



# CIVIL SOCIETY SUMMIT:

BRIDGING WISCONSIN'S  
DIVIDES ON EDUCATION AND  
OPPORTUNITY

A REPORT BY



INSTITUTE FOR  
REFORMING GOVERNMENT

DECEMBER 2024





INSTITUTE FOR  
REFORMING GOVERNMENT

## ABOUT THE INSTITUTE FOR REFORMING GOVERNMENT

The Institute for Reforming Government, along with its partner organization IRG Action Fund, is focused on developing free-market and limited-government reforms, taking action on them, and getting results for Wisconsin. Founded in 2018, IRG has quickly grown into one of the state's largest think tanks, boasting an elite policy team with decades of experience in state and federal government, trade associations, and statewide campaigns. Most importantly, IRG gets results for the conservative movement in Wisconsin.

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**CIVIL SOCIETY SUMMIT:  
Bridging Wisconsin's Divides on  
Education and Opportunity**

*A report prepared by the Institute for Reforming Government*

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The week after the presidential election, IRG brought together eight Wisconsinites - who have never met each other - from different parts of the state with diverse political beliefs. We facilitated a four-hour-long discussion that touched on two major state policy issues: school choice and socioeconomic mobility. The results were nothing short of amazing as we saw complete strangers bond and even friendships form.

This is what we saw:

- Despite political differences, broad agreement on what the issues in society were and what the end goal should be
- No one said that government was the solution to these issues
- Consensus on the need for stronger communities, engaged parents, and the need to reform public benefit programs to encourage self-actualization.
- A new found appreciation for the idea of the American Dream as an ideal based upon individual goals and aspirations.
- Participants walked away wanting to have this experience duplicated for more people and we hope to convene the group in 2025 to further discuss state policy issues.

**CHECK OUT THE VIDEO:**

[IRG shot a short video with interviews of the participants.](#)



# Executive Summary

Wisconsin, and the nation at large, is facing an increasing crisis of incivility caused by cultural and political polarization. As a “purple” state, most of Wisconsin’s statewide elections are decided by just a few thousand votes. In the most recent Presidential election, Donald Trump won the state by roughly 30,000 votes. He won and lost by the same margins in 2016 and 2020 respectively. Wisconsin has almost equal sides voting each way in major elections. **However, is it just our vote that divides us and does that permeate into every aspect of life? Are we really as divided as the ballot box would indicate?** The Institute for Reforming Government, partnering with the Mercatus Center, sought to find out.

- We brought together a group of eight strangers from different parts of the state and hosted a discussion on two hot-button topics.
- In almost equal measure, we had liberals, conservatives, and those unsure about their political ideology participate.
- The participants either came from or lived in urban Milwaukee or rural parts of Wisconsin.
- We brought them together to discuss school choice and socioeconomic mobility.

On November 14th, a little more than a week after the 2024 Presidential election, we brought these seemingly divided groups together and hosted a four-hour-long discussion. What we saw was nothing short of amazing. Over the course of the afternoon, participants shared their honest thoughts on these topics and started to bond as they realized their shared views, values, and goals. **They talked about the need for greater community, more parental involvement, the negative effects of the public welfare system, and a shared belief that government cannot solve all of society’s ills.** They realized they shared the same goals and wanted the same things for themselves and their children. Their discussion on the American Dream was eye-opening for those participating. The event was uplifting and inspiring. Many of the participants agreed that this type of exercise needs to happen more often and with more people. In the end, we learned that there is **far more that unites Wisconsinites than divides in this purple state.**

*“I love diversity of opinions because that is how you get to good solutions. I could tell that everyone that was there was speaking from the heart and with true honesty. It was a great exchange of ideas and thoughts.”*

— CONSERVATIVE PARTICIPANT

*“I enjoyed myself working with the seven other adults in the room. Just being able to just enjoy just company - even through breaks. I didn’t find myself talking to people that I know, I found myself more so talking to people who I don’t know and just getting a different outlook on their perspective of life.”*

— MILWAUKEE EDUCATOR

# What is a Pluralist Lab Workshop?

The Pluralist Lab Workshop brings together people from various backgrounds, races, and political views to discuss major topics in a structured setting. The workshop was designed by the [Mercatus Center](#) to provoke participants to see policy preferences through the minds of people with divergent viewpoints. As an example, the conversation usually kicks off with a facilitator asking, “Why do you think participant ‘X’ believes that school choice undermines K-12 education?”

Each topic begins with a prompt to select either a conservative, liberal, or middle-ground viewpoint. Before the actual discussion begins, each participant raises a colored paddle to indicate their selection of the three options. From there, the actual conversation begins and a participant is called on to try and explain why another participant has a viewpoint opposite theirs. Each topic is allotted roughly 35 minutes, which allows for a full discussion where the participants can really engage with each other.

## The Participants

The participants in a workshop discussion are meant to be average Americans with well reasoned thoughts on relevant political and cultural issues. IRG worked hard to find a mix of Wisconsinites from different backgrounds who could bring varying worldviews to the conversation. Of the eight participants, five were people of color who currently live in or were raised in urban Milwaukee and identify as liberal or “not sure.” The other three participants self-identified as “very conservative,” two of which live in the Fox Valley and another in Washington County.



*“Initially, just in thought maybe I didn’t agree, but to be there, in-person, hearing from those people, and just kind of understanding and just feeling their energy, were that they were good people, made it easier to accept their points of view and actually put it into my head and say you know what - I can kind of see it that way.”*

— LIBERAL PARTICIPANT



# The Topics



Two topics were chosen for the workgroup: school choice and socioeconomic mobility. Participants were prompted at the beginning of each discussion and told to take a stance on the issue by selecting one of the prompts. Here are the prompts that were read to the participants.

## SCHOOL CHOICE

*“School choice increases segregation and disadvantages students with high needs. They are more likely to undermine traditional public schools than improve educational outcomes.”*

*“Government must ensure a wide range of educational options, including public, charter, and private schools are available to all families regardless of their socioeconomic status to meet diverse student needs.”*

*“I’m not sure/other”*

## SOCIOECONOMIC MOBILITY

*“The government should redistribute resources from the well-off to others in need, and establish a more comprehensive welfare system.”*

*“The government is involved in too many aspects of our lives and the economy. It should reduce taxes and regulatory requirements to make it easy to pursue entrepreneurial opportunities and realize their fullest potential.”*

*“I’m not sure/other”*

# The Discussion

As previously mentioned, the discussion format allotted for roughly 35 minutes for each topic, which was then followed by a post-discussion debrief. The conversation for each section was structured and orderly, with none of the participants talking over each other. They shared their reactions, opinions, and experiences without hostility or flaring emotions. The structure of the discussion, as designed by Mercatus, induced an organic curiosity for the rationale of other participants. That doesn't mean that this was a dispassionate discussion; participants openly shared their thoughts with the raw emotion that was the basis of their convictions. What follows is an overview of the discussion on each of the topics.



## SCHOOL CHOICE

In this section, there were four participants in favor of school choice, three opposed, and one unsure. To kick off the conversation, a facilitator asked a participant with a liberal view on school choice why one of the conservative participants expressed the opposite opinion. After taking a short time to think about it, she explained that he is likely from a rural area, may not have a lot of educational choices, and has a strong belief in competition. When the conservative was asked how received her assumptions, he said that she was exactly right about his belief in competition as the foundation for his support of school choice. When a conservative participant was asked to explain why another participant held the liberal position, he said that it was because that participant likely engendered a stronger belief in public institutions. The liberal-leaning participant indicated that he believed that those utilizing school choice thought that it gave them a higher social and financial status. This was just the start. The discussion covered a myriad of different opinions on the topic: the need for competition, funding for public schools, funding for choice schools, opportunities for those in poor-performing districts, lack of parental involvement, and many more.

## FUNDING

Participants discussed concerns with funding for schools, both public and private. Those who selected the liberal position expressed concern that school choice takes funding and resources away from public schools. One participant said that when a student is removed from a voucher school, they ultimately end up back in a public school, furthering what they characterized as a strain on public school resources. They also expressed concern that voucher schools were not held to the same standards as public schools. However, the same participant expressed support for school choice because their child is actually in a school choice program.

## COMPETITION

“A rising tide lifts all boats.” This was the first opinion expressed by a conservative participant at the start of the school choice discussion and there was a sense of agreement from the group. One of the liberal participants explained that they thought the absence of choice would lead to a monopoly and quality would suffer. More interestingly, a participant who expressed disfavor with school

choice also indicated they thought the public school system was “not good,” but felt that programs for gifted students in voucher schools should be replicated in public schools.

*“I grew up on 36th and Center - that’s intercity Milwaukee, Wisconsin. So, rough area, high incarceration rate... By school choice, I was able to go to Milwaukee Lutheran and get my high school diploma which was amazing for me and I loved it.”*

*“For me, it was an opportunity to see more than what I’d seen in the hood on the daily, so I had white friends and Asian friends and all of that, so I was able to go and meet their families and see how life was outside of the hood. I also believe that for a lot of kids, they just need to see different environments sometimes.”*

— MILWAUKEE PARTICIPANT

*“I’m a big believer in competition and I think we need competition in the school system. I think it was JFK who said, ‘a rising tide lifts all boats,’ and I firmly believe that. If a private school is doing better and a public school can learn from that and implement those procedures, I see that as a big plus.”*

— MILWAUKEE PARTICIPANT



*“There shouldn’t be a monopoly because then people get comfortable.”*

— LIBERAL PARTICIPANT

## PARENTING

There was a robust discussion on parenting. This was something that all participants had an opinion on and expressed concerns about the current state of affairs. The consensus was that parents are disengaged for a myriad of reasons. One liberal participant said that parents are distracted by their phones. Another participant who works in education said that PTO membership continues to dwindle. They indicated that parents take no interest in their child's education until they start receiving failing grades, for which they tend to blame the teacher, rather than take responsibility themselves. Another participant echoed that concern, saying that parents were all too willing to "hand off" parenting to the school. One participant thought that today's parents are trying too hard to be better parents to their children than what they remember. From their point-of-view, this has resulted in them spoiling their children with new technology and not properly disciplining their kids. Overall, the group agreed that the lack of strong and involved parenting was a major concern for the current generation of students.



## OPPORTUNITY

Although there were three opposed to school choice at the start of the discussion, many of the ideas they shared showed that those same participants believed that school choice had a role to play in Wisconsin's K-12 education system. As mentioned previously, one of the participants opposed to school choice actually had their child enrolled in a private school through the choice program. They said that they make personal sacrifices to make sure their child can attend that school and, in theory, they liked the program. However, they think the program is "poorly executed." Also mentioned previously was a participant talking about the opportunities made available to them because he was able to get a better education through school choice.

*"I think school choice is a great idea, I just think it is poorly executed."*

— LIBERAL  
PARTICIPANT

# SOCIOECONOMIC MOBILITY

The most shocking part of the discussion started at the beginning. Not one person raised the paddle that indicated the liberal position on the topic of socioeconomic mobility. There were four votes for the conservative position and four for the middle or ‘not sure’ position. Although there were definitely liberal-leaning overtones to the discussion, those who self-identified as liberal before the event shared many reservations about public programs having unintended consequences.

The discussion covered a range of issues. Participants discussed the American Dream, their personal vision for a purposeful life, the isolated nature of our current culture, and the need for personal agency in improving one’s station in life. Like the previous topic, there were disagreements, but the discussion was civil and the participants were genuinely curious about the thoughts and opinions of others.

## THE AMERICAN DREAM

A conservative participant first brought this topic to the table, stating their belief in the American Dream. In their opinion, the American Dream has to be attainable for society to flourish. They also took the time to explain that this concept is what you want it to be, and is unique to each American. A liberal participant explained that they do not believe in the American Dream, calling it a facade because of America’s history with slavery, mistreatment of immigrants, and racism. Other participants said they never thought they believed in the American Dream until they heard it described as being content in life, rather than an idealized version of a large house in the suburbs.

*“I’m a firm believer [in what he said] that the American Dream is what you want it to be.” ...*

*“So, right now it might not look like it to [nobody] else but I’m living the American Dream. I made it.” ...*

*“Right now, if God were to take me, I’ve lived the American Dream.*

*I’m not rich or anything like that, but I’m able to move the way I want to move and I’m able to do what I want to do and I’m happy with it.”*

— LIBERAL PARTICIPANT



*“When I was working, there was a common thread wherever I went. Humans are humans, and I saw that here today. I kind of expected that, but I was pleasantly surprised. I think you are all living the American Dream - that’s my opinion - just listening to you all here today.”*

— CONSERVATIVE PARTICIPANT

## THE ROLE OF GOVERNMENT AND PERSONAL AMBITION

There was a longer discussion about the role of government and personal ambition. The participant who expressed their disbelief in the American Dream also believed that the government could not solve society's problems. Another participant who grew up in Milwaukee said that "the government has too much say-so, they can take away your motivations." They expressed their belief in the entrepreneurial spirit and said that school only prepares you to work for someone else. There is a fear that public assistance programs take away the incentive to better oneself. A liberal participant who grew up in Milwaukee shared their story of struggling to get ahead after growing up in a house that had absent parents. They did not want to take public assistance, but were still able to achieve a college education and a successful career. They thought that public assistance, as it is currently structured with means-testing, keeps people in a permanent state of poverty. With their personal story in mind, they posed the question of how society should empower people without enabling them and give them autonomy with accountability. That was the heart of the discussion - how to give people the opportunity to succeed in life. The participants almost all agreed that government was not the answer.

*"One thing I still don't know is: what is the happy medium? How do we empower people without enabling people? How do we hold people accountable but still give them autonomy?"*

— LIBERAL PARTICIPANT



## PURPOSE IN LIFE

There was a dynamic discussion on what made for a purposeful life, which was then intertwined with a discussion about accumulating wealth and the role of religious institutions. A participant from Milwaukee said that we should all strive to live more Christ-like and criticized the wealthy for their accumulation of earthly possessions. "You don't need all those cars, go help someone." This drew disagreement from a conservative participant who said that he didn't fault rich people, nor did they think much about the decisions of the wealthy. There was agreement among most in the group that we all need something bigger than ourselves to believe in, whether it be God or a secular version thereof. It was marked in the conversation as a key way to move away from thinking about one's self and instead focusing on family and community.

# Key Findings

## WISCONSIN NEEDS STRONG COMMUNITIES

The concept of community was a common thread throughout the whole conversation. Each participant brought their own perspective, but the commonalities were striking. Multiple people spoke about the prevalence of social isolation and how it has caused many of the issues we see in modern America. The loss of trust in institutions has led to further fragmentation in society and political polarization. There was a strong desire to rekindle the idea of the local community as a way to solve many of our social ills.



A participant who had grown up in Milwaukee explained that communities do not have leaders anymore. He went as far as to say that at every level; national, state, and local - communities across America are without leaders. Another participant who grew up in Milwaukee expressed a desire to have communities akin to

*“When we show empathy and the love to see us all thrive, it makes us safer and we can achieve more when we work together. I always think of the phrase ‘united we stand and divided we fall.’ And also, as much as I believe in togetherness, I also believe in accountability because we all have to do our part in that community.”*

— MILWAUKEE  
PARTICIPANT

the 1960s where people attended church on Sunday and the pastor was a local pillar of the community. The same participant told the rest of the group how he was able to get a better education because of school choice and that the community he made at his school opened his eyes to different cultures and ways of living. A conservative participant agreed when a liberal-leaning participant said that it “takes a village. Their background stems from their roots in a different country where village life was very important. The conservative participant went on to explain more fully that he believes that individuals self-sort into communities with like-minded values. They said that similar values are what makes those communities strong.

## GOVERNMENT IS NOT THE SOLUTION

Probably the most surprising area of agreement was on the role of government. Participants agreed that government was not the solution to the problems in society. As mentioned above, the discussion on socioeconomic mobility brought this to the forefront when not one person aligned themselves with the liberal position at the outset of the discussion. There were a number of “in the middle” or “not sure” votes, but not one participant believed that government should redistribute wealth and bolster the welfare system. Although there was a level of disdain for the wealthy, no one called on the government to increase their taxes. Furthermore, there was a marked pessimism regarding welfare. Some in the group believed that it stifled motivation and kept people from reaching their potential. A liberal participant expressed a need for reform in the current system to encourage a path from dependence to independence. They spoke about their personal experience and how they were able to rise above adversities without the need of public assistance. However, they noted that there are so many roadblocks in the way of single mothers and those born into poverty, that we should reform the system to help these individuals without trapping them in welfare dependence.

*“In particular with politicians, they look forward to the next election - they’re not looking toward the next generation. I think we’ve completely lost sight of that and I find that disappointing.”*

— CONSERVATIVE PARTICIPANT

## WE SHARE COMMON GOALS



Near the end of the afternoon, there was time allowed for reflection on their experience of participating in the discussion model. They all came to an agreement on two key points. First, everyone shared the same goals. Whether it was ensuring that children attain an education that gives them the best opportunity for success in life, or making it so that everyone has a chance at the

American Dream; every participant supported these ideas. However, the difficulty lies in how we get there and in what policies will aid in the achievement of those goals. This leads to the second point of agreement. Civil discussions like this are necessary for society and need to be repeated. Expanding on this, participants expressed a need to be curious in these discussions, know that those with an opposing viewpoint have valid reasons for their ideas, the need to find the areas of agreement first and come to the discussion ready to listen rather than trying to win an argument.



# Conclusion

When the discussion concluded and the formal structure of the workgroup ended, the participants lingered to chat and to exchange contact information. For its part, IRG asked participants if they would be willing to meet again in a couple of months for lunch and the group resoundingly agreed. When participants left the venue, many of them said, “See you in a couple months.” A group of strangers from different parts of the state, different ideological backgrounds, and different life experiences, had bonded together over the course of an afternoon. Much of the feedback was that this needs to happen again and more people need to experience this.

*“It was a great experience. I feel like I learned quite a bit. I didn’t really expect how emotionally invested in everybody else you become as soon as you start hearing that their values kind of line up with yours even though they’re from different backgrounds.”*

– CONSERVATIVE  
PARTICIPANT

Overall, this discussion brought together people from diverse backgrounds to discuss contentious and major public policy issues, and in the end, they found that there is far more that unites each one of us than divides us.

*“It was really beautiful to me because we don’t have these conversations a lot in the world and I figured this is the way they have a solution for all of the problems in the world. We need to come together, share like-minded ideas - even if they don’t sound the same or if the path isn’t the same - but just try to figure out ways to understand one another and ways to progress and move forward.”*

– MILWAUKEE  
PARTICIPANT

Several weeks after the event, two participants had a chance interaction at a sports venue, one conservative from a rural area and the other from Milwaukee. After greeting each other and a quick discussion, they found that they were both basketball fans. Before they left each other, they exchanged contact information and agreed to meet up in the near future to watch basketball together. These are connections that need to happen in society and in this case, would not have happened if it were not for this workgroup.

*“I just hope that we do more of these.”*

– MILWAUKEE PARTICIPANT



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