

# Todd Berry: How Wisconsin government and politics have changed—and what to do about it

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As I retire after almost 25 years as President of the nonpartisan Wisconsin Taxpayers Alliance, I can't help but reflect on how Wisconsin government and politics have changed over the decades. Perhaps the most significant change that has occurred is the increasingly partisan and polarized nature of dialogue and decision-making in the public arena.

Part of this is due to the deterioration of our national discourse, but part is also due to Wisconsin being one of about a dozen states with a full-time, professional legislature. What makes us different from most of these states dominated by career politicians, however, is scale. California, Illinois, Massachusetts, New York, and Pennsylvania are populous, urban, and large. By comparison, Wisconsin is relatively small.

Regardless of size, many of these states have the same problems: take-no-prisoners partisanship; state budgets that are often tardy and almost always narrowly balanced, usually with gimmicks and timing tricks; official financial statements that show GAAP deficits; and subpar bond ratings. Wisconsin fits the description to a "T," regardless of party in control.

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This is not an accident. In professional legislatures, the psychology changes: The goal is to keep one's job, and that means getting reelected. Difficult tax and budget

problems are papered over, pushed past the next election.

In career legislatures, such as ours, power becomes increasingly centralized in the hands of a few party leaders. Party discipline is strictly enforced, and dissension is not tolerated. Legislative leaders have tremendous power because they control the political fate—and, therefore, career—of their backbenchers. They name committee chairs and members; they send bills to committees and determine whether they will receive serious consideration; they influence and direct special-interest campaign donations; and, in some cases, punish uncooperative caucus members by encouraging primary opposition.

The nature of primary elections and Wisconsin elections generally is part of the significant change that has occurred in our politics. In recent decades, when given the opportunity, both Democrats and Republicans have “gerrymandered” legislative districts in hopes of achieving partisan advantage. The Democrats did so in 1983; the GOP, in 2012.

The fallout is evident, as the 2016 elections indicate. After the August primary, about half of state legislators were effectively reelected, with no November challenger, or only a token minor-party opponent. Lawmakers need not be accountable to voters if there is no ballot choice. And lack of accountability is an invitation to incumbent arrogance, abuse of party power, and even corruption.

But the problem with our elections goes deeper. Because of how legislative districts are drawn and because of where people choose to live, few districts are competitive, with seats regularly changing party hands. That makes August party primaries pivotal. They are low-turnout affairs dominated by true believers and party activists, and subject to monied intervention by special interests. To win a primary in Democratic Dane County, a candidate moves to the far left; to win a primary in Republican Waukesha County, the reverse is true: GOP hopefuls compete for a subset of voters on the right.

Thus, candidates who win primaries are committed partisans, who owe their careers

to single-issue or ideologically motivated voters. Arriving in Madison, they have no incentive to work with members across the aisle, or even members of their party from more diverse districts. They need only answer to the few who elected them.

With the two legislative parties populated with such members, the result is to be expected: partisan bickering, “gotcha politics,” and inability to compromise.

Wisconsin’s growing labor force shortage and transportation finance impasse illustrate the adverse effect of career politics. The argument for a full-time professional legislature was its ability to anticipate and confront emerging challenges. However, whether the issue is tax policy, transportation, changing demography, fiscal management, school finance, or higher education, Wisconsin state government—under both parties—has been largely unable to think long-term and strategically.

Critique of state government is easy. Undoing decades of combative partisan conflict among career politicians is not. Regulatory tinkering with elections or campaign spending addresses symptoms, but real change rests on lasting structural change.

A first step is a nonpartisan, citizen-driven approach to legislative redistricting. This will only be effective, however, if partisan primaries are ended in favor of all-candidate, cross-party primaries. Election changes might also include reducing state restrictions on minor candidates, instituting rank voting (where voters rank candidate choices), and adopting Illinois’ discarded use of multi-member districts and “bullet voting.” The latter would help elect an occasional Democrat from Waukesha or Republican from Madison.

Returning to a part-time citizen legislature is also key but must involve more than ending full-time salaries and benefits, cutting staff, or even instituting term limits. A citizen legislature also requires shorter, fixed-length sessions, and a larger assembly so that districts are smaller, easier to represent, and less costly to contest. Committee work by electronic means becomes important.

The state senate might also be reformed to restore the founders’ vision of the upper house as a true check and balance on the lower house. Wisconsin’s senate has become mostly a means to prolonging an assembly career. Elect-ing senators in the spring on a nonpartisan ballot to a single eight-year or two six-year terms might also ensure a more deliberative and independent body.

Changing institutional structure and process might help diversify the ranks of professional legislators and return us to an era when public service, rather than a political career, motivated a run for the legislature. It would also bring back to the Capitol greater experience in local government, small business, and parenting.

The ideas offered here are not panaceas but could promote discussion of how to restore Wisconsin's tradition of civil discourse, mutual respect, and citizen governance.

*— Berry is former President of the Wisconsin Taxpayers Alliance. The views expressed in this column are solely those of the author. The Wisconsin Taxpayers Alliance, and its successor the Wisconsin Policy Forum, does not engage in lobbying or advocate for specific policies.*