
WHAT WISCONSIN WANTS:

GOING IN DEPTH WITH RURAL WISCONSIN VOTERS

2024

WHAT WISCONSIN WANTS:
THE VIEWS OF RURAL WISCONSIN VOTERS
OCTOBER 2024

RURAL WISCONSIN VOTERS
QUALITATIVE RESEARCH REPORT
MAY 2024

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.

ReformingGovernment.org

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Overview

Continuing the Institute for Reforming Government's (IRG) "What Wisconsin Wants" series, IRG partnered with the State Policy Network (SPN) and spent 2024 capturing the views and taking a closer look at those living and working in rural Wisconsin.

Zoom in: In partnership with the State Policy Network, IRG and SPN's Erin Norman produced the two reports to go in depth with rural Wisconsin. Both are included here.

- What Wisconsin Wants: The Views of Rural Wisconsin Voters
- Rural Wisconsin Voters: A Qualitative Report

Why We Did This: IRG is dedicated to developing policy reforms and engaging communities to give all Wisconsinites an opportunity to succeed and prosper. Some findings we expected, but others educate and inform as we move past stereotypes and help ensure Wisconsin's best days are still to come for all of Wisconsin. The issues identified by rural voters are what policy makers should work to solve as they get to work next January. These reports give a nonpartisan roadmap for those just elected to follow if they want to tackle the issues that matter to rural Wisconsinites.

The Findings: Rural voters are informed and center right on policy. They are libertarian minded favoring less government involvement in their personal lives or controlling personal decisions. We found, however, that rural Wisconsinites appreciate that there is a role for government, including as a safety net for their neighbors in need. They love and want to preserve their communities and are looking for more opportunities to improve their lives. The work we conducted in 2024 and the resulting findings could be viewed as a foreshadowing of the 2024 election results. Rural America has spoken, but are we listening?

Their priorities reflect the quality of life rural voters seek:

Ranked any 1-3, the THREE that are most important to you

- ❖ Reducing crime: 37%
- ❖ Property tax cuts: 36%
- ❖ Better roads: 30%
- ❖ Protecting the environment: 27%
- ❖ Elimination of the income tax: 26%
- ❖ Protecting gun rights: 26%
- ❖ Greater job opportunities: 24%

Rural voters are informed:

- 57% utilize network tv (NBC, CBS, Fox, & ABC) as a news source
- 42% use social media to consume news
- 37% rely upon online news sources

"Most read at least some local news and many also follow national news, political news and sports." – Erin Norman, SPN

Yes, rural Wisconsin is center-right:

- We found that they favored former President Trump, but leaned slightly towards Evers, and Hovde/Baldwin was a toss up.
- Favor right-to-work 60% to 40%
- 56% seek less housing regulation over relying upon subsidized housing for new homes
- 54% would like to see elimination of the income tax

“I’ve read a little about the UBI system. I can’t visualize that working well. Eliminating state income tax would help many seniors. I know retirees who’ve left the state because of our high taxes.”

– Karyn N., Moderate Democrat

But they are also libertarian-minded:

- Only 7% favor an abortion ban, with 57% of rural Wisconsin voters having a more pro-choice view of abortion
- 36% favor abortion only in the case of exceptions
- 65% favor legalizing cannabis

“If carrying the child causes major health issues for the mother, she should have the right to terminate the pregnancy. Let alone if someone is raped, that experience is traumatic and life altering.”

–Jessica M., Conservative Republican

And government has a role:

- 72% favor increasing funding for their public school with just 28% seek a taxpayer funded voucher for a private school
- 51% favor expanding government healthcare for those with lower incomes

“I feel our democracy is suffering at the hands of our inept government. Everyone has their own agenda and the people’s issues are being forgotten.”

– Conservative Republican

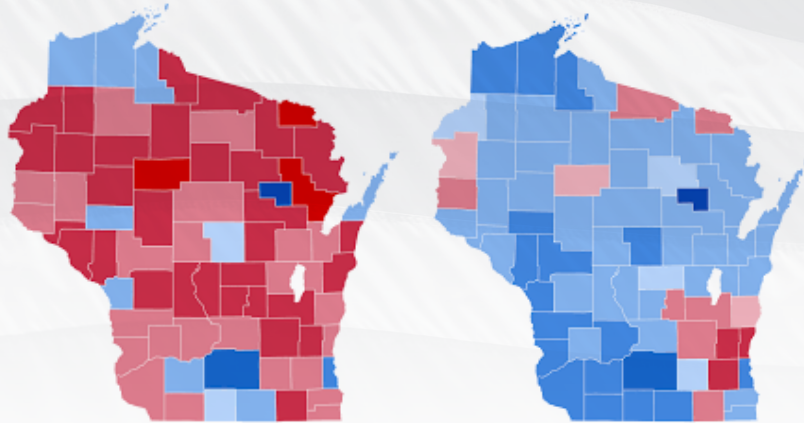
Opportunities needed:

- 38% say the economy is the most important issue
- 49% say lower food costs would help most with personal finances

“Our biggest challenge in recent years has been trying to live within our means in light of rapid inflation and the rising costs of basic necessities across the board. We’ve had to focus more on needs, not wants.”

– Julie A., Conservative Independent

The Key Takeaway: Rural Wisconsin voters are generally more conservative. In the 2024 election, there was a continued red shift in rural America. The red shift, however, was less dramatic in Wisconsin this election cycle. In fact, there was a smaller shift towards Republicans in rural Wisconsin than in any other battleground state. The red shift was less in 2024 than it was in 2020 or 2016, suggesting that rural Wisconsin is near its peak for Republican turnout. Rural Wisconsin can also produce dramatic shifts in Presidential elections. Compare Obama's 2008 victory to the swing to Trump in 2024.



How can rural Wisconsin swing this dramatically? It's not necessarily ideology or party lines that drives rural voters. Rather, it is a desire for less government, more economic opportunity, and freedom to pursue the life they seek. Practically speaking that means less taxes for the government and less regulation enacted by the government. It means a government that is focused on more core duties like public safety, education and ensuring the poorest have a safety net. It means a strong desire for economic opportunity. And perhaps contrary to what we may stereotypically think, it means rural voters are open to legalizing cannabis and want the freedom to make personal decisions even on issues like abortion. Depending on the importance of a particular issue in a given cycle and who they think will deliver, rural Wisconsin swings from red to blue and vice versa. This is also why Wisconsin produces Trump/Baldwin voters.

“When it comes to a gubernatorial candidate in Wisconsin in 2026, rural voters want someone who will fill their desire for more common ground, civility and compromise. Rural voters also want someone who is going to work to improve the state rather than play politics or forget about constituents after the election.”

– Erin Norman, SPN



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A DEEPER LOOK INTO RURAL WISCONSIN

The Institute for Reforming Government (IRG) prides itself on putting Wisconsinites at the center of our work and we cannot do that without looking past stereotypes and deeply understanding them.

Rural America is often thought of as Deep Red territory and Wisconsin has a great number of rural counties. But there is nuance to rural voters as this most recent research shows.

Rural voters in Wisconsin do lean to the right, but there is nuance to their political attitudes that shows neither party will win them over on every issue and there is room for Republicans to lose enough support, or Democrats to gain enough, in rural Wisconsin to impact elections in the state.

Through our *What Wisconsin Wants* series, IRG continuously seeks to better understand the people of Wisconsin and their needs. We share this report to inform others working in Wisconsin policy on how to best be responsive to the needs of people in our state.

WHAT WE DID

State Policy Network (SPN) assisted the Institute for Reforming Government in conducting research to better understand the needs of rural Wisconsin voters. A multi-day, online qualitative exercise was undertaken with a group of voters living in rural counties. Voters were screened to ensure they lived in a rural county in Wisconsin and to create a group with a mix of genders, ages, education and income levels. A mix of political affiliations and ideologies were recruited with “Strong Democrats” and people who self-described as “very liberal” excluded. Data were collected from April 29 to May 2, 2024.

One goal of this study was to understand the nuance of voters in counties where 70%+ agree on the same candidate in elections. While all parts of the state have a mix of partisans and ideological perspectives, including strong Democrats and liberals, in this small-scale study including people who strongly identify with left-of-center ideals is not an ideal way to understand the “rural conservative bloc.” Voters who identified as “moderates,” “independents,” “not-so-strong Democrats” and “lean Democrat” were included in the sample. In total, 15 voters participated in the study. Demographics of the study participants can be found at the end of this report.

Following the qualitative research, a survey of rural voters (in the same counties) in Wisconsin was conducted. A total of n=541 online surveys were completed between July 25 and August 6, 2024.

Included counties were: Adams, Ashland, Barron, Bayfield, Buffalo, Burnett, Clark, Crawford, Dodge, Dunn, Florence, Forest, Grant, Green Lake, Iron, Jackson, Juneau, Lafayette, Langlade, Lincoln, Manitowoc, Marinette, Marquette, Menominee, Monroe, Oneida, Pepin, Polk, Portage, Price, Richland, Rusk, Sauk, Sawyer, Shawano, Taylor, Trempealeau, Vernon, Vilas, Walworth, Washburn, Waupaca, Waushara, and Wood.

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



This report was authored by

ERIN NORMAN

Senior Director of Communications Strategies at State Policy Network

Community and Belonging

Rural Wisconsinites generally have positive feelings about their community. Many describe their communities as small, close-knit, or personal. All but one participant said they feel like they have a place where they belong, and many talk about their local town or community being a place that fosters a sense of belonging. Family and church also provide a high degree of community and belonging. The one person who openly said he did not have a place he belonged was happy about it – a self-described loner who preferred not to join communities or get involved.

“I do have a sense of belonging myself and I feel strongly that this is due to the fact that I am a teacher within my community. This gives me a sense of purpose in that I have positive interactions with other members of my community.”

– Moderate Independent

“I guess my home would be the place I feel I belong. I really don’t do social media and where I live is pretty isolated so home is my refuge. I consider my family to be my rock and where I belong. Not just my wife and kids but my brother and his family and my mom and dad and my in-laws are all part of our greater community and I feel I belong with them.”

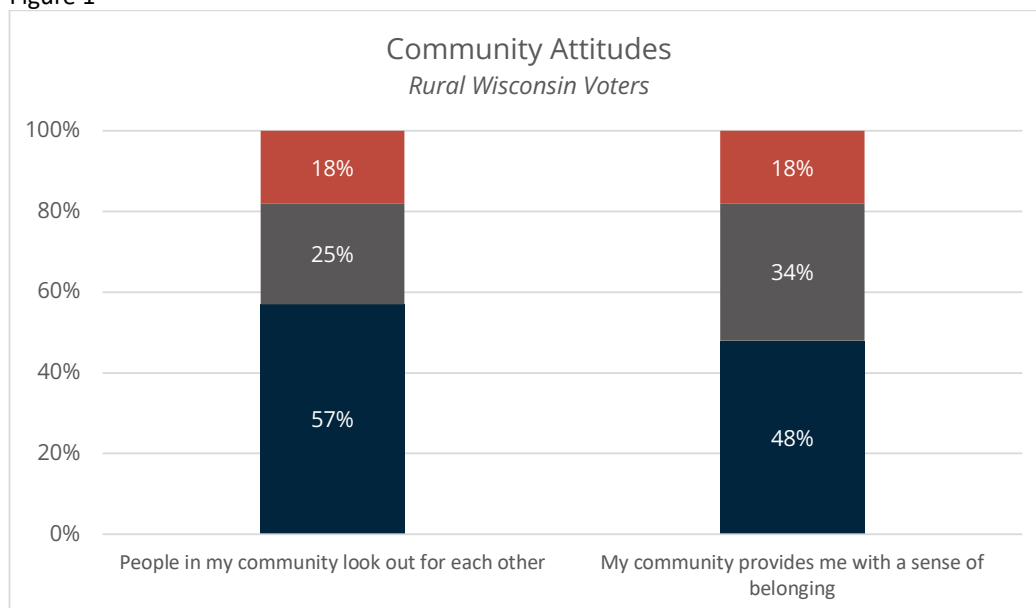
– Moderate Democrat

“I disagree with the statement that I feel like I have a place where I belong. I’m not someone who cares about having a sense of community or about getting involved.”

– Conservative Republican

In the quantitative survey, fewer rural voters agreed strongly with the idea that their community provided belonging or included people who looked out for each other but still half of rural voters agree with these ideas (Figure 1).

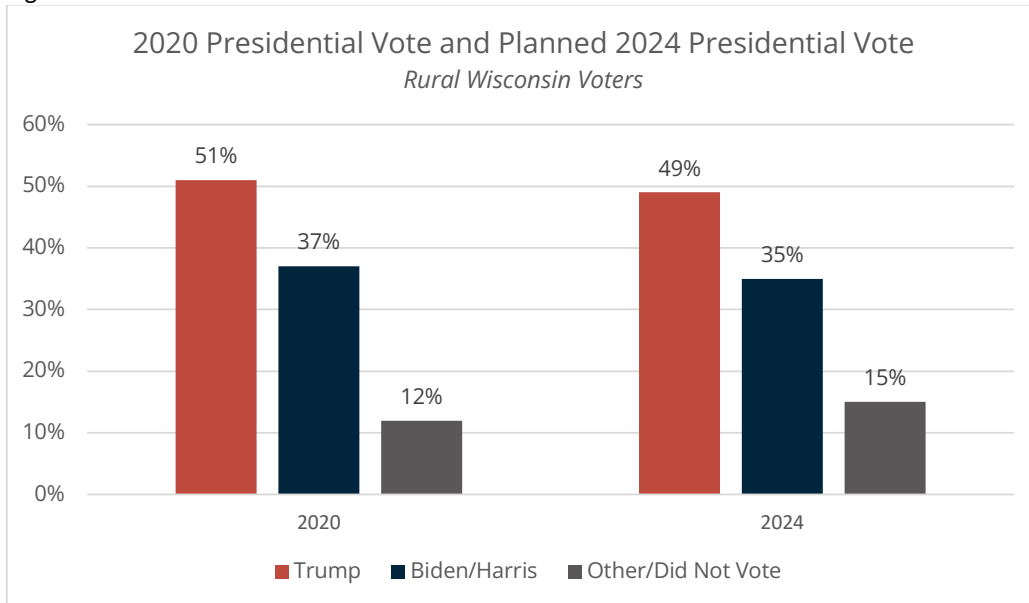
Figure 1



Voting Preferences

True to their Republican reputation, rural Wisconsin voters supported President Trump in 2020 by a 14-point margin and are looking to do the same in the 2024 contest (Figure 2). Among rural Wisconsin voters, Trump is polling best for 2024 among those earning between \$25,000 and \$50,000 per year (50%) and those with some college education but no degree (54%). Harris is winning voters with a college degree (45% to Trump's 44%) and those who never attend church (48% to 37%)

Figure 2



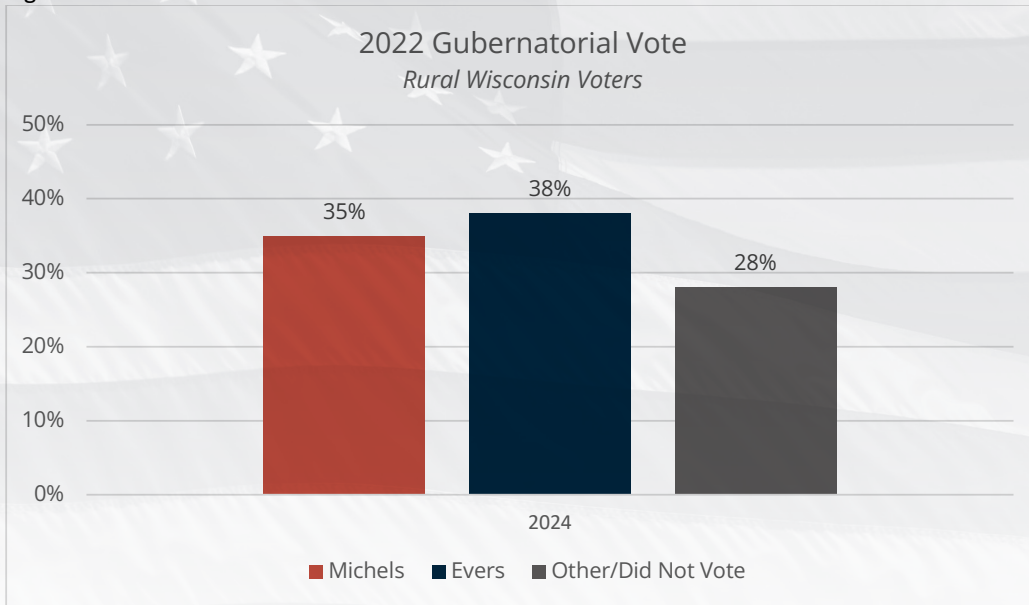
But a strong preference for Trump among rural Wisconsin voters is not necessarily a strong commitment to all Republicans. This group swung in the 2022 Wisconsin Gubernatorial race with a slight preference for Democrat Tony Evers (Figure 3). The number of rural voters that either voted for a third party or sat the contest out more than doubled from self-reported 2020 vote figures. Five percent of rural voters cast a ballot for Republican Donald Trump and Democrat Tony Evers, with 31% of this group saying they voted for Evers because they believed he was doing a good job and another 17% cited specific policy agreement. Most of the additional drop-off from Trump to Michels comes from voters who did not participate in the 2022 gubernatorial election.

Thinking ahead to the 2026 Wisconsin Gubernatorial race, rural voters want someone who will fill their desire for more common ground, civility and compromise. Rural voters also want someone who is going to work to improve the state rather than play politics or forget about constituents after the election. Some also look at a vote for governor as a check on the legislature, saying they will vote for the party that does not control the legislative process.

“I want someone who can be independent if needed but also that sticks to their core values. I have voted for republican candidates in the past but the last decade there is such a grievance-based message from Republicans that I can’t see myself voting for a republican candidate.”

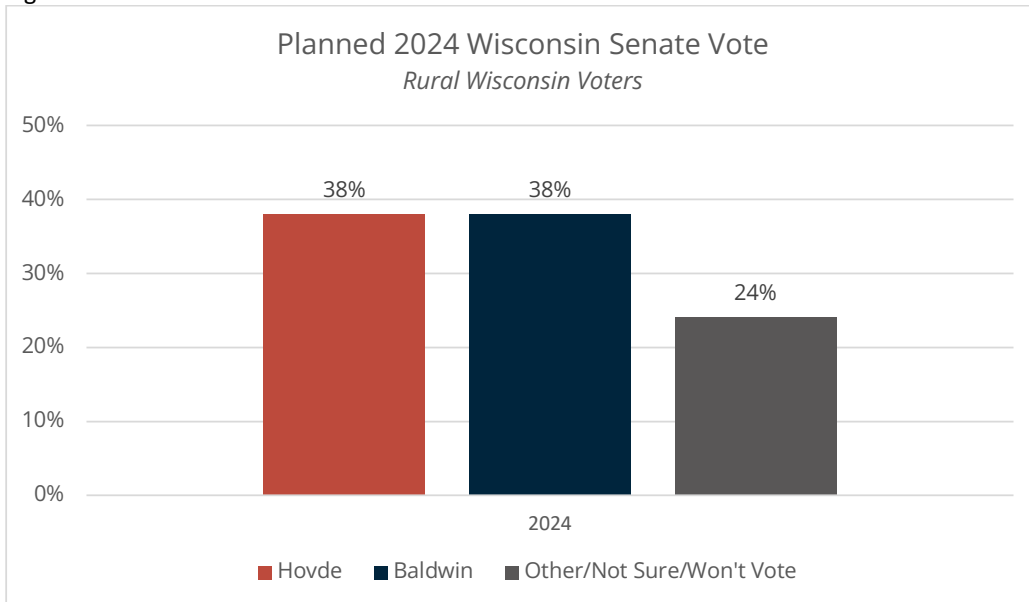
– Moderate Democrat

Figure 3



The upcoming U.S. Senate race is also close among rural Wisconsin voters (Figure 4). Incumbent Democrat Tammy Baldwin is in a dead heat with challenger Republican Eric Hovde with roughly one-quarter of voters undecided or not planning to vote at the time of the poll. Independents are breaking toward Baldwin, 42% to 30% and one in ten Republicans also plan to support the incumbent.

Figure 4

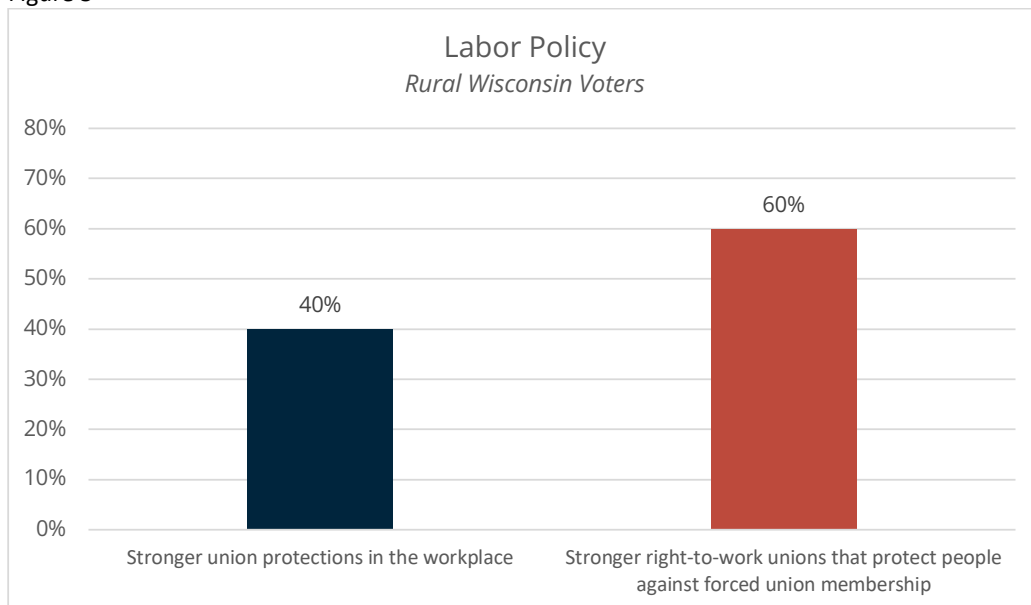


Policy Positions

In several key policy areas, rural Wisconsin voters hold more conservative positions. They generally favor right-to-work laws over greater protections from unions (Figure 5) as well as favoring a free market approach to housing over public and subsidized housing (Figure 6).

When it comes to tax policy, rural voters are more evenly split but show a preference for eliminating the state income tax over raising state taxes on the wealthy (Figure 7). The tax issue splits along party lines, with Independents favoring eliminating the tax 56% to 44%.

Figure 5



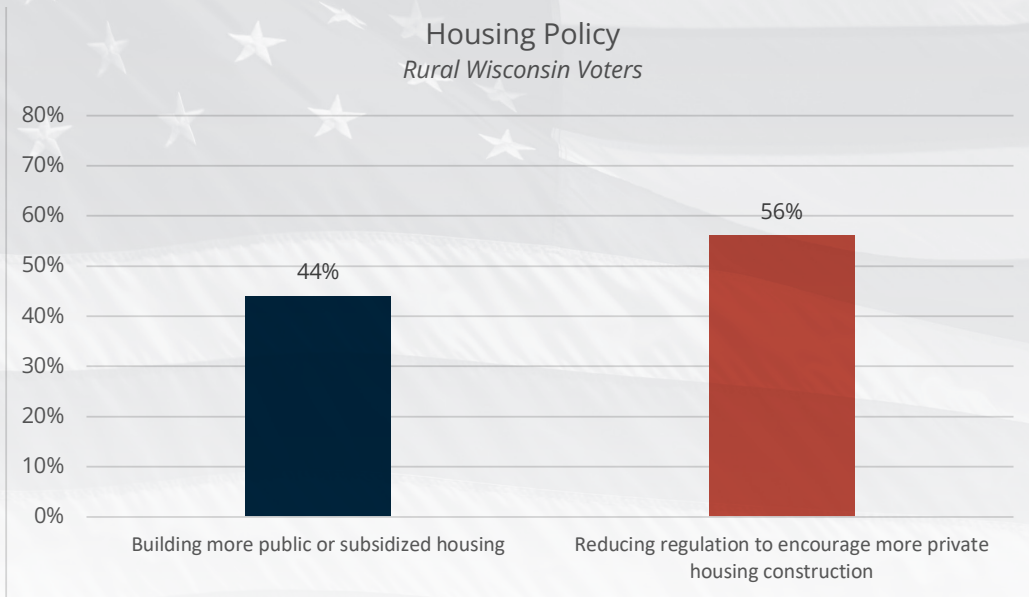
“We need a strong union presence in our state to protect workers and improve pay and conditions. A union has the ability to raise wages for an entire industry and is the only source of protection workers have.”

– Moderate Democrat

“[Stronger right-to-work protections] due to personal experience with a labor union bullying me into joining or quitting a job that I didn’t stay on too long due to that. When I said I wouldn’t join, they all stopped talking to me and never helped me with my work, even if they didn’t have much work that day and I was slammed.”

– Conservative Republican

Figure 6



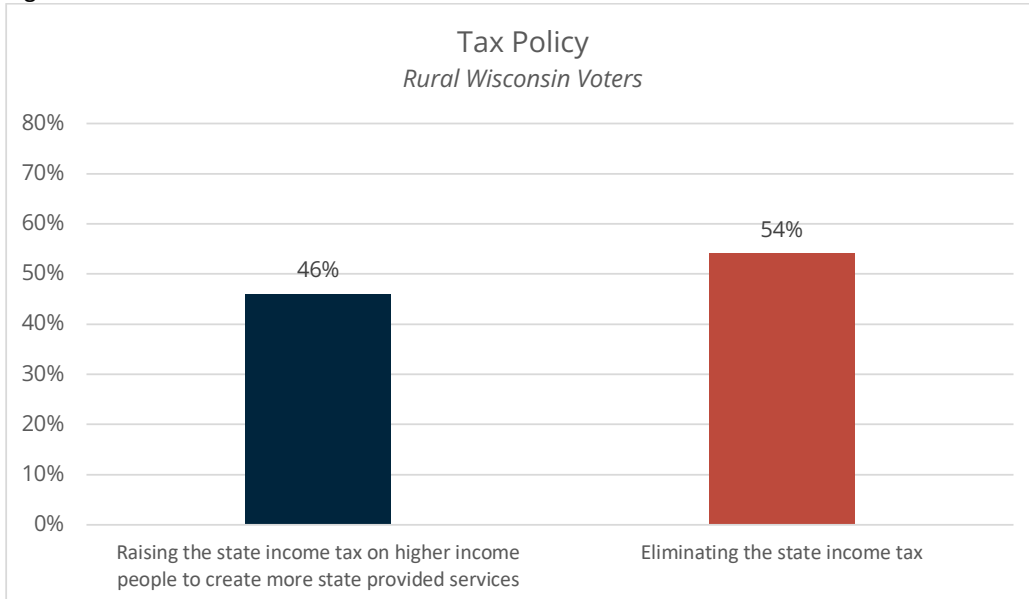
“Public housing does nothing for the continued growth of a community.”

– Conservative Republican

“Public and subsidized housing ends up being a warehouse for crime and supports keeping people dependent on the government instead of being self-supporting.”

– Moderate Democrat

Figure 7



“I don’t like tax credits though, I feel like it’s never made out to be as good as they make it, and I could likely save more money through the income tax elimination than I would through UBI or credits.

– Conservative Republican

“I’ve read a little about the UBI system. I can’t visualize that working well. Eliminating state income tax would help many seniors. I know retirees who’ve left the state because of our high taxes.”

– Moderate Democrat

On other policies, such as school choice, there is evidence that being a rural voter alters the typical paradigm that conservatives support school choice. Nearly three-quarters of this voting bloc prefer increasing funding for local public schools over using a voucher system to increase access to private schools (Figure 8). This includes two-thirds of rural Republicans and Independents. School choice is a complicated issue across Wisconsin: a separate statewide poll conducted by the Institute for Reforming Government asked if school choice makes public schools better or worse and a plurality (43%) said it depends on where the school is located.

“Our local schools need the investment to help our kids succeed. Vouchers are a band-aid that maybe helps a few kids but not the majority.”

– Moderate Democrat

“In my area, there aren’t many private schools. All the children go to public schools. the way I look at it, I would rather it be fair and have everyone be able to get that opportunity/chance. How would you go about getting a taxpayer voucher anyway? Doesn’t sound promising to me.”

– Conservative Republican

Rural Wisconsin voters also favor legalizing marijuana (Figure 9), although this once liberal position is now a majority opinion in the state. A split sample was used to test this policy in two ways - “legalizing marijuana” and “legalizing cannabis”- and both draw support.

Abortion has been a key issue in Wisconsin since the *Dobbs* ruling pushed the issue back to the states. Only a small minority (7%) of rural voters agree with a complete ban on abortion and only one-third of rural voters believe it should only be restricted to extreme circumstances like rape, incest or to protect the life of the mother (Figure 10).

Figure 8

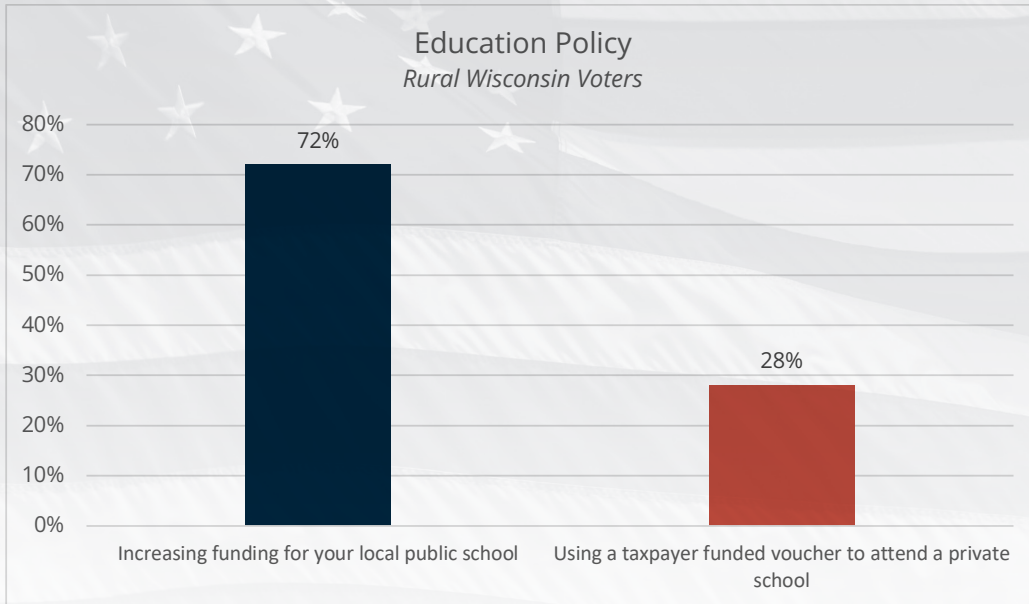
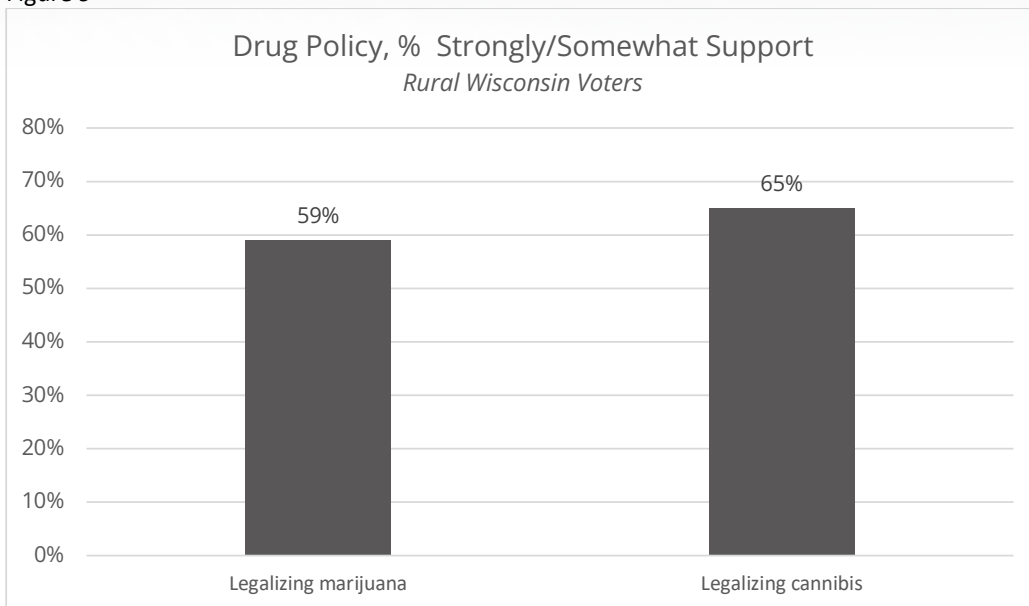


Figure 9



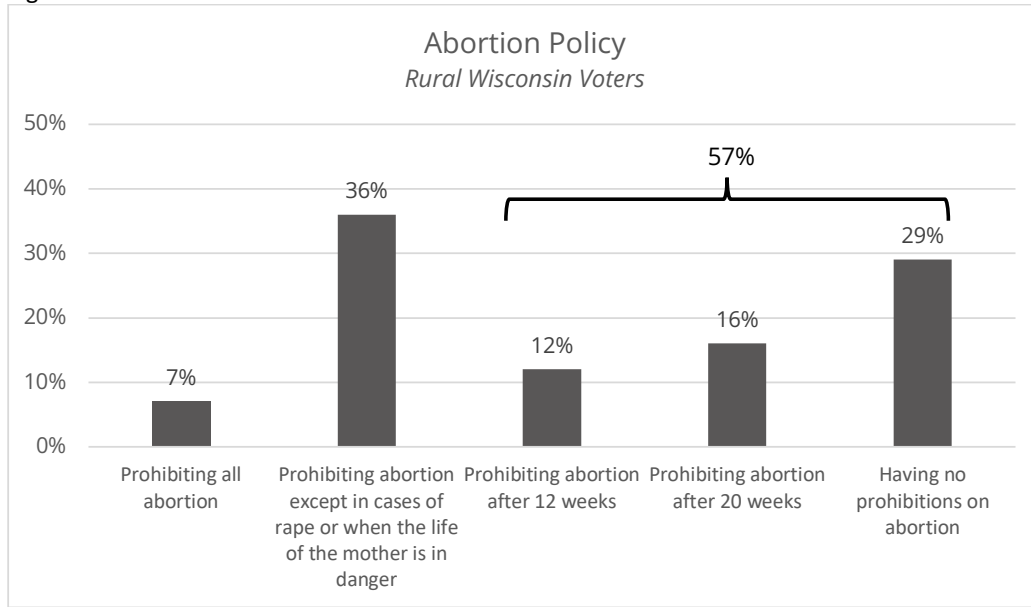
“I think it’s safer than alcohol which is legal. It seems silly to not legalize it when we have a state bordering us where it is legal and a tax-paying industry.”

– Moderate Democrat

Many states have already approved its use. I believe it does have medicinal value. I see alcohol as being more of a gateway drug (more readily available) than pot.

– Conservative Independent

Figure 10



“I choose [prohibiting abortion except in cases of rape or when the life of the mother is in danger] in this case as I consider myself pro-life. My only issue with having to choose any option here is that I do not feel it is my place to make the choice for another individual especially given the fact that I am not a woman and cannot make a decision that doesn’t have a direct effect on me.”

– Moderate Independent

“No prohibitions. I would favor prohibiting extremely late-term abortion say 30 weeks because it would more likely be adopted (become state law) vs. no prohibitions.”

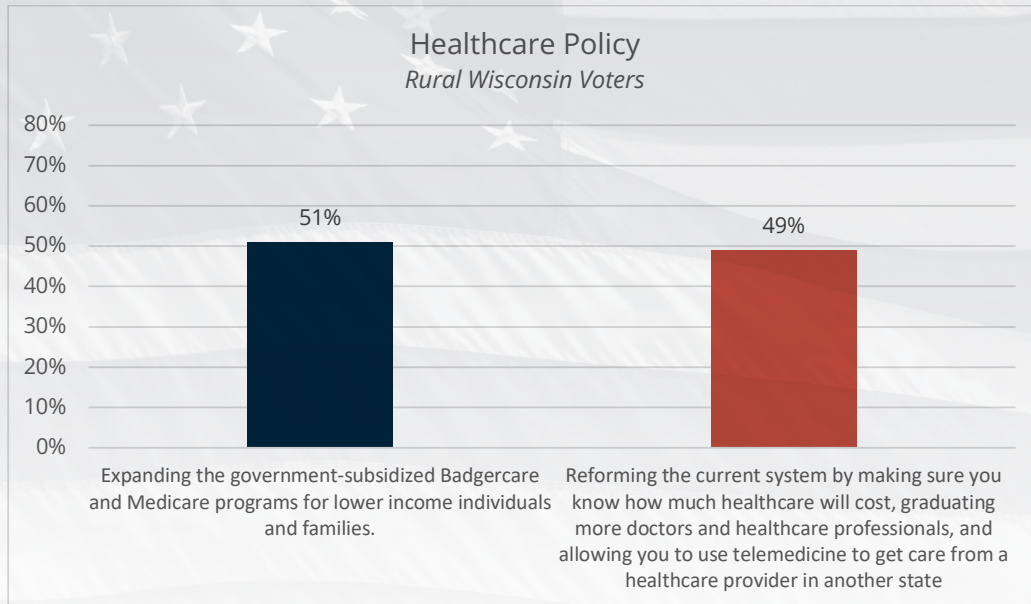
– Moderate Democrat

“If carrying the child causes major health issues for the mother, she should have the right to terminate the pregnancy. Let alone if someone is raped, that experience is traumatic and life-altering.”

– Conservative Republican

On healthcare policy, rural voters are split with half wanting to see government-subsidized BadgerCare expanded, and half hoping to see market-based reforms that bring down costs (Figure 11). Additional research from the Institute for Reforming Government has found that statewide, people are struggling so much to keep up with the cost of everyday life, and even traditionally conservative voting blocs are open to policies that favor government expansion if it provides relief from inflation and other upwards price pressures. Republicans favor market reforms - but not completely - with 39% saying they would prefer to see expanded government health care.

Figure 11



“I do not think BadgerCare/Medicare expansion is the answer because I don’t need people abusing their systems, and then costs get put on taxpayers.”

– Conservative Republican

“I’m not totally against the expanding BadgerCare as long as the people are attempting to work. It’s irritating the people who are on it that are not working who could be and there is nothing wrong with them.”

– Conservative Republican

Partisan Profiles

Political party accounts for much of the variability seen in candidate and policy preferences. Figure 12 shows an overview of rural Wisconsin voters from both major parties.

The preferences for their own party’s candidates are clear, but softer in statewide races among Republicans where 13% cast a ballot for Evers in 2022, and 11% are planning to vote for Tammy Baldwin in the 2024 Senate contest.

Across rural partisans, there is an agreement that state lawmakers need to focus on reducing crime and lowering the cost of food. There is also agreement that “people in my community look out for each other,” underscoring a key benefit of living in rural Wisconsin.

In education, both rural Republicans and Democrats are worried about the quality and quantity of teachers and also have little enthusiasm for expanding voucher programs over increasing funding for public schools.

Figure 12

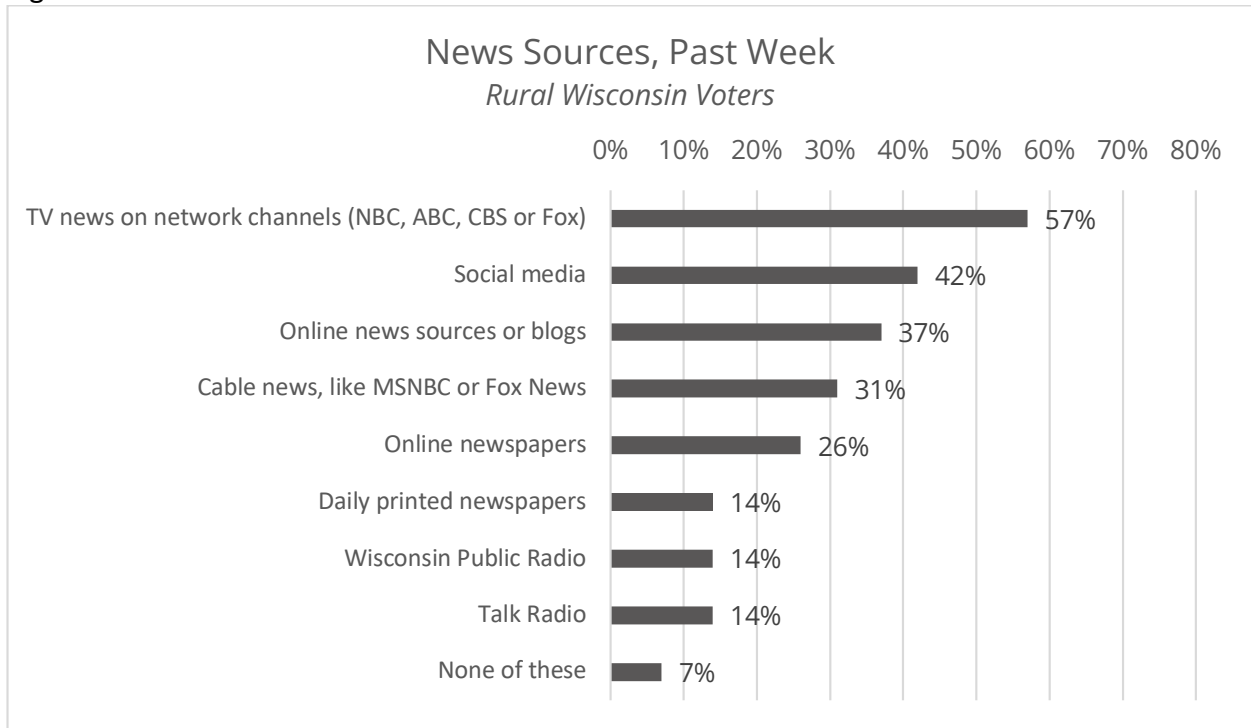
Profiles of Rural Wisconsin Voters		
	Republican	Democrat
Size	38%	23%
2020 Presidential Vote	Trump 88% Biden 5%	Trump 2% Biden 88%
2022 Gubernatorial Vote	Michels 63% Evers 13%	Michels 2% Evers 81%
2024 Presidential Vote	Trump 90% Harris 3%	Trump 1% Harris 87%
Top Factor in 2024 Presidential Vote	Economy (51%)	Character (39%)
2024 WI Senate Vote	Hovde (72%) Baldwin (11%)	Hovde (3%) Baldwin (81%)
Top Three Issues for State Lawmakers to Address	Property tax cuts (42%) Protect gun rights (39%) Reducing crime (37%)	Protect environment (53%) Reducing crime (36%) Better roads (35%)
Most Help to Personal Finances	Lowering food costs (50%)	Lowering food costs (46%)
Agree: <i>People in my community look out for each other</i>	62%	59%
Agree: <i>My community provides me with a sense of belonging</i>	55%	46%
Rate Quality of Public Schools Good/Excellent	47%	59%
Biggest Problem with Public Schools	Quality and Quantity of Teachers (21%) Quality and Quantity of Courses (12%)	Quality and Quantity of Teachers (20%) Poor Academic Outcomes (10%)

Policy Preferences		
Healthcare <i>Prefer reforming healthcare system over expanding BadgerCare</i>	61%	29%
Education <i>Prefer taxpayer voucher system over to increasing local public-school funding</i>	36%	13%
Housing <i>Prefer reducing regulation to encourage housing construction over building more public housing</i>	66%	36%
Taxes <i>Prefer eliminating the state income tax to raising the state income tax on higher income people</i>	72%	29%
Labor <i>Prefer right-to-work to stronger union protections</i>	69%	39%
Abortion Prohibit abortion after 12 weeks, but not before	35%	82%
Drugs Support legalizing marijuana	46%	82%

News Sources

Rural Wisconsin voters get their news from a variety of sources, just like most Americans (Figure 13). TV Network news is the most popular followed by social media. Printed newspapers and radio are less frequently used news sources. There are no significant differences across political parties on news sources.

Figure 13

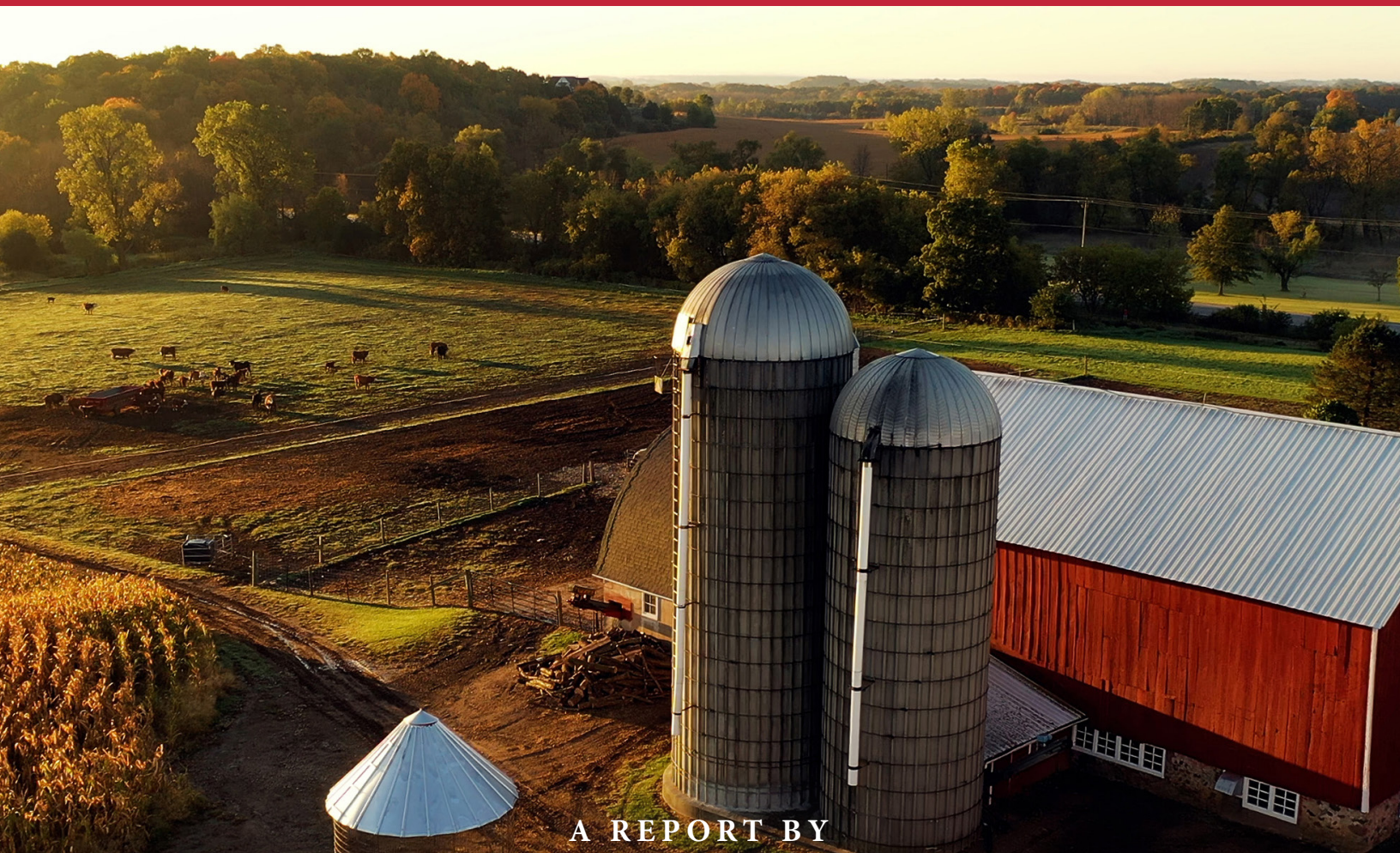




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Executive Summary

Rural voters in Wisconsin have positive feelings about where they live. Generally, they feel like they belong in their communities which include close families, circles of friends and neighbors. Many rural residents acknowledge that even though people don't always agree on politics, there is a friendliness to their communities and most people are able to be respectful of different opinions most of the time. Despite the closeness of these communities, and the generally respectful approach to politics, many avoid talking about current events because it can get heated or divisive. Staying away from politics is how many keep positive relationships in their social circles and communities.

Related, most voters say the biggest problem in politics today is the lack of common ground or compromise and believe politicians are only looking out for themselves - not the people of Wisconsin. This sentiment will be a large driving factor when rural voters vote for governor in 2026. They are likely to cast their vote for someone who can work across the aisle to get things done for Wisconsinites.

There is skepticism about the security of elections on both sides of the aisle. Few are thinking about these security risks in terms of "stolen" elections, but rather the degree to which technology is now embedded in our election process and the ease at which it is hacked.

Despite being a moderate and conservative group of voters, rural voters have some liberal policy preferences. There is a preference for increasing public school funding over expanding vouchers and broad support legalizing marijuana, especially as Wisconsin is next to several other states that have already done so. Their positions on abortion are relatively conservative, generally favoring bans after 12 weeks, but support for a full ban is low.

This group of rural voters generally favor reducing regulation on private housing construction (instead of increasing government housing), increasing price transparency in healthcare over expanding BadgerCare, and eliminating the state income tax instead of providing selective tax credits. The group is unified on protecting free speech instead of shielding people from speech that might be offensive and split on the importance of right-to-work laws.

Rural Wisconsin voters are conservative, as their voting patterns indicate, but that does not mean they are in favor of all Republican or free-market policies or ideas. There is a nuance to the views of most rural Wisconsin voters. Ultimately, they want government to improve the quality of their life, and they are not seeing that happen. While voters may be committed to a particular party, they will shift on policy to where they see the most effective solutions.

Research Methodology

To better understand the needs of rural Wisconsin voters, we conducted multi-day, online qualitative research with a group of voters living in rural counties¹. Voters were screened to ensure they lived in a rural county in Wisconsin and to create a group with a mix of genders, ages, education and income levels. A mix of political affiliations and ideologies were recruited with “strong Democrats” and people who self-described as “very liberal” excluded. Data were collected from April 29 to May 2, 2024.

One goal of this study was to understand the nuance of voters in counties where 70%+ agree on the same candidate in elections. While all parts of the state have a mix of partisans and ideological perspectives, including strong Democrats and liberals, in this small-scale study including people who strongly identify with left of center ideals is not an ideal way to understand the “rural conservative bloc.” Voters who identified as “moderates,” “independents,” “not-so-strong Democrats” and “lean Democrat” were included in the sample.

In total 15 voters participated in the study. Demographics of the study participants can be found at the end of this report.

¹ Adams, Ashland, Barron, Bayfield, Buffalo, Burnett, Clark, Crawford, Dodge, Dunn, Florence, Forest, Grant, Green Lake, Iron, Jackson, Juneau, Lafayette, Langlade, Lincoln, Manitowoc, Marinette, Marquette, Menominee, Monroe, Oneida, Pepin, Polk, Portage, Price, Richland, Rusk, Sauk, Sawyer, Shawano, Taylor, Trempealeau, Vernon, Vilas, Walworth, Washburn, Waupaca, Waushara, Wood.

Community and Belonging

Rural Wisconsinites generally have positive feelings about their community. Many describe their communities as small, close knit, or personal. All but one participant say they feel like they have a place they belong, and many talk about their local town or community being a place that fosters a sense of belonging. Family and church also provide a high degree of community and belonging. The one person who openly said he did not have a place he belonged was happy about it – a self-described loner who preferred not to join communities or get involved.

“I do have a sense of belonging myself and I feel strongly that this is due to the fact that I am a teacher within my community. This gives me a sense of purpose in that I have positive interactions with other members of my community.”

– Sean B., Moderate Independent

“I guess my home would be the place I feel I belong. I really don’t do social media and where I live is pretty isolated so home is my refuge. I consider my family to be my rock and where I belong. Not just my wife and kids but my brother and his family and my mom and dad and my in-laws are all part of our greater community and I feel I belong with them.”

– Benjamin Z., Moderate Democrat

“I disagree with the statement that I feel like I have a place where I belong. I’m not someone who cares about having a sense of community or about getting involved.”

– Konrad B., Conservative Republican

Challenges Rural Wisconsinites Face

Despite a generally positive feeling, people living in rural Wisconsin see challenges in their communities, most notably the economy. Many talk about the rising cost of food, utilities and housing connected to stagnant wages or difficulty finding a job that pays well.

In some cases, communities lack jobs and the ability to attract businesses that would provide them. For other communities, there are jobs but only ones that pay minimum wage, which is not enough to live on, and many say not enough to incentivize workers to take them. Several rural residents note their economies are highly dependent on seasonal tourism, which is not guaranteed and has seen several low years due to the pandemic and unusual weather.

In areas where economic challenges are more significant, there is less resistance to help from the government, even among right-of-center voters. Konrad, a Trump voter who identifies as a Republican has the following to say about challenges in his community:

“I wouldn’t say it’s thriving or in need of help. It’s sort of a mix of both...There are things that do need help, people’s needs, homeless people, stuff like that. The challenges that are facing the community are increases in homelessness due to lack of job security, people not hiring as much, inflation, and renters are seeing rents increase by quite a bit. It doesn’t help that food prices are going up; electrical prices are going up as well. Things that would help address those challenges would be more government help, state help, with paying those types of bills, providing that help, providing job searches, providing opportunities to get into jobs....an increase in minimum wage would be a huge benefit for people paying off their bills.”

– Konrad B., Conservative Republican

Some rural Wisconsinites also mention being socially isolated while others note they are economically isolated, further away from work, medical services, and shopping.

“It’s crazy how things keep rising and we don’t see a change on things.”

– Jess V., Conservative Republican

“Our biggest challenge in recent years has been trying to live within our means in light of rapid inflation and the rising costs of basic necessities across the board. We’ve had to focus more on needs, not wants.” – Julie A., Conservative Independent

“It is isolating to live here and it has been difficult finding the same job opportunities that I had previously.” – Benjamin Z., Moderate Democrat

“The challenges of life, living in a rural area, is the distance that I have to travel for shopping and medical care.” – Karyn N., Moderate Democrat

When asked about what these challenges are keeping them from, rural Wisconsinites often answer with an optimistic or grateful approach. Some note that they are fortunate, and things aren’t all that bad but have clear visions of what freedom from the current economic climate would mean. Many talk about a reduction in stress, better mental health and peace of mind. A common outcome of reducing these challenges is seen as being able to spend more time and do more things with family.

Shared Views in Communities

In many communities, people acknowledge there is a diversity of political opinions and beliefs. However, this is usually not seen as a problem. Instead, many rural residents talk about living in a community where there are underlying similarities in values even if that doesn't translate to political opinions.

“Even though we don't share the same political views, I have found that we have many common interests and we've been able to work on community projects together.”

– Karyn N., Moderate Democrat

“I would speculate that 10-15% share my views (moderate politically). I've traveled around the country a fair bit and people are just more friendly here. Maybe it's because it's a relatively small community but regardless of our views, friendliness is common. I also believe that we respect each other's views when we interact in our daily lives.”

– Tom B., Moderate Democrat

A few more moderate or liberal research participants acknowledge they do feel out of sync with people in their community when it comes to politics and several notice that there are fewer political moderates/independents than there used to be.

“In terms of political beliefs, I would say that most of the community does not share my beliefs. I live in a rural small town and over the past decade it has become more and more conservative. I am progressive and where I used to live (La Crosse) I was probably right in the middle of political beliefs. Now I feel I am far to the left of the people of my community.”

– Benjamin Z., Moderate Democrat

“I would say that there are very few people in my community that share the same political views. In the past 10 years or so, there has become much more division among people. There are fewer people who we might consider independent and are many more people who might be considered extreme one way or the other.”

– Sean B., Moderate Independent

The diversity of political opinions and perception that there are fewer moderates impact how often people are willing to talk about difficult public policy issues. Many avoid talking about politics with co-workers or even friends and family. Others talk about these potentially contentious topics with only specific friends or family members they know won't get too heated or upset. There are some rural Wisconsinites who have found ways to engage in productive political discussions even in the current environment.

“I actually do my best to avoid talking politics with just about everyone. It seems that this usually brings with it such strong feelings that it almost always turns negative. Even when people agree on certain issues or candidates they usually end up in a negative light.”

– Sean B., Moderate Independent

"I do have people I won't talk about it with even if I do agree with them. They are too intense and upset in their beliefs that it's not worth it. But I do have some people I do disagree with and I can have a good and productive conversation. Sometimes we end up seeing things a little differently and sometimes we agree to disagree."

- Bekki Z., Moderate Independent

"I have one friend where we talk politics every time we talk. I have other friends where I will make a comment when I know they agree with me. I have other friends where we avoid the topic altogether. I just don't feel that politics topic is worth destroying a friendship over. I make my point of view in the voting booth."

- Linda K., Conservative Republican

News Consumption

Rural Wisconsin voters vary significantly in how much news they consume. Some are watching over 10 hours of television news per week on top of reading print and online news sources. Others say they have stopped consuming news or never really paid attention.

There is also variety in the types of stories rural voters read. Most read at least some local news and many also follow national news, political news and sports. Fewer look for news on business or arts. At the national level, stories about Trump and Biden, and their related trials and scandals, came to mind most frequently. Interestingly, there is less recall about specific policies or program ideas from these national party leaders. At the state and local level, some voters are more likely to follow state politics, such as what Governor Evers is doing, while others are following hyper-local stories about town governance and local infrastructure.

Similarly, there is a mix of channels and mediums consumed. For live coverage, people mentioned their local PBS stations, national and local talk radio, local TV news, Newsmax, ABC, Fox, CNN, News Nation, and Apple News. Print sources are just as varied with mentions including the Associated Press, the New York Times, the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel, Google News, and emailed newsletters.

A few study participants note that their mental health is better when they reduce their news consumption.

“As I’ve detached myself a bit from MSM over the last few years, my mood has greatly improved.”

– Julie A., Conservative Independent

“I have friends who watch the news throughout the day and before they go to sleep. They all are experiencing high levels of stress and don’t sleep well.”

– Karyn N., Moderate Democrat

Politics and Democracy

Rural Wisconsin voters largely see the biggest problem in politics as a lack of civility and willingness to find common ground. Voters see this as a barrier to the types of compromises that solve problems and keep government working. There are also concerns about extremism and politicians that don't keep their word to the people who elect them.

“The biggest problem is finding a middle ground between the parties. Their inability to work together is almost paralyzing, where not much ever gets accomplished.”

– Michelle S., Moderate Democrat

“I feel like the biggest issue in politics is divisiveness. We used to be able to hold different opinions but still live peacefully with one another; now, everyone is convinced that “the other side of the aisle” is the worst thing that’s ever happened to America and they’re going to lead to the complete downfall of our nation if their wants/desires get passed as law. People can’t even be civil toward each other anymore because they’re convinced their fellow American is “the enemy.”

– Bekki Z., Moderate Independent

“Politicians who become corrupt once they get there, get rich off of their office, and are privy to insider information and trading. Their only concern becomes being re-elected, and doing what they’re told, but not by their constituents.”

– Julie A., Conservative Independent

None of the voters who participated in this research feel the state of democracy in America today is in a good place. Responses range from “fine” to “in danger.” Self-identified Republicans tend to be more pessimistic about the state of democracy compared to Democrats although this is likely to be closely related to the outcome of recent elections.

“It is in danger. The citizens used to get one vote for our government officials and feel like it was a fair and honest vote.” – Petra S., Conservative Republican

“I feel our democracy is suffering at the hands of our inept government. Everyone has their own agenda and the people’s issues are being forgotten.” – Linda K., Conservative Republican

“The state of democracy is in flux at this point. What is ironic about it is that both sides of politics think the other side is trying to “end” democracy. Basic facts have been ignored.”

– Benjamin Z., Moderate Democrat

“I would say that the state of democracy is in somewhat of at least a degraded or threatened state in America today. I say that because many of the people within our country have lost the ability to disagree without feeling the need for retribution. True democracy would only seem to exist if we can have open and honest discussions about the things that we disagree about and then make decisions that would be seen as a compromise by both sides of an issue. Without compromise we lose the very meaning of democracy at its core.”

– Sean B., Moderate Independent

However, all voters are concerned about the potential for unfair election practices and election interference, even if they don't believe it happened in the past on a wide scale or impacted the final election results. Voters often cite advanced technology as an easy way to have an unfair impact on elections.

"I am concerned about the fairness and security of our elections. I work at my polling place for every election that I'm available. In my small town, we take the elections very seriously."

– Karyn N., Moderate Democrat

"I am concerned with foreign interference via online BS stories. Because some people, mostly youth, are only getting news from social media instead of reputable news organizations they are vulnerable to being swayed toward a particular viewpoint. AI has only made this year's election related social media news in greater jeopardy to interference than 2020."

– Tom B., Moderate Democrat

"I am somewhat concerned about the fairness and security of elections. I've heard of election centers closing early or not allowing people to vote; I've also heard of people not updating their address on their ID and then using different forms of ID to vote in two different locations. While I don't buy into the conspiracy theory that Trump won and the election was stolen, I have concerns about electronic ballots and who is in charge of verifying them. I have very little trust in our government overall, regardless of which way they lean."

– Bekki Z., Moderate Independent

Voting Behavior

There are a few voters in the group who had mismatched partisan votes. Two voters say they voted for President Trump in 2020 and Governor Evers in 2022. These two voters are largely disillusioned with the entire system and wanted it to work better for “everyday” people. For them, this includes greater government benefits, services, and regulation to ensure means are distributed fairly. One self-describes as a conservative Republican and the other as a moderate Democrat.

There are also five voters who voted for one of the major-party candidates in 2020 but have yet to make up their mind for the 2024 contest.

Unsure 2020 Trump Voters

The two who previously voted for Trump are centrist voters – one a Moderate Independent and one a Moderate Democrat. They both generally avoid the news. One is more cynical about the system believing it is “all rigged” while the other is optimistic but worries about the levels of divisiveness in politics today.

Unsure 2020 Biden Voters

Three voters voted for Biden in 2020 but are unwilling to commit to voting for him in 2024. All three are self-described Moderates, with two identifying as Democrats and one as an Independent. They all agree the biggest problem in politics today is divisiveness and the lack of middle ground between the parties.

“I think that the biggest problem with politics today is extremism. There are very few candidates that do not seem to feel they have to appeal to the farthest corners of their base.”
– Sean B., Moderate Independent

As a group, these unsure Biden 2020 voters have different issue priorities although “better roads” is a top three issue for all, showing a high level of concern for government that can solve problems close to home. Two are concerned with the environment, two with job opportunities and two with issues that are typically highlighted by the right – property tax cuts and protecting free speech.

Gubernatorial Race 2026

When it comes to a gubernatorial candidate in Wisconsin in 2026, rural voters want someone who will fill their desire for more common ground, civility and compromise. Rural voters also want someone who is going to work to improve the state rather than play politics or forget about constituents after the election. Some also look at a vote for governor as a check on the legislature, saying they will vote for the party who does not control the legislative process.

“I want someone who can be independent if needed but also that sticks to their core values. I have voted for Republican candidates in the past but the last decade there is such a grievance-based message from Republicans that I can’t see myself voting for a republican candidate.”
– Benjamin Z., Moderate Democrat

“I want someone who can be independent if needed but also that sticks to their core values. I have voted for Republican candidates in the past but the last decade there is such a grievance-based message from Republicans that I can’t see myself voting for a republican candidate.”

– Sean B., Moderate Independent

“Someone with a moral backbone. Not a puppet robot who does whatever the party line tells them to do. Someone who will listen to the majority of people in this state other than just those in Madison or Milwaukee.”

– William E., Very Conservative Republican

“Until the state legislature is closer to 50/50 Democrat-Republican and not so one party as it is now, I would want the governor to be a democrat to “off-set” the imbalance.”

– Tom B., Moderate Democrat

Policy Positions of Rural Wisconsin Voters

Respondents were asked to pick the three most important policy topics the state government should focus on. This research is qualitative in nature and results here cannot be projected to a broader population. However, the ability to get policy position preferences and additional intel as to why voters feel that way is valuable in understanding where rural voters are on the issues and why they might change their minds in the future.

Protecting the environment and improving roads are the two most popular policies among respondents. Earlier in the research, many rural Wisconsinites talked about how one of the benefits of where they live is nature and outdoor activities and so it is unsurprising they support protecting it.

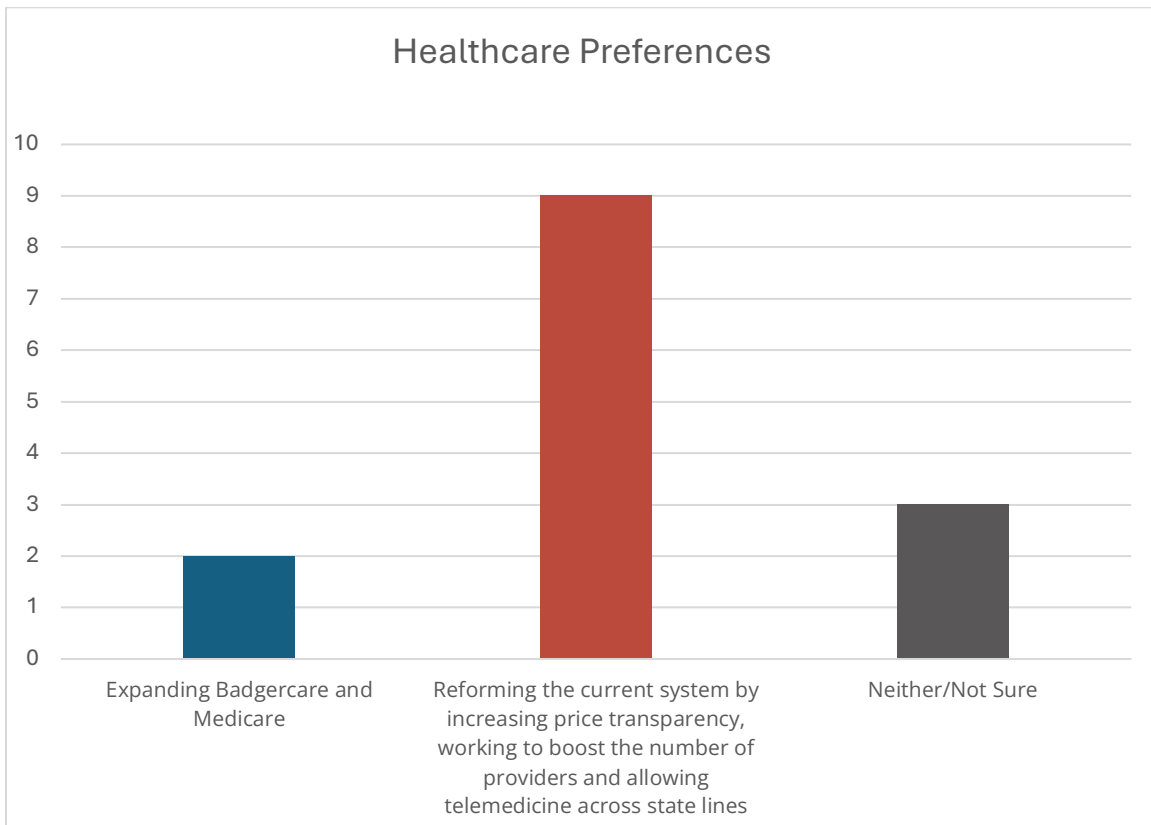
Better road and reducing crime are also important issues to this group of voters and speaks directly to quality of life in the respondents' communities. Property tax cuts and greater job opportunities are next on the list and speak to the economic concerns rural Wisconsinites have.

Policy	Number of Selections	Number Saying "Most Important"
Protecting the environment	7	4
Better roads	7	1
Reducing crime	6	2
Property tax cuts	6	0
Greater job opportunities	4	2
K-12 education reform	3	1
Protecting gun rights	3	0
Protecting free speech	3	2
Elimination of the state income tax	2	1
Doing more to push back against the federal government	2	0
Expanding K-12 school choice	1	0
Better access to the internet	0	0

Rural Wisconsinites were also asked about their positions on specific policy issues after they discussed the issues most important to them. In some cases, despite a range of political affiliations, the group has a clear policy preference which may or may not represent a free-market approach. On other issues, rural voters are more divided.

Healthcare

On healthcare, there is little support for expanding BadgerCare and Medicare in rural Wisconsin. While many rural residents are worried about the economy and being able to afford their bills, they largely feel the path forward on healthcare is to reform the medical care system to bring prices down, not to give away medical care for free. Many assume they would not benefit from an expanded government healthcare benefit.



"I feel that reform of the current system makes the most sense. In order to drive down healthcare costs it makes the most sense to increase transparency in pricing as this does represent the consumer with the best options and a better sense of how things are being billed. Competition between different providers will ultimately provide competition for services which, in turn, should help to lower costs."

– Karyn N., Moderate Democrat

"I do not think BadgerCare/Medicare expansion is the answer because I don't need people abusing their systems, and then costs get put on taxpayers."

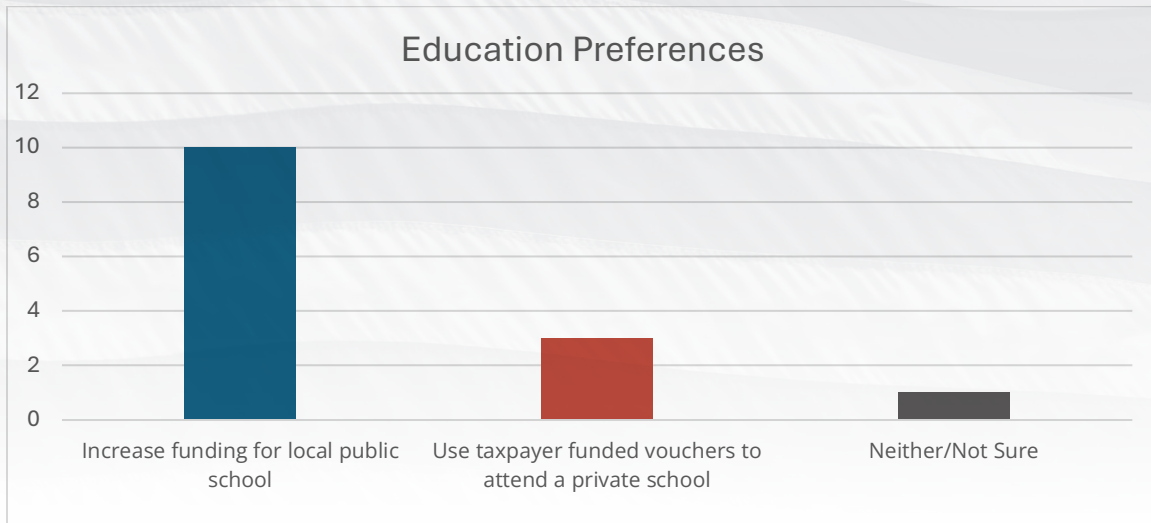
– Jessica M., Conservative Republican

"I'm not totally against the expanding Badgercare as long as the people are attempting to work. It's irritating the people who are on it that are not working who could be and there is nothing wrong with them."

– Jess V., Conservative Republican

School Choice

Wisconsin has a long history of school choice programs, but in rural communities, voters are more likely to want increased funding for public schools rather than taxpayer funded vouchers. Some talk about the community that local public schools provide, and others note that there are no private schools available in their area.



“Our local schools need the investment to help our kids succeed. Vouchers are a band aid that maybe helps a few kids but not the majority.”

– Benjamin Z., Moderate Democrat

“In my area there aren’t many private schools. All the children go to public schools. The way I look at it, I would rather it be fair and have everyone be able to get that opportunity/chance. How would you go about getting a taxpayer voucher anyway? Doesn’t sound promising to me.”

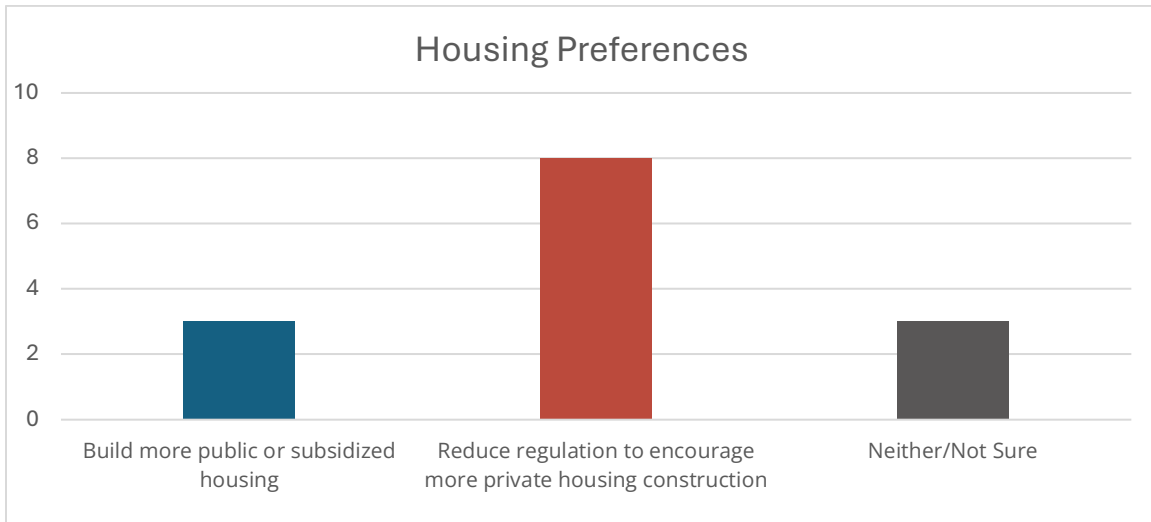
– Jess V., Conservative Republican

“Increasing funding for our local public school. We have great public schools where we live, really not many private options at all unless we drive 30-45 minutes.”

– Jessica M., Conservative Republican

Housing

There is more confidence that finding ways to expand private housing, rather than subsidizing government housing, will solve the housing shortage in rural Wisconsin. Several Wisconsinites that prefer private housing note that public housing does not help to build a community or sustain long-term growth. Many of those who favor additional government housing worry that it would just funnel money to builders and developers.



“Subsidizing others’ rent may help temporarily but doesn’t actually give people long-term assistance to own and care for their own property.”

– Bekki Z., Moderate Independent

“Public housing does nothing for the continued growth of a community.”

– William E., Conservative Republican

“Public and subsidized housing ends up being a warehouse for crime and supports keeping people dependent on the government instead of being self-supporting.”

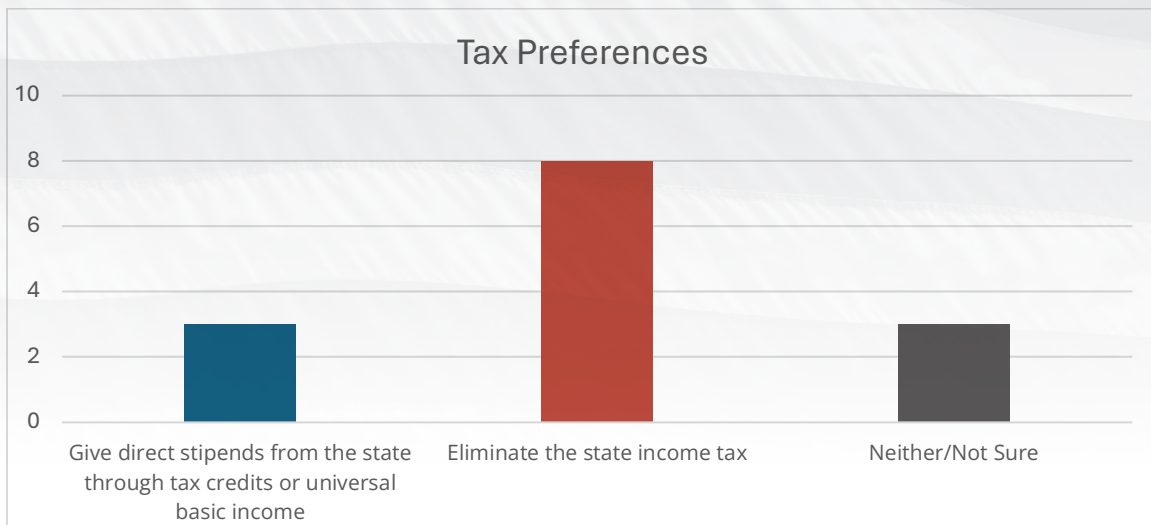
– Michelle S., Moderate Democrat

“I do not think more private housing would help, we have so many houses being built in the outlying areas of our school district already, and more private I just think of the higher prices not stopping.”

– Jessica M., Conservative Republican

Tax Policy

When it comes to state tax policy, rural residents prefer the elimination of the state income tax over guaranteed income or tax credits. There is a lack of understanding or skepticism about guaranteed income programs and tax credits. Many people who elsewhere in the research supported liberal economic policies surmise they would do better financially with the elimination of the state income tax compared to government assistance programs. Some don't believe either is a good option as the state needs the tax revenue to continue current programs.



“I don’t like tax credits though, I feel like it’s never made out to be as good as they make it, and I could likely save more money through the income tax elimination than I would through UBI or credits.

– Konrad B., Conservative Republican

“I’ve read a little about the UBI system. I can’t visualize that working well. Eliminating state income tax would help many seniors. I know retirees who’ve left the state because of our high taxes.”

– Karyn N., Moderate Democrat

“I would prefer option A. I close friend of mine was living in California with her husband and they were weighing their options regarding where they were going to move; they decided on Florida due to the state not charging income tax. She said after they moved, they couldn’t believe the difference in their paychecks.”

– Bekki Z., Moderate Independent

“I don’t support either. Income taxes are paid to keep our state running well. I’m not really sure what direct stipends would entail but it sounds somewhat communist.”

– Michelle S., Moderate Democrat

Free Speech

The importance of free speech is a unifying value in rural communities in Wisconsin. Only one person in the research feels free speech should be censored and that person is thinking of threatening hate speech, using the KKK as an example. Several people mention that while they fully support free speech, their hope is that people are able to express themselves while staying civil and respectful, reinforcing their desire for more civil political discourse.

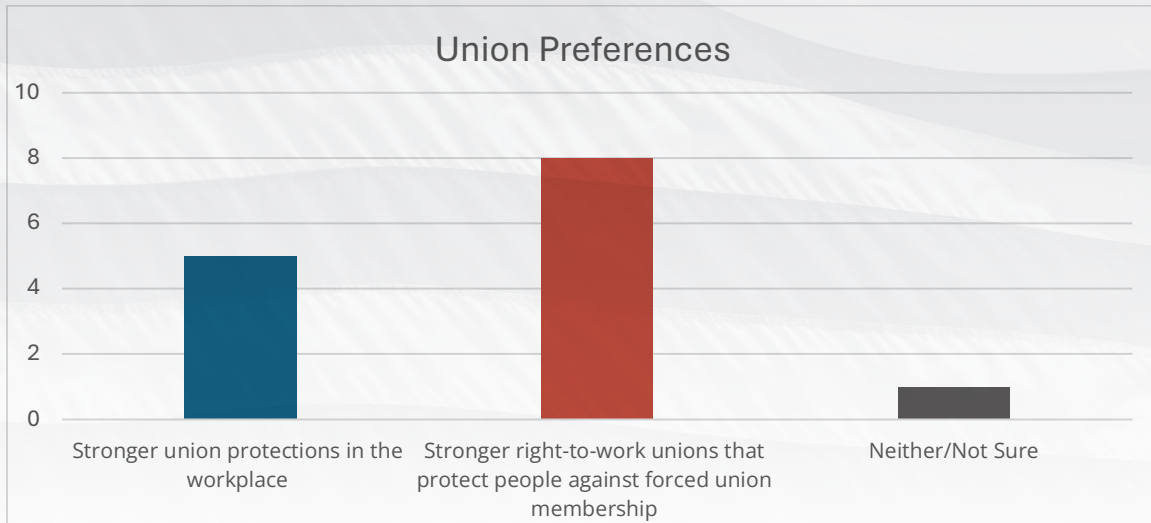


“Free speech must be allowed. But my hope is that people will express themselves without denigrating another person or group of people.”

- Karyn N., Moderate Democrat

Unions

Rural Wisconsinites are more evenly split on unions than any other issue tested. Some see the corruption or coercive nature of unions and want to be free from that dynamic. Others either have had good experiences with unions or gravitate to anything that protects and helps workers.



“I do not want stronger unions. I do not like the fact of unions backing people that do not do their job. I saw this when I was getting my teaching degree and unions were still a big thing, I came across multiple older teachers that were completely checked out, only there to coach sports or get their pension. It was so hard for me to swallow seeing this and the union protecting this. It should be a person’s opinion and option if they want to join a union.”
– Jessica M., Conservative Republican

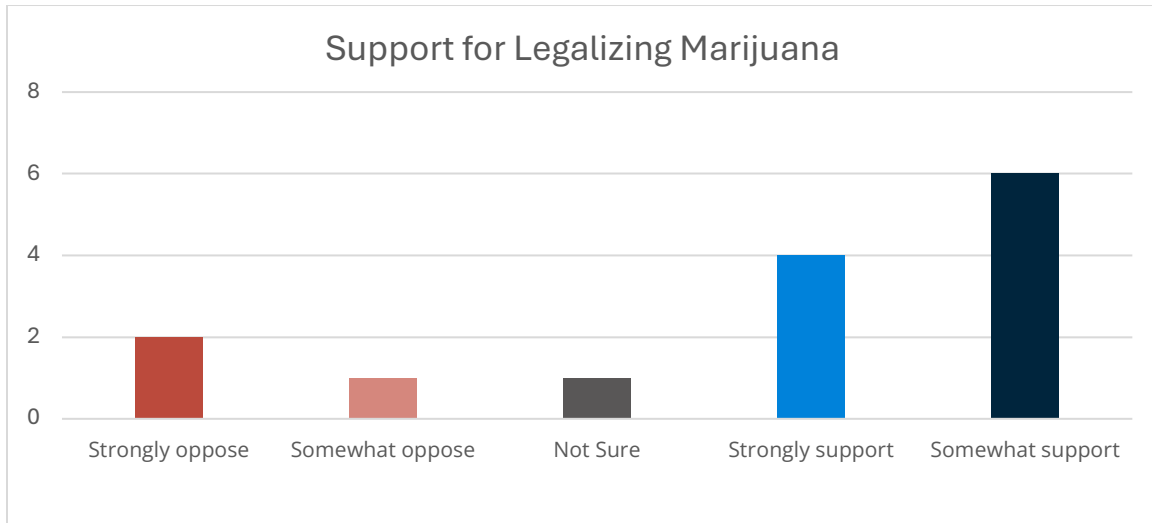
“I prefer strong union protections. I think there are more workers who want that than want right-to-work.”
– Tom B., Moderate Democrat

“We need a strong union presence in our state to protect workers and improve pay and conditions. A union has the ability to raise wages for an entire industry and is the only source of protection workers have.”
– Benjamin Z., Moderate Democrat

“[Stronger right-to-work protections] due to personal experience with a labor union bullying me into joining or quitting a job that I didn’t stay on too long due to that. When I said I wouldn’t join, they all stopped talking to me and never helped me with my work, even if they didn’t have much work that day and I was slammed.”
– Konrad B., Conservative Republican

Marijuana

Attitudes about legalizing marijuana are more liberal than one might expect from a generally conservative rural population. Only a handful of rural Wisconsin voters in this study oppose the legalization of the drug. There were many reasons to support legalization including it being a relatively safe drug (some think is safer than alcohol), it can create a revenue source for the state, and it can be used medicinally to relieve suffering.



“I think it’s safer than alcohol which is legal. It seems silly to not legalize it when we have a state bordering us where it is legal and a taxpaying industry.”

– Michelle S., Moderate Democrat

“Many states have already approved its use. I believe it does have medicinal value. I see alcohol as being more of a gateway drug (more readily available) than pot.”

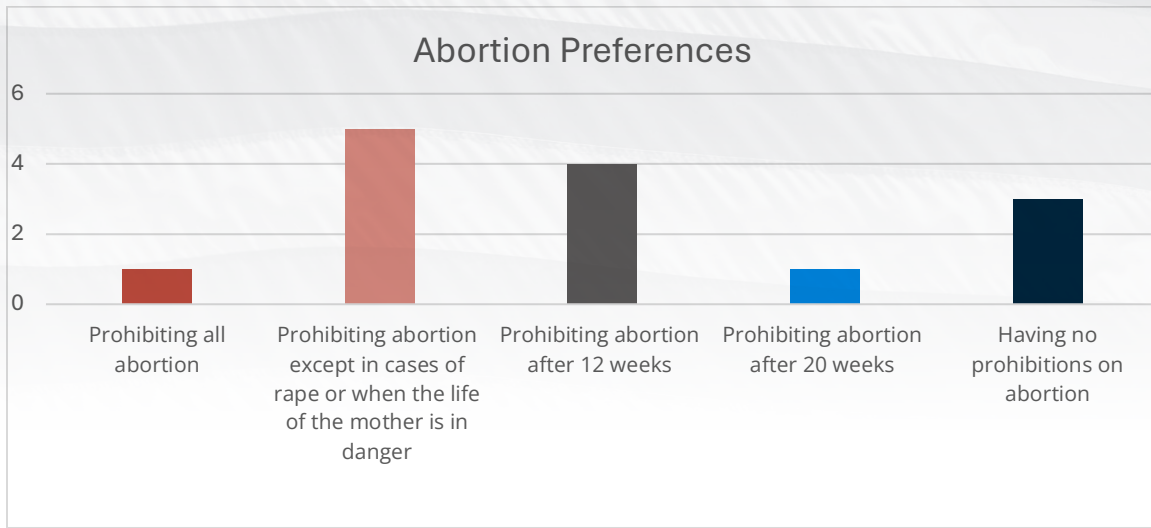
– Julie A., Conservative Independent

“It’s a natural herb. Let it be used. Keeping it illegal makes it cost more.”

– Petra S., Conservative Republican

Abortion

Abortion is always a contentious issue and especially so in Wisconsin where there have been several high-profile legal challenges to state laws after *Dobbs v. Jackson*. Rural voters, like voters across the state, have a wide variety of opinions on the issue. The majority of rural voters in this study favor allowing abortion but in tightly controlled circumstances or before 12 weeks. Full bans even among this more conservative population are not popular. Many rural Wisconsinites picked their answer from the choices provided and then offered additional context or things they would like to see in laws, underscoring the difficulty in finding a firm standard on which most people can agree.



I choose [prohibiting abortion except in cases of rape or when the life of the mother is in danger] in this case as I consider myself pro-life. My only issue with having to choose any option here is that I do not feel it is my place to make the choice for another individual especially given the fact that I am not a woman and cannot make a decision that doesn't have a direct effect on me."

– Sean B., Moderate Independent

"No prohibitions. I would favor prohibiting extremely late term abortion say 30 weeks because it would more likely be adopted (become state law) vs no prohibitions."

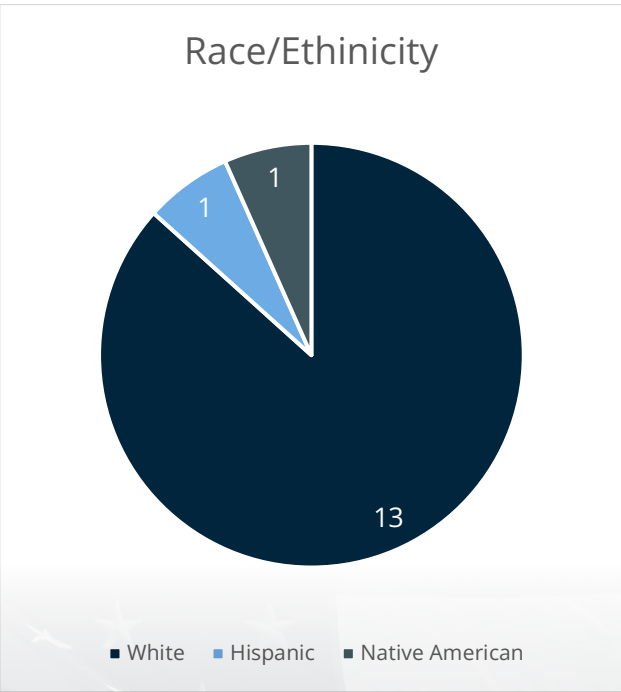
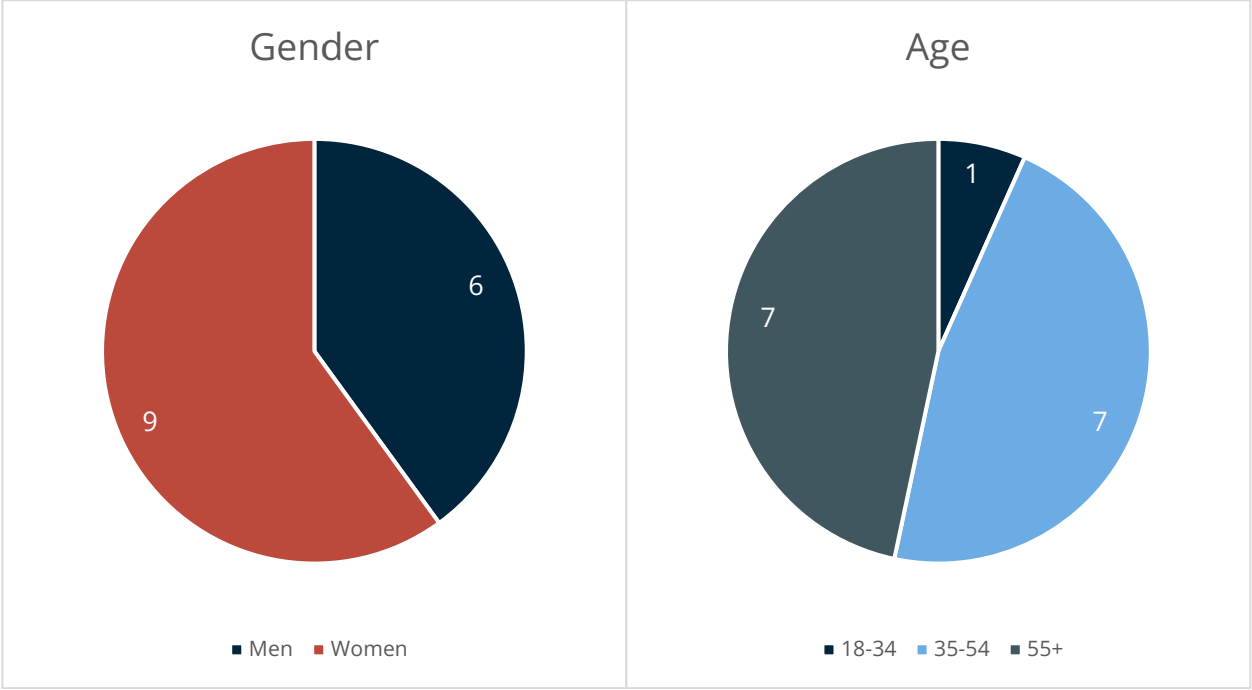
– Tom B., Moderate Democrat

"If carrying the child causes major health issues for the mother, she should have the right to terminate the pregnancy. Let alone if someone is raped, that experience is traumatic and life altering."

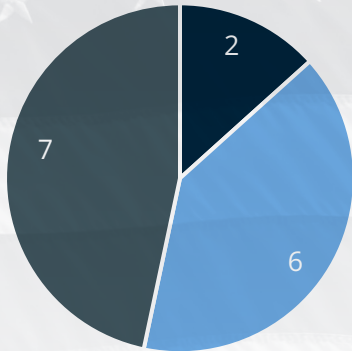
– Jessica M., Conservative Republican

Respondent Profile

Demographics

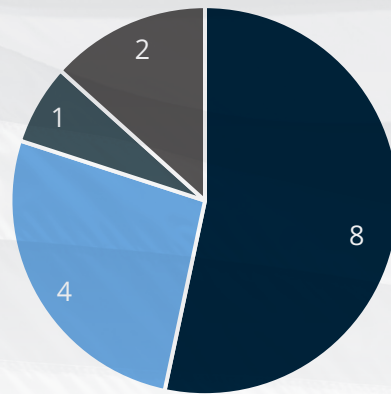


Education



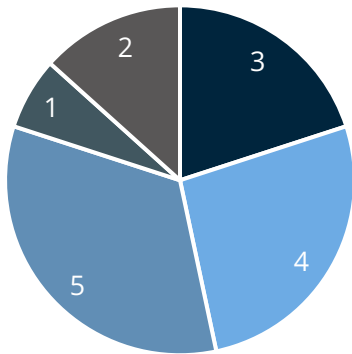
- High School
- Some College/Associate's Degree
- Bachelors' Degree or More

Employment



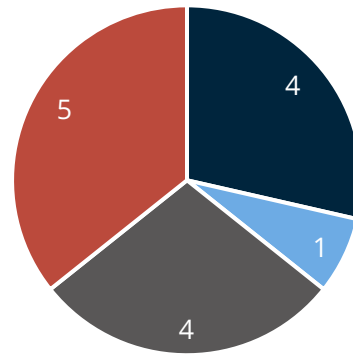
- Employed full-time
- Employed part-time
- Seasonal part-time
- Retired

Household Income

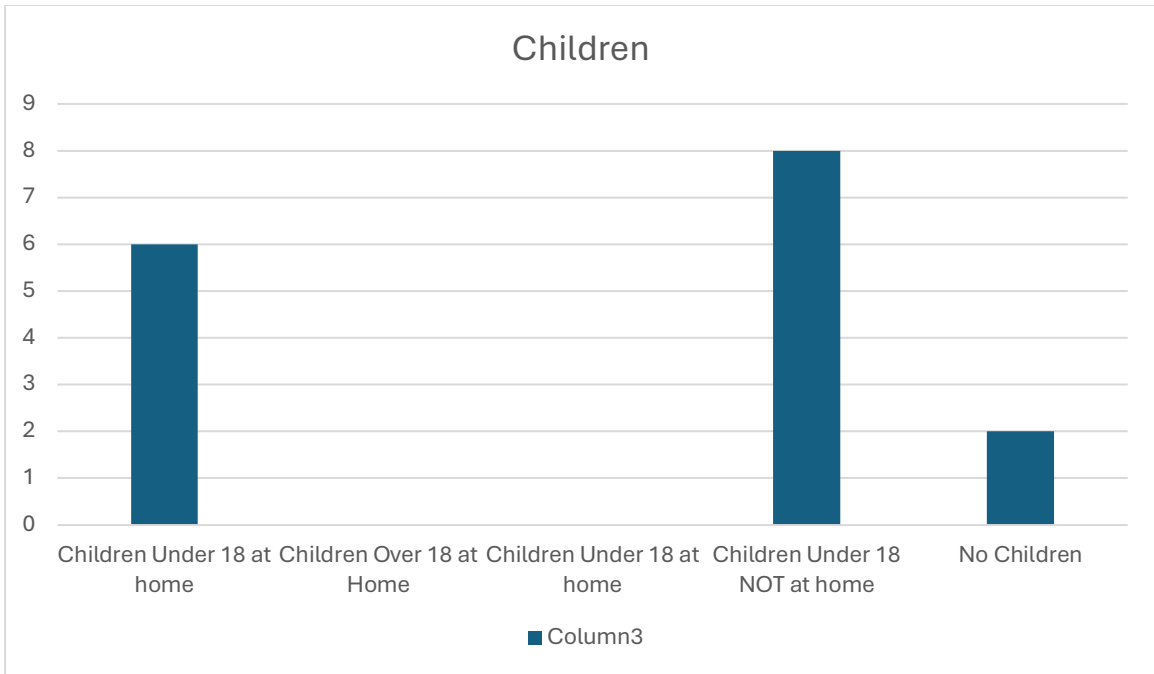


- Less than \$25,000
- \$25,000-\$50,000
- \$50,000-\$75,000
- \$75,000-\$100,000
- \$100,000-\$150,000
- More than \$150,000

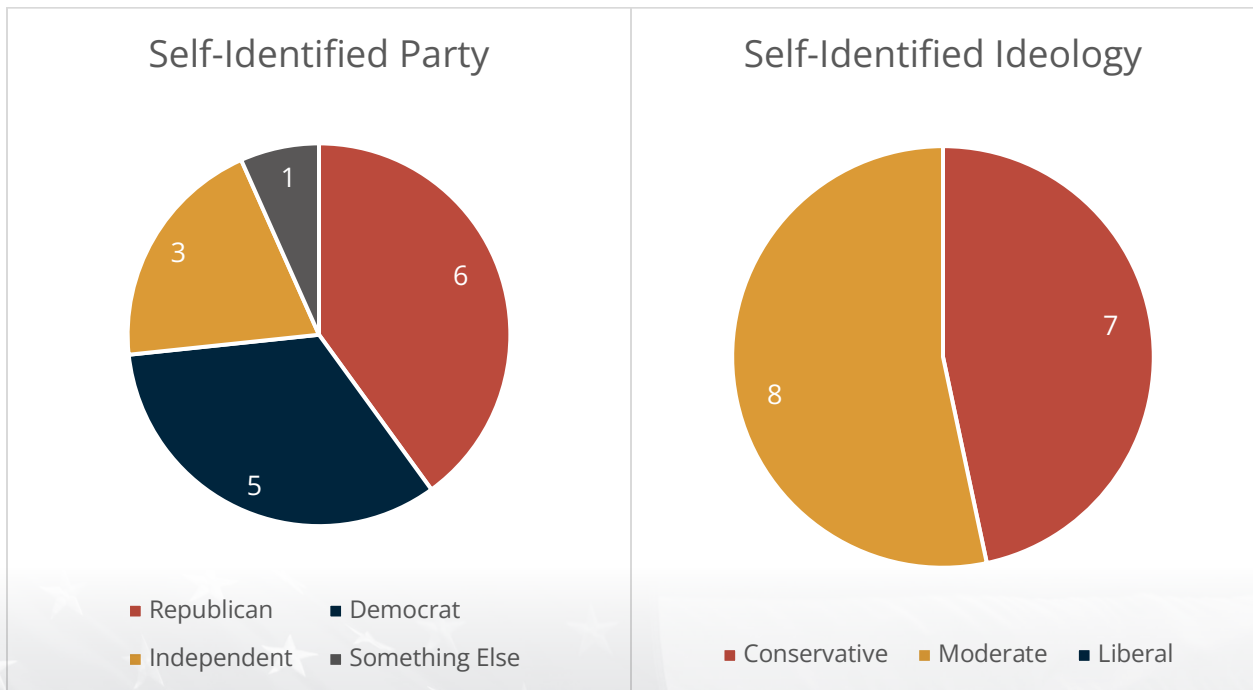
Church Attendance



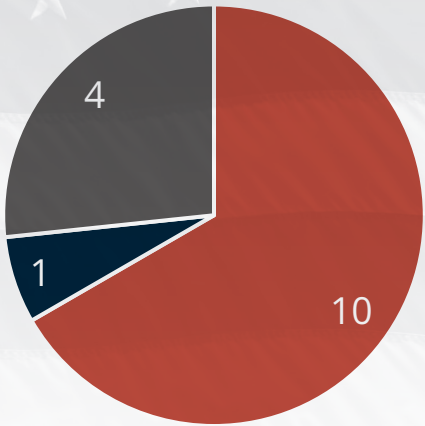
- At least once a week
- A few times a month
- At least once a month
- Less than once a month
- Never



Political Preferences

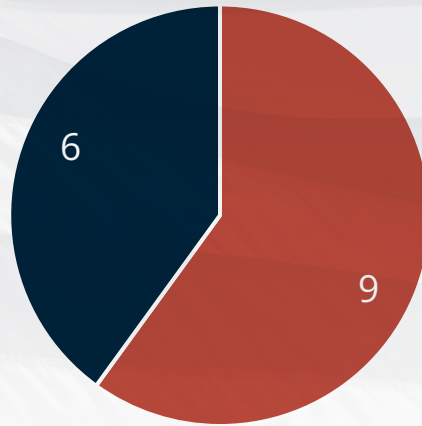


2016 Presidential Vote



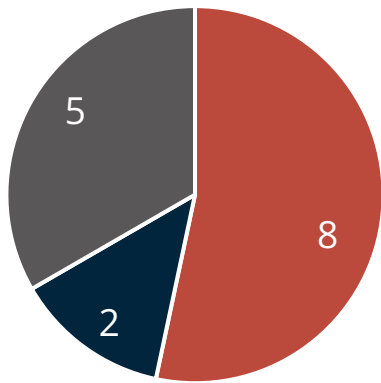
■ Trump ■ Clinton ■ Did Not Vote

2020 Presidential Vote



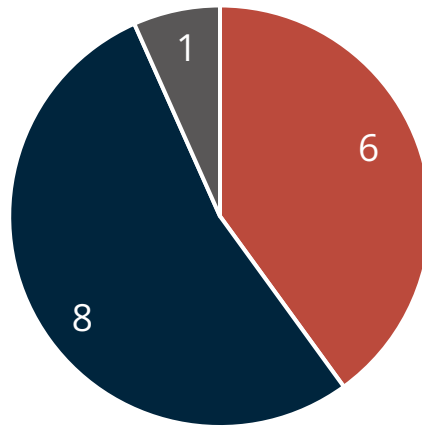
■ Trump ■ Biden ■ Did Not Vote

2024 Anticipated Presidential Vote



■ Trump ■ Biden ■ Not Sure Yet

2022 WI Gubernatorial Vote



■ Michels ■ Evers ■ Did Not Vote



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