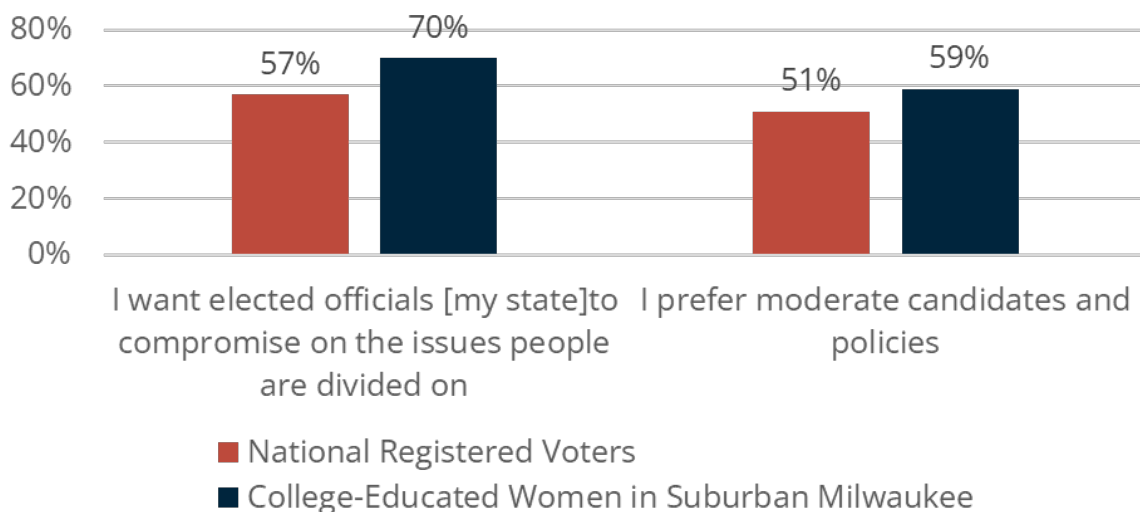


Figure 24

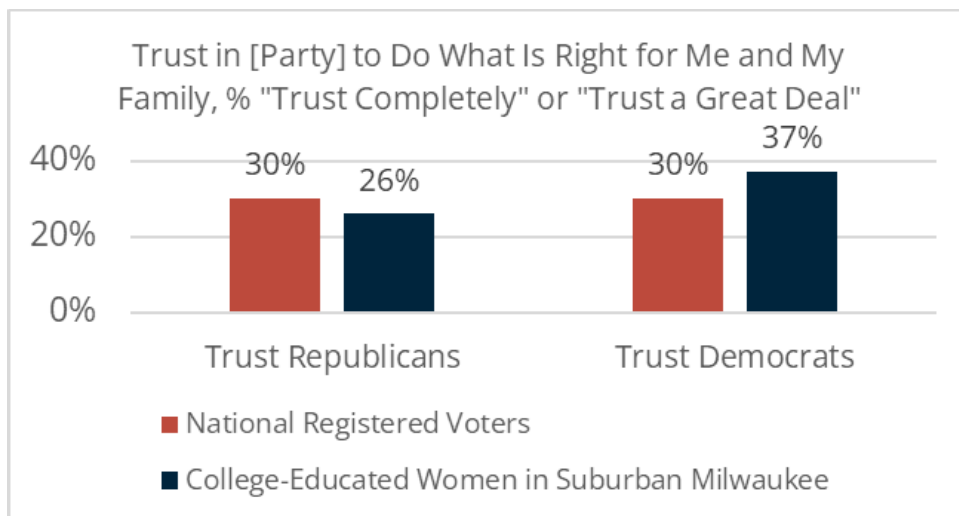
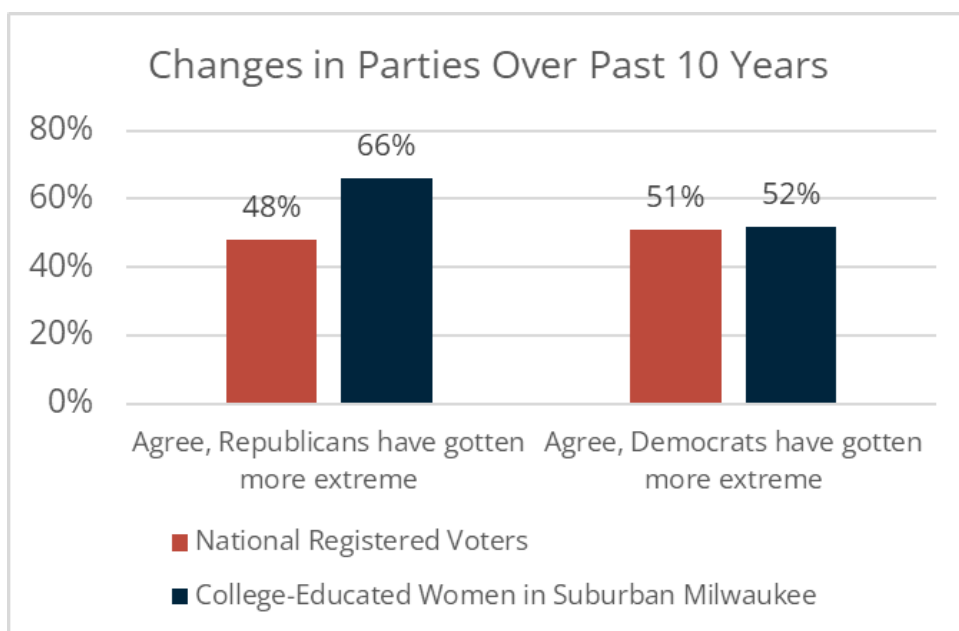


Figure 25



Data specific to suburban Wisconsin show the strong influence abortion plays in voting decisions, but a comparison to national data shows just how in focus the issue is in Wisconsin. Nationally, just 18 percent list abortion policy as a top-three issue, a number that rises only slightly when filtered to women (20 percent) and to just one-quarter (26 percent) among Democratic women. However, 34 percent of college-educated women in suburban Milwaukee—who identify with a healthy mix of political parties and ideologies—rate abortion policy as a top-three issue.



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