



Liberal Arts

*How **BadgersVote Coalition** Uses Donor Cash to Import Democratic Votes*



INSTITUTE FOR
REFORMING GOVERNMENT



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report unpacks exactly how BadgersVote Coalition's election day liberal turnout operation works and poses important oversight questions for UW-Madison administrators, including, most importantly, whether the program violates the Wisconsin Constitution's new ban on private funding of election administration.

- » UW-Madison's BadgersVote Coalition is a campus-wide initiative aimed at turning out votes among the school's overwhelmingly liberal student body.
- » IRG's independent review of the Coalition's operations raises several concerns, including turnout that is difficult to reconcile with the number of eligible campus voters, and an apparent mixing of private funds with university election activity that the state's new constitutional restrictions may reach.
- » Wisconsin voters amended the State Constitution in 2024 to bar state agencies and their employees from using privately donated money in connection with the conduct of an election. UW-Madison is a state agency; the Coalition partners with the Madison City Clerk, hosts polling places on campus, and has drawn on private funds.
- » A complete audit of the Coalition's finances and operations is necessary to ensure Wisconsin's elections are run fairly and university funds spent and managed appropriately.

Background. In the 2024 presidential election, no state’s voters were more closely divided than Wisconsin’s; President Donald Trump won Wisconsin’s 10 electoral votes by just 0.86%, or 29,397 votes.¹ The 2020 margin was narrower still: Joe Biden edged out Trump by just 20,682 votes, or 0.63%.² Indeed, Wisconsin was the *only* state in the Union with a sub-1% margin in the last three presidential elections,³ appropriately earning the moniker “America’s battleground.”⁴ Elections in Wisconsin are often a game of inches.

But these razor-thin margins mask the high concentration of Democratic votes in just a few areas. It’s no secret, for example, that Dane County represents one of just two principal locations where the Left gains its necessary inches each cycle (Milwaukee County being the other).⁵ Take the last presidential election, where Kamala Harris took 273,995 votes (75%) to Trump’s 85,454 (23%) in Dane County, one of just 13 Wisconsin counties (out of 72) she won.⁶ Or consider the November 2024 U.S. Senate race in Wisconsin, where Dane County provided Tammy Baldwin with more than 16% of her statewide total.⁷ High turnout in Dane County is essential to Democratic victories.

Dane County’s enormous margins have several causes. This report focuses on an important one: the BadgersVote Coalition at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, the University of Wisconsin System’s flagship school.⁸

The BadgersVote Coalition traces its origins to 2013. A year later, Kathy Cramer became faculty director of the University’s Morgridge Center for Public Service and

¹ *Presidential statewide margins of victory of five percentage points or fewer, 1948-2024*, Ballotpedia, available [here](#).

² *Id.*

³ *Id.*

⁴ Brit McCandless Farmer, *America’s battleground: Wisconsin’s free-thinking voters*, CBS News (Oct. 20, 2024), available [here](#).

⁵ Nuha Dolby, *Democrats in Wisconsin’s Bluest County Want the Party to Make Inroads Everywhere Else*, NOTUS (now The Washington Sun) (Oct. 28, 2024), available [here](#).

⁶ *2024 General Election*, County of Dane, available [here](#); Charles Franklin, *Wisconsin County Votes for President and Senate*, Marquette Univ. L. Sch. Faculty Blog (Nov. 7, 2024), available [here](#).

⁷ *2024 General Election Results*, Politico, available [here](#); (statewide total of 1,672,777 votes for Baldwin).

⁸ *About BadgersVote*, University of Wisconsin-Madison, available [here](#).

made student voter engagement a priority.⁹ The Coalition describes itself as a “non-partisan, educational initiative of the University of Wisconsin–Madison, whose mission is to equip students with the knowledge and resources necessary to be active participants in democracy.”¹⁰ This innocuous description, however, masks the Coalition’s real nature and purpose. University administrators built the program more than a decade ago to juice turnout in Wisconsin’s most liberal county.

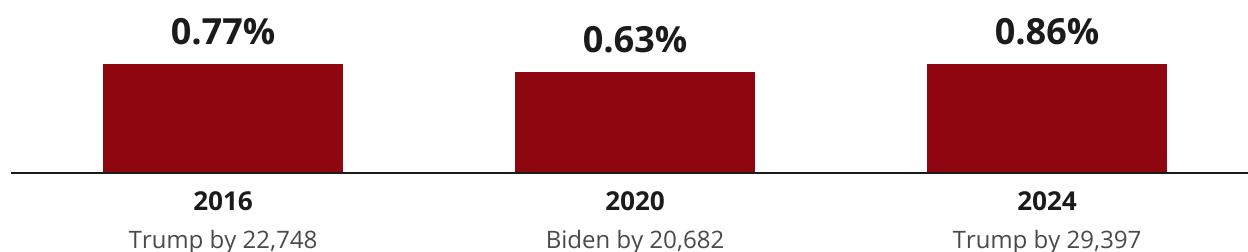
In 2016, UW-Madison joined 575 colleges and universities in the ALL IN Campus Democracy Challenge, a national student voter engagement campaign.¹¹ Using cash from left-wing donors, the University harvests votes from its overwhelmingly left-wing student body—including many students who have never previously participated in Wisconsin elections. By the University’s own measures, the program has been a roaring success, and it continues to expand.

This report unpacks exactly how UW-Madison’s election day liberal turnout operation works and poses important oversight questions for UW-Madison administrators, including, most importantly, whether the program violates the Wisconsin Constitution’s new ban on private funding of election administration.

FIGURE 1

A Game of Inches

Wisconsin’s presidential margins of victory in 2016, 2020, and 2024, each under one percent.



Source: Ballotpedia (n.1). Scale: full bar height = 1.0%.

⁹ *BadgersVote Through the Years*, Morgridge Center for Public Service, available [here](#) (explaining that UW-Madison joined the ALL IN Campus Democracy Challenge in 2016, and that the BadgersVote Coalition officially formed after the 2018 midterms).

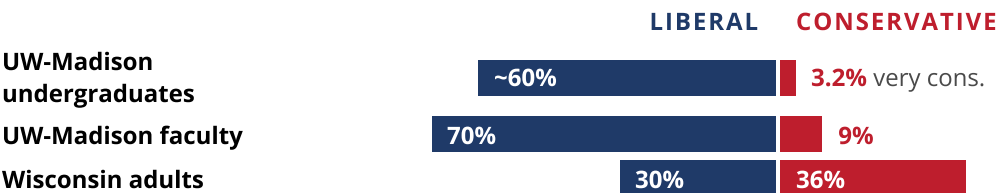
¹⁰ *About BadgersVote*, *supra* n.8.

¹¹ *Participating Campuses: University of Wisconsin-Madison*, ALL IN Campus Democracy Challenge, available [here](#).

How the BadgersVote Coalition Works

Step 1: Find an overwhelmingly liberal community. A liberal get-out-the-vote operation first requires liberal votes—and there is perhaps no more fertile ground for this in the entire state of Wisconsin than the campus of UW-Madison. The school enrolled 51,822 students in fall 2025—well above Wisconsin’s recent presidential margins.¹² Recent data confirm what everyone already knows: the student body’s political affiliation is deep blue. In a survey published in 2023, nearly 60% of the undergraduate student body identified as very liberal or somewhat liberal, a number that increased to almost 80% when so-called moderates were included.¹³ Just 3.2% identified as very conservative—the lowest share among the System’s 13 campuses.¹⁴ A recent survey of the school’s faculty found the same tilt: 70% identify as some form of liberal, and only 9% as some form of conservative.¹⁵ Compare these numbers to Wisconsin as a whole, where (by one measure) Wisconsinites identify as liberal and conservative at a rate of 30% to 36%, respectively,¹⁶ and it becomes clear why the Left sees Madison’s campus as a goldmine for blue votes. It also shows how Madison can easily achieve its goals while running its turnout program in a “non-partisan” manner, knowing full well that the vast majority of votes harvested will go to the liberal candidate.

FIGURE 2 Campus vs. State: self-identified ideology



¹² *About UW-Madison*, University of Wisconsin-Madison, available [here](#).

¹³ April Bleske-Rechek et al., *UW System Student Views on Freedom of Speech* at 13, University of Wisconsin System (Feb. 1, 2023), available [here](#). Please note that all page citations for PDFs cited in this report are to the PDF page number as opposed to the printed page number.

¹⁴ *Id.*

¹⁵ Alex Tahk, *Faculty Perspectives on Academic Freedom, Free Expression and Campus Climate at UW-Madison* at 6, Tommy G. Thompson Center on Public Leadership, Universities of Wisconsin (Mar. 8, 2026), available [here](#).

¹⁶ Public Religion Research Institute, *The 2024 Battleground: Inside Wisconsin* (July 9, 2024), available [here](#).

Step 2: Ensure the members of that community are eligible to vote. But are all these potential voters—many of whom come from out of state—even eligible? After all, Wisconsin law defines a person’s “residence” for voting purposes as “the place where the person’s habitation is fixed, without any present intent to move, and to which, when absent, the person intends to return.”¹⁷ Similarly, “[n]o person gains a residence in any ward or election district of this state while there for temporary purposes only.”¹⁸

Despite Chapter 6’s seemingly clear definition of residence for voting purposes, it goes on to create a carve-out for students by providing that the residence of a student “who boards at different places for part of the week, month, or year, if one of the places is the residence of the person’s parents, is the place of the parents’ residence unless through registration or similar act the person elects to establish a residence elsewhere.”¹⁹ Additionally, the Wisconsin Election Commission has interpreted “no present intent to move” and “intent to return” as follows: “It is not necessary that there be an intention to remain permanently at the voting residence. It is sufficient that the place is for the time being the home of the voter to the exclusion of other places. Once established, a person’s residency is presumed to continue until a new one is established. A voter’s statements and actions alone can establish intent.”²⁰

A closer look at the data suggests a large share of non-resident UW-Madison students take advantage of the statutory exemption for purposes of voting in Wisconsin elections. About half of the 37,198 undergraduate students at UW-Madison in 2025 were non-residents for tuition purposes.²¹ Regardless of how much this should overlap with the definition of non-resident for voting purposes, a July 2026 study suggests that of those tuition non-residents, only 23.9% stay in

¹⁷ Wis. Stat. § 6.10(1).

¹⁸ Wis. Stat. § 6.10(8).

¹⁹ Wis. Stat. § 6.10(4); *see also* Wis. Stat. § 6.10(12) (“Student status shall not be a consideration in determining residence for the purpose of establishing voter eligibility.”).

²⁰ WEC Guide to Student Residency, available [here](#).

²¹ 2025–2026 Data Digest at 2, University of Wisconsin-Madison, available [here](#).

Wisconsin one year out from graduation (a number which falls to 13.8% a decade out).²² In other words, much of UW-Madison’s student body likely has a temporary, not fixed, habitation here, instead intending to return to their home state or elsewhere. The same statute also provides that a student who lives part of the year at her parents’ home resides, by default, where her parents do, unless they proactively establish a residence elsewhere.²³

All this begs an important policy question. Why should a student from Indiana who moves to Wisconsin for school intending to leave Wisconsin upon graduation, and who may spend summers and holidays at home, help decide who sits for a decade on the Wisconsin Supreme Court? However one answers that question, the answer is not that the law is being flouted. It is being followed. Wisconsin lets a student elect residence here “through registration or similar act,” and a separate provision bars officials from considering “[s]tudent status” at all in determining residence.²⁴ The election a student makes by registering is therefore lawful—but it is still an election, and it still carries the statutory requirement that habitation be fixed and not merely temporary. The practical consequences of that gap are twofold.

First, available guidance frequently treats voting in Wisconsin as a simple choice a student can make with little discussion of what residency actually means. UW-Milwaukee’s voter FAQ page, for instance, reads: “[Q:] My permanent residence is not in Wisconsin. Can I still vote in my state election? [A:] If you are from out of state, you will need to decide if you want to vote in Milwaukee or in your home state’s elections.”²⁵ Likewise, many sources—like BadgersVote—incompletely state that students need only “reside[] in Wisconsin for at least 28 consecutive days before Election Day,” without explaining that temporary habitation is not residency.²⁶

²² Junjie Guo & Ananth Seshadri, *Developing and Retaining a Skilled Workforce in Wisconsin* at 20, Center for Research on the Wisconsin Economy, University of Wisconsin-Madison, available [here](#).

²³ Wis. Stat. § 6.10(4).

²⁴ Wis. Stat. § 6.10(4) (parents’ residence controls “unless through registration or similar act the person elects to establish a residence elsewhere”); *id.* § 6.10(12) (“Student status shall not be a consideration in determining residence . . .”).

²⁵ *Student Voter Information: Frequently Asked Questions*, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, available [here](#).

²⁶ *Register to Vote in Wisconsin*, BadgersVote, University of Wisconsin-Madison, available [here](#).

A prominent left-wing special interest group waters down the requirement even further, omitting the word “reside” and advertising on its student voting information page that students “need to have *lived* at [their] current address for at least 28 days by Election Day in order to register to vote in that election district or ward.”²⁷

Second, the guidance omits the simplest lawful option. A student who remains domiciled in Illinois or Minnesota may vote absentee there, which avoids the residency question entirely and has become markedly easier over the past decade. The University’s materials press registration in Wisconsin and say little about the alternative. That silence matters for a second reason, developed below: because a student voting absentee at home counts toward UW-Madison’s reported turnout exactly as a student voting on State Street does, the University’s own figures cannot distinguish between the two.

Those at UW-Madison looking to get out the liberal vote, then, know there are many thousands of liberal votes available on campus and no real bar to harvesting all of those votes. The only challenge is to get those students physically registered and to the polls. That requires a well-organized, well-funded operation—the BadgersVote Coalition.

Step 3: Form and run the liberal turnout operation. While public information about the BadgersVote Coalition is sparse, and most of what exists is relatively nonspecific, enough has accumulated over the years to generate a rough sketch of the apparatus.

The Coalition began to take real shape around the time of President Trump’s political rise, with constituent members of the yet-to-be-formed Coalition heavily involved in the 2016 election.²⁸ After the 2018 midterms, the Coalition was formally organized at the University, and it has since ballooned into the massive, “campus-wide initiative” it is today.²⁹

²⁷ *Student Voting Guide*, Common Cause Wisconsin, available [here](#) (emphasis added).

²⁸ *BadgersVote Through the Years*, *supra* n.9.

²⁹ *Id.*

By 2024, the Coalition could boast of a partnership of “many individuals, units and departments across campus and the city of Madison,”³⁰ including the offices of the Provost, Student Affairs, University Relations, Strategic Communication, and Finance and Administration, UW Athletics, and various student groups, as well as a campus staff of six, third-party-sponsored interns in earlier cycles (more on that later), and the City of Madison’s clerk’s office.³¹

One name recurs across all of it. John Zumbrunnen, a professor of political science, has chaired the BadgersVote Coalition since at least 2024, and the University’s own announcement of the Coalition’s 2022 turnout award identifies him as its faculty chair.³² He also helped found the Division for Teaching and Learning and oversaw it as senior vice provost for academic affairs and vice provost for teaching and learning.³³ When the Coalition’s management was moved out of the Morgridge Center for Public Service—after Wisconsin voters amended the state constitution to bar private funding of election administration—the destination was the Division for Teaching and Learning, the division he helped found and then oversaw. The Morgridge Center had itself sat inside that division since 2022, so the reporting line moved up one level rather than across. What moved further was the program’s visibility.³⁴

Zumbrunnen became interim provost in June 2025 and was named provost and executive vice chancellor for academic affairs on March 9, 2026. He is now the University’s chief academic officer and its second-ranking official.³⁵

³⁰ *Annual Report 2023-24* at 29, Morgridge Center for Public Service, University of Wisconsin-Madison (June 2024), available [here](#).

³¹ *2024 Campus Action Plan* at 3–4, University of Wisconsin-Madison, available [here](#). *2020 Campus Action Plan* at 3, University of Wisconsin-Madison, available [here](#) (listing sponsored interns).

³² *UW-Madison Nationally Recognized for Greatest Overall Turnout in 2022 Big Ten Voting Challenge*, Univ. of Wis.-Madison News (Sept. 11, 2024), available [here](#) (identifying Zumbrunnen as “faculty chair of the BadgersVote Coalition”); *2024 Campus Action Plan*, *supra* n.32, at 3 (listing Zumbrunnen as “BadgersVote Chair”).

³³ *John Zumbrunnen*, Univ. of Wis.-Madison Commencement, available [here](#) (Zumbrunnen oversaw and helped found the Division for Teaching and Learning).

³⁴ *Annual Report 2024-25* at 27, Morgridge Center for Public Service, University of Wisconsin-Madison (June 2025), available [here](#).

³⁵ *John Zumbrunnen Named UW-Madison Provost and Executive Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs*, Univ. of Wis.-Madison News (Mar. 9, 2026), available [here](#).

FIGURE 3

A Decade of Expansion

The Coalition's growth from its 2013 origins through the 2024 move to the Division for Teaching and Learning.

2013	● Coalition traces its origins.
2014	● Kathy Cramer becomes Morgridge Center faculty director; makes student voting a priority.
2016	● UW-Madison joins the ALL IN Campus Democracy Challenge.
2018	● Coalition formally organized after the midterms.
2020	● 24,572 students vote; CTCL grants flow to Wisconsin cities.
2022	● 55.8% turnout; Big Ten Voting Challenge award, Zumbrunnen named faculty chair.
Apr. 2024	● Voters amend the Constitution to ban private funding of election administration (54%).
After 2024	● Management quietly shifted from the Morgridge Center to the Division for Teaching and Learning.
June 2025	● Zumbrunnen becomes interim provost.
Mar. 2026	● Zumbrunnen named provost and executive vice chancellor.

The University has never said who authorized the Coalition's move, on whose recommendation, or on what record. The man who chaired the program, helped found the division that received it, and now runs the academic side of the University could answer those questions directly. The public record does not show that anyone has asked him. The 2024 Action Plan lists Zumbrunnen, by his senior administrative titles, as "BadgersVote Chair."³⁶ The University is throwing its full weight behind this program.

So what does the Coalition do? Its many activities boil down to one thing: getting out the (liberal) vote by any means necessary. This is done in three parts.³⁷

³⁶ 2024 Campus Action Plan, *supra* n.32, at 3.

³⁷ See *id.* at 5–9. These strategies are reported prospectively in the Coalition's Action Plan.

First, the Coalition registers as many voters as possible, going so far as to provide information to Madison’s clerk via the University so that registration forms and instructions are mailed “to all eligible students living in campus residence halls,” with numerous follow-up registration events throughout the year such as at other campus events, “when students pick up their bus passes at the beginning of the semester,” when students pick up their textbooks, and on “National Voter Registration Day.”³⁸

Next, in what could be dubbed the “BadgeringVoters” phase, the Coalition “educates” students about the need to vote in countless ways, such as via “an electronic newsletter distributed to all students,” a newsletter sent to all parents, slides shared with instructors, materials given to all incoming students when they pick up their campus IDs, again when they attend the Chancellor’s Convocation, and through numerous videos, social media posts, and other websites.³⁹

Finally, when voting actually occurs, the Coalition holds many more on-campus events and sends out many more communications, including via texts, chalk messages, stand-up banners, t-shirts, bracelets, and more, including during early voting when students are encouraged to vote at one of three voting locations on campus.⁴⁰

The upshot: it would take a miracle for a student to withstand the barrage of peer and faculty pressure continuously directed toward harvesting that student’s vote. And that, of course, is the point.

Step 4: Harvest the votes—and decline to count where they landed. The program works. Between the 2014 and 2022 midterms, the number of UW-Madison undergraduates who voted rose from 10,666 to roughly 17,600.⁴¹ In 2022, 80.2% of eligible UW-Madison students were registered, and 55.8% voted—far above the 30.6% national rate for college students.⁴² The University touts the highest student registration and turnout of any four-year college in Wisconsin and the greatest overall turnout in the 2022 Big Ten Voting Challenge.⁴³

³⁸ *Id.* at 5, 7–8.

³⁹ *Id.* at 7–9.

⁴⁰ *Id.* at 9.

⁴¹ Student Voting Rates, *supra* n.27, at 13.

⁴² *Id.* at 4–5.

⁴³ UW–Madison Nationally Recognized, *supra* n.33.

These are the numbers the University measures, promotes, and submits for national recognition. They are also, by construction, the wrong numbers for assessing the Coalition's effect on Wisconsin elections. The registration and voting rates come from the National Study of Learning, Voting, and Engagement, which produces them by matching UW-Madison's enrollment records against national voter files. A student who registers and votes absentee in Illinois counts toward UW-Madison's rates exactly as one who votes on State Street does. The figures measure participation somewhere in the United States. The University does not report—and so far as the public record shows, does not track—how many of those ballots were cast in Wisconsin.

Its own data nonetheless establish a floor. In 2020, UW-Madison reported that 18% of its student voters cast ballots in person on Election Day and another 16% voted early in person. Ballots cast in person are cast where the voter is standing. On the University's own accounting, then, at least a third of the 24,572 students who voted that year—more than 8,000 ballots—were cast at Wisconsin polling places, many of them at polling locations sited on the campus itself. Joseph Biden carried Wisconsin that year by 20,682 votes.

That comparison is offered for scale, not causation. No one can say how those students voted, and the Coalition would be quick to note that its materials never ask them to vote one way. But the Center for Tech and Civic Life (“CTCL”) experience, discussed below, established the relevant principle: ostensibly nonpartisan turnout work can move statewide outcomes when it is concentrated in partisan territory. The Coalition operates at a scale of thousands of Wisconsin ballots per cycle, on a campus where fewer than one student in twenty-five identifies as very conservative, in the county that produces the Left's decisive margins. A program with those characteristics does not need to be partisan in design to be partisan in effect—and it does not need to have decided any particular election to warrant an accounting of what it does and how it is paid for.

No such accounting exists. And the Coalition is expanding. Its 2026 Action Plan is not yet public, but student leaders have recently workshopped proposed University policy changes that would extend excused absences for student election officials to cover early voting periods and keep election days free of major assignments. Whatever the merits of those proposals, they would enlarge a program whose finances, guidance materials, and Wisconsin-specific results are all unavailable to the public that funds it.⁴⁴

⁴⁴ Abigail Wandersee, *ASM leaders propose amendment to expand UW election day policy to include early voting*, The Badger Herald (April 23, 2026), available [here](#).

Problems with the Coalition

Defenders of the BadgersVote Coalition will point to the obvious fig leaf justifying the Coalition's existence: voting is a civic good, and the program is ostensibly run in a non-partisan manner. So why complain?

The core concern is not student voting or nonpartisan get-out-the-vote drives in principle. Rather, it is the improper leverage of public university infrastructure and targeted private dollars to build a partisan turnout machine under the guise of civic engagement.

First, consider the extent of private resources. Operating an extensive campus-wide voter turnout initiative demands funding. The Coalition has relied on third-party advocacy groups including the Campus Vote Project, the League of Women Voters, and the Andrew Goodman Foundation to sponsor and fund dedicated interns; the terms of those sponsorships have never been disclosed. The Morgridge Center, which housed the Coalition until 2024, reports its own gifts and grants annually—\$39,965 in 2025-26, of which \$15,000 was designated to undergraduate fellowships, \$15,000 to Badger Volunteers, and \$9,965 came from individuals. No disclosed gift is designated to voter engagement, and the three sponsoring groups do not appear in the donor table at all. That is the point: the money the University discloses is modest and directed elsewhere, while the money that actually underwrites the turnout operation has never been accounted for publicly.

The Morgridge Center has not stepped back from this work. In June 2026 it published its development priorities for the coming year, and among them is “the expansion of nonpartisan voter education and mobilization efforts, ensuring that students are equipped with the knowledge, tools, and confidence to engage meaningfully in the electoral process.” That is a unit of a state agency, writing twenty-six months after ratification, soliciting private philanthropic money to expand voter mobilization. Whatever conclusion one reaches about flows that have already occurred, the University has announced its intention to raise more private money for this purpose. The Legislature need not wait for the next annual report to ask what that money will fund and whether Article III, § 7 permits it.

Wisconsin knows full well what happens when private parties are allowed to meddle in state-affiliated election operations. Most famously, Mark Zuckerberg channeled millions of dollars to Wisconsin municipalities through the Center for Tech and Civic Life in the months leading up to the 2020 election, with nearly 86% of the grants going to the 5 largest cities in the state.⁴⁵ These cities then spent portions of these grants on “non-partisan” voter education efforts,” with one study estimating “a potential electoral impact of more than 8,000 votes in the direction of Biden” statewide.⁴⁶

Following the Money

What the public record shows about the BadgersVote Coalition — and where it goes dark

PRIVATE SOURCES

Private gifts and grants
\$39,965 in 2025-26;
none designated to voter work

Campus Vote Project
Sponsors and funds interns

League of Women Voters
Sponsors and funds interns

Andrew Goodman Fdn.
Sponsors and funds interns

Amounts undisclosed

UNIVERSITY STRUCTURE

Morgridge Center for Public Service
Within the Division for Teaching
and Learning since 2022

Coalition moved up in 2024

Division for Teaching and Learning
Current home of the Coalition;
publishes no financial report

BadgersVote Coalition
Campus staff of six; partners with
the Provost’s office and City Clerk

ELECTION ACTIVITY

Registration mailings
Student data to the City Clerk;
sent to residence halls

Voter education and GOTV
Newsletters, instructor slides,
texts, convocation materials

On-campus polling places
Early-voting locations sited
on University property

Documented in Action Plan

— Documented in the public record

--- Acknowledged; amount and terms undisclosed

JUNE 2026: The Morgridge Center lists “the expansion of nonpartisan voter education and mobilization efforts” among the development priorities for which it is seeking private philanthropic support.

THE CONSTITUTIONAL QUESTION

Wis. Const. art. III, § 7(1) bars a state agency from using money “donated or granted by an individual or nongovernmental entity” in connection with “the conduct of any . . . election.” UW-Madison is a state agency. The structure above is a matter of public record; the flows are not.

Source: IRG analysis of UW-Madison Campus Action Plans, Morgridge Center annual reports, and BadgersVote materials. The Coalition’s own budget is not reported in any public document.

⁴⁵ Will Flanders et al., *Finger on the Scale: Examining Private Funding of Elections in Wisconsin* at 4–6, Wisconsin Institute for Law & Liberty, available [here](#).

⁴⁶ *Id.* at 4, 15.

Ostensibly non-partisan get out the vote efforts, in other words, can swing elections if they are concentrated in a partisan manner. In reaction to this type of electoral gamesmanship, Wisconsin voters amended the Wisconsin Constitution in April 2024 to ban the private funding of election administration, with over 54% of voters supporting the change to the Wisconsin Constitution.⁴⁷ In so doing, Wisconsin joined 27 other states in banning or otherwise restricting the use of private donations for election administration purposes.⁴⁸

OFFICIAL BALLOT		
Spring Primary Election · April 2, 2024 · State of Wisconsin		
STATE REFERENDUM QUESTION 1		
Use of private funds in election administration.		
Shall section 7 (1) of Article III of the constitution be created to provide that private donations and grants may not be applied for, accepted, expended, or used in connection with the conduct of any primary, election, or referendum?		
☒ YES		54.43% · 638,555
☐ NO		45.57% · 534,612

DANE COUNTY		
YES		31.0% · 39,363
NO		69.0% · 87,422
Dane rejected the amendment by the widest margin of any county. Only 9 of Wisconsin's 72 counties voted no.		
RATIFIED APRIL 2024	After ratification, the BadgersVote Coalition's management “shifted from the Morgridge Center.” Its budget and funding sources remain unpublished.	

⁴⁷ Wisconsin Question 1, Ban on Private and Non-Governmental Funding of Election Administration Amendment (April 2024), Ballotpedia, available [here](#).

⁴⁸ *Id.*

This raises the question: are the activities of the University and the Coalition even legal? The new constitutional provision states in part that “No state agency or officer or employee in state government and no . . . officer or employee of a political subdivision may . . . use any moneys . . . in connection with the conduct of any . . . election . . . if the moneys . . . are donated or granted by an individual or nongovernmental entity.”⁴⁹ Recall that the Coalition partners with the Madison clerk’s office; that the Coalition itself includes many state employees; that voting is conducted on campus; and that substantial private money appears to subsidize voting activities from start to finish.

Three features of the provision matter here. First, it reaches state agencies and their employees by its terms, and UW-Madison is a state agency.⁵⁰ Second, it bars not only accepting donated money but “expend[ing]” or “us[ing]” it, so a program financed by private gifts does not escape the provision merely because the gift was received by a university center rather than by an election official. Third, it took effect upon ratification in April 2024. Conduct before that date is beyond its reach; conduct after it is not.⁵¹

The University’s answer will turn on the phrase “in connection with the conduct of any primary, election, or referendum.” It will argue that the “conduct” of an election is a term of art for administration—printing ballots, staffing polling places, canvassing returns—and that voter education and turnout work sit outside it.⁵² That argument deserves a serious answer, and the facts that would supply one are precisely the facts the University has not disclosed: the terms of its partnership with the Madison City Clerk, the arrangement under which student information is supplied so that registration materials reach residence-hall students, and who pays for the polling places sited on University property and the staff who support

⁴⁹ Wis. Const. art. III, § 7(1).

⁵⁰ Wis. Const. art. III, § 7(1). The University of Wisconsin System and its institutions are created by statute as instrumentalities of the state. *See* Wis. Stat. ch. 36.

⁵¹ Wisconsin Question 1, *supra* n.48. A constitutional amendment approved by the electors takes effect upon ratification. *See* Wis. Const. art. XII, § 1.

⁵² *Cf.* Wis. Stat. ch. 7 (governing election officials, polling places, ballots, and canvassing); *id.* § 7.30 (appointment and duties of election officials).

them.⁵³ A program that helps generate registrations for a municipal clerk, and that hosts the polls themselves, is not obviously on the far side of that line. Until the Coalition’s books are open, no one outside the University can say on which side it falls—and that, rather than any confident conclusion, is the point.

The Coalition’s own finances remain opaque. The Morgridge Center publishes an annual report containing a budget summary and an itemized donor list; the BadgersVote Coalition has never appeared as a line item in any of it. After the constitutional amendment passed, the Coalition reported that its “management . . . shifted from the Morgridge Center” to the University’s “Division for Teaching and Learning.”⁵⁴ The Coalition said this was “designed to enhance campus-wide coordination, unify the institutional voting message, and ensure that all areas of campus are actively included in voter engagement efforts.”⁵⁵ Whatever the merits of that rationale, the effect on disclosure is not in dispute. The Coalition left the one campus unit that publishes its finances for one that publishes none, and no public accounting of the Coalition has appeared since.

If the University’s intent is to more directly support the Coalition with public funds, that raises separate questions. Set aside for a moment what has already been noted—the partisan effect, and therefore the unfairness, of publicly funding get-out-the-vote efforts only in heavily blue areas. Public spending requires direct oversight by the political branches, especially if the University really wishes to assure the public that all activities are nonpartisan. At present almost nothing meaningful is public about the Coalition’s work. This omission is addressed in the next section, which poses important oversight questions for the Coalition.

⁵³ See *2024 Campus Action Plan*, *supra* n.32, at 3, 7 (describing the Coalition’s partnership with the City of Madison Clerk’s office, the transmission of student information used to generate residence-hall registration mailings, and on-campus voting locations).

⁵⁴ *Annual Report 2023-24* at 27, Morgridge Center for Public Service, University of Wisconsin-Madison (June 2025), available [here](#).

⁵⁵ *Id.*

Oversight Questions for UW-Madison

As discussed, the Coalition is only expanding its work, and with many important elections on the horizon, it is necessary for the Legislature to step in now and demand answers from the University on the Coalition's operations. The Legislature should invite University administrators to answer the following questions, among others:

Who funds the Coalition and in what amounts? How, exactly, does the Coalition spend its money and manage its relationships with third parties?

First the Legislature needs a complete audit of the Coalition's financial statements. How much does the Coalition even spend? What percentage of its funding comes from private donors? Taxpayer dollars? Which endowments have funded the Coalition and has that funding changed over time? Where is the money going? How much control do private third parties have over the students they appear to fund? Without even a basic accounting of the Coalition's income and expenditures, there is no way to assess whether the Coalition is operating legally.

How does the Coalition explain UW's voter turnout compared to its enrollment numbers? What safeguards are in place to ensure that students are truly residents of Wisconsin and do not vote in the wrong state—or worse, two separate states?

UW's voting numbers, combined with data on student retention, strongly suggest that non-residents are voting in Wisconsin elections. Does UW have any safeguards in place to ensure that student voters are actually in Wisconsin permanently rather than temporarily? Is the University willing to provide *complete* guidance to students on their eligibility to vote, such as by sharing disclaimers that “[n]o person gains a residence in any ward or election district of this state while there for temporary purposes only”?⁵⁶ As part of complete guidance, does the University accurately explain the ability of students to take advantage of absentee voting, which obviously avoids the complexity of reestablishing residency for voting purposes and has greatly expanded over the last decade?

⁵⁶ Wis. Stat. § 6.10(8).

Does the Ban Reach BadgersVote?

The constitutional test, applied to what the public record shows.

Is UW-Madison a state agency?

YES

Does it use privately donated money?

Third-party-sponsored interns; Morgridge Center private gifts and grants.

APPEARS SO

“In connection with the conduct of” an election?

Partners with the Madison City Clerk; supplies student data for registration mailings; hosts polling places on campus.

CONTESTED

After April 2024?

YES

CANNOT BE DETERMINED

The records that would answer it have not been made public.

Does the Coalition’s work comply with the Wisconsin Constitution’s new provision?

To what extent are UW and the Madison Clerk’s office commingling private funds with official election activity? Has the Coalition conducted any legal assessments of the compliance of its operations with the Wisconsin Constitution—and will it make those assessments public? How will the Coalition ensure that improper mixing of private funding with public activity does not occur?

Who made the decision to move the Coalition’s management out of the Morgridge Center and why?

In 2024 the Coalition’s management was moved out of the Morgridge Center and into the Division for Teaching and Learning—the division in which the Morgridge Center itself already sat. Who proposed the move, who approved it, and on what date? What contemporaneous written records document the deliberation? What role did John Zumbrunnen, then the Coalition’s faculty chair and the vice provost overseeing the receiving division, play in proposing or approving it? Did anyone assess the move’s implications for compliance with the newly ratified constitutional provision, and if so, will the University produce that assessment? What public accounting of the Coalition’s finances, if any, has been published since?

Will the University commit to posting Coalition financials and publications online going forward?

At a minimum, if the University truly wishes to guarantee to the public that the Coalition’s efforts are legal and nonpartisan, it must commit to a greater level of transparency. This should include providing the public with ongoing access to all official Coalition records, including budgets and other financial statements, faculty membership lists, and programming materials. For example, the Coalition notes that it “offers free voter education presentations for campus groups and student organizations.”⁵⁷ What do those presentations look like?

* * *

The BadgersVote Coalition claims that it wants to “equip students with the knowledge and resources necessary to be active participants in democracy.”⁵⁸ But true civic engagement requires more than simply mechanically harvesting liberal votes. It is long past time for the Coalition to take its responsibility to the electoral process seriously by providing the transparency needed to ensure the process is not corrupted.

⁵⁷ *About BadgersVote, supra* n.8.

⁵⁸ *Id.*



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