

# Book excerpt: Almanac of American Politics chapters on Wisconsin and Gov. Tony Evers

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For more than five decades, the Almanac of American Politics has set the standard for political reference books. In July, the Almanac will be publishing its 2024 edition, with some 2,200 pages offering fully updated chapters on all 435 House members and their districts, all 100 senators, all 50 states and governors, and much more.

Below are excerpts from the new chapters in the 2024 Almanac on the state of Wisconsin and Gov. Tony Evers, written by Louis Jacobson. Jacobson — a senior correspondent for [PolitiFact](#), a senior columnist for Sabato's Crystal Ball at the University of Virginia Center for Politics, and a contributor of political coverage for U.S. News & World Report — has written for seven editions of the Almanac, going back to the 2000 volume.

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## Wisconsin

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Wisconsin, as much as any state, has been in the political spotlight in recent years for its delicate partisan balance. In 2016, Donald Trump won Wisconsin by fewer than 23,000 votes, securing his path to the White House. Four years later, Joe Biden reversed the script, winning the state by just under 21,000 votes; it was the “tipping point” state in the Electoral College —the state whose electoral votes put the winner over the required 270. In 2022, the parties split in the biggest races, with Democratic Gov. Tony Evers and Republican Sen. Ron Johnson both winning

reelection. Then, in April 2023, Democrats won a crucial state supreme court race that could undo the GOP's highly favorable maps in the legislature.

Wisconsin has long been one of America's premier "laboratories of reform," in Justice Louis Brandeis' phrase—a state developing new public policies, debating them vigorously and even tumultuously, observing whether they worked, and serving as an example for other states. North of the dominant westward paths of migration, the state was sparsely settled, first by New England Yankees and then by waves of immigrants from Germany and Scandinavia. The German language is seldom heard now, but German place names and surnames are common in Wisconsin and, like the once plainly German beer and brat brands, now seem quintessentially American. On the rolling dairy land of Wisconsin and the orderly streets of Milwaukee, they built their own churches, kept their own language, and maintained old customs, from country weddings to Christmas trees to beer gardens—a source of friction in temperance-minded America. About 46% of Wisconsin residents who reported an ethnicity in the 2020 Census cited German ancestry, more than any other state; Wisconsin still has an orderliness and steadiness that owes something to its Germanic heritage.

Wisconsin has been home to high-skill, precision instrument production at companies like Johnson Controls and Rockwell Automation. Madison, powered by the flagship campus of the University of Wisconsin, has become a technology hub. (A plan for an advanced manufacturing plant near Racine for Taiwan-based Foxconn has been less successful; originally driven with billions of dollars in subsidies, promised by Gov. Scott Walker and his fellow Republican legislators, the project's slow pace of building and hiring led Walker's Democratic successor, Tony Evers to hold back on state monies.) Wisconsin is also the nation's leading producer of paper, though the inexorable shift from printed to digital media has hobbled the industry. Agriculture remains a significant part of the economy, particularly dairy; Wisconsin ranks either first or second in the nation in most categories of milk and cheese production. However, improved productivity and competition from foreign countries, as well as California's giant agribusiness enterprises, have had an impact. Wisconsin, of course, is also a prime source of beer and sausage. Over time, Wisconsin's economy has ranked right around where the country is; its median income hovers just below the nation's.

Wisconsin's reputation for innovative public policy was established during the Progressive Era that began around 1900 and which owes its development to an extraordinary governor, Robert La Follette Sr. Wisconsin is one of the two states

that gave birth to the Republican Party in 1854 (the other is Michigan); Germans, then arriving in America in vast numbers, heavily favored the GOP. They opposed slavery and welcomed the free lands Republicans delivered in the Homestead Act, the educational opportunities provided by land grant colleges, and the transportation routes constructed by subsidized railroad builders. Wisconsin has also had a long history of labor activism. Milwaukee saw bloodshed on May 5, 1886, when 1,500 tradesmen and Polish immigrants demanding an eight-hour workday marched on the Rolling Mills iron plant in the city's Bay View neighborhood. Seven people, including a young boy, were killed; south of downtown Milwaukee, a memorial stands near where the blood was spilled.

From this seedbed sprouted the Progressive movement founded and symbolized by La Follette. At a time when Germany was the world's leader in graduate education and the application of science to government, La Follette had professors at the University of Wisconsin help develop the state workmen's compensation system and income tax. La Follette became a national figure, and after he died in 1925, liberal Democrats carried on his tradition—progressive at home and isolationist abroad. Meanwhile, Milwaukee developed its own distinct strain of governance on the left—the “sewer socialists” who occupied the Milwaukee mayor's office for much of the time between 1910 and 1960. Touting spending on public health, infrastructure, and parks, these officials “were known for their integrity, their tactical ingenuity and their relentless organizing,” including “a volunteer army that could deliver the party's literature, in any of 12 languages, to every house in Milwaukee within 48 hours,” Dan Kaufman wrote in the *New York Times*. Wisconsin became the first state to grant collective-bargaining rights to public employees, in 1959.

Starting in the 1990s, Wisconsin became a laboratory for conservative reforms driven by Republican Gov. Tommy Thompson, who beat a liberal Democrat in 1986 and was reelected three times. He cut taxes, sponsored a school choice program, and passed the nation's most sweeping welfare reforms that cut caseloads by equipping recipients to work. After a Democratic interregnum, the 2010 election produced another experiment in conservative reform as Republican Scott Walker, a former Milwaukee County executive, won the governorship and set off a firestorm with proposals to limit the power of public-sector unions. The effort was successful, and Walker turned back an energetic, labor-driven effort to recall him in 2012 before winning reelection in 2014. A University of Wisconsin study found that in the first eight years after passage of the anti-union measures, membership fell by

almost 54 percent, more than double the national pace.

Wisconsin's population has grown, but at a modest rate, up 3.6 percent since 2010. Both the city of Milwaukee and Milwaukee County have shrunk since 2010, while the surrounding suburban counties of Waukesha, Ozaukee, and Washington, known as the "WOW" counties, have all grown between 4 and 7 percent during the same period. By contrast, the state's fastest growth has occurred in Dane County (Madison), which has expanded by 15.5 percent since 2010, pushing population gains to rural areas to the south and northeast. Other growth areas have included Outagamie County (Appleton) and Eau Claire County (Eau Claire), which have expanded by 8.4 and 7.8 percent, respectively, and the Minneapolis-St. Paul suburb of St. Croix County, which has grown by 12.7 percent since the last census.

The state remains 80 percent white, with a small, if expanding, foreign-born population. Overall, Wisconsin is 7 percent Black, 8 percent Hispanic and 3 percent Asian. But the state has significant racial disparities: In Milwaukee, Black households are half as likely to own homes as white households, and the gaps are even wider in Madison, Green Bay, Kenosha, and Racine, according to the Wisconsin Policy Forum. Racial tensions in Kenosha drew national attention in 2020 when police fired at Jacob Blake, a Black man, seven times in the back, paralyzing him. Daytime protests spiraled into clashes and arson at night, and Kyle Rittenhouse, a white teenager from Illinois aligned with militia members, was arrested for shooting three people, killing two of them. A jury found him not guilty after he testified that he had acted in self-defense.

The state's historical patterns for voting trace back to ethnic differences: Eastern Wisconsin is more German, and thus Republican, while western Wisconsin is more Scandinavian, making it more Democratic. But these leanings have been in flux in recent elections. The Fox River Valley, including the "BOW" counties of Brown, Outagamie, and Winnebago, have historically been Republican turf, though the mid-sized industrial cities they contain, such as Appleton, Oshkosh and Green Bay, have become a bit bluer in recent years. Western Wisconsin—areas along the Mississippi River, the small inland cities such as Wausau and Eau Claire and the counties along Lake Superior—has historically been more Democratic. But a portion of southwest Wisconsin known as the Driftless Area (for its geology) "boasts the nation's greatest concentration of Obama-Trump counties—places that voted for President Barack Obama in 2012 and Trump in 2016," the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel's Craig Gilbert has written. Many of those counties backed Evers for governor in 2018, but flipped back to Trump in 2020. The most heavily Democratic region by far is around

Madison. It has become ever more important for the party's electoral math: Dane County is both growing in population and turning leftward.

Other pockets of historical Democratic strength include a belt of college cities—La Crosse and Eau Claire, each with University of Wisconsin campuses, and Rock County (Janesville), the home of Beloit College. Meanwhile, the historically strong Republican support in the “WOW” counties has sagged; Wauwatosa, a city in Milwaukee County, backed Walker in 2014 by five points, but eight years later, Republican gubernatorial nominee Tim Michels lost it by 40. “For four elections in a row, not always at the same speed or on the same scale, the high-education suburbs of Milwaukee and Madison have been getting bluer while rural counties and small towns around the state have been getting redder,” Gilbert wrote.

With statewide races in Wisconsin often decided narrowly, a small but important group of Wisconsinites are swing voters. Indeed, Wisconsin has elected and reelected both conservative Republican Ron Johnson and liberal Democrat Tammy Baldwin to the Senate. Yet the GOP-held Wisconsin legislature is one of the nation's most heavily gerrymandered; an analysis by Marquette University Law School found that under the current maps, Republicans could win a majority of Assembly seats with just 44 percent of the statewide vote.

Heading into the 2016 presidential election, some considered Wisconsin one of the Democrats' “blue wall” states—a supposed bulwark against Republicans in the Electoral College, because the state had not voted Republican for president since Ronald Reagan's 1984 landslide. But this ignored that the state's demographics, especially its above-average percentage of white, non-college-educated voters, favored the incipient Trump campaign. Ultimately, 23 of the state's 72 counties flipped in 2016, all from blue to red; a state Obama had won by seven points in 2012 ended up voting for Trump by less than a point.

The state remained swingy during Trump's presidency. Walker lost a tough battle for a third term to Evers in 2018. In an April 2019 judicial election, Wisconsin voters swung back to the right, but one year later, a liberal justice won a surprisingly strong victory, possibly aided by Democratic ire over the Republican legislature's refusal to allow Evers to expand mail voting during the pandemic. In 2020, both presidential campaigns focused intently on Wisconsin; Biden won narrowly, by about six-tenths of a percentage point, but large swaths of nonmetropolitan Wisconsin put up results that showed their moves toward the GOP were likely long-lasting. In April 2021, the candidate favored by Democrats won Wisconsin's

nominally nonpartisan race for superintendent of public instruction with an impressive 58 percent of the vote.

The 2022 elections produced slightly Democratic-leaning results, possibly due to concerns among Democrats that a Republican governor, combined with the safely GOP legislature, would enshrine an 1849 ban on abortion with no exceptions for rape and incest. Evers won by just over 90,000 votes, and incumbent Democrats narrowly held the attorney general and secretary of state seats. But Johnson won a third Senate term by his smallest margin yet—fewer than 27,000 votes—thanks to faring a few points better than Michels in the WOW and BOW counties, an improved performance in rural areas, and victories in two Driftless counties, Vernon and Columbia, that Evers won in 2022. The GOP also won the open-seat state treasurer's race. But crucially, Republicans fell two seats short of a supermajority in the Assembly, preventing them from making Evers irrelevant. Then, in 2023, a Democratic aligned candidate easily prevailed in a closely watched supreme court race, flipping the court's ideological lean, with potentially far-reaching consequences on issues ranging from abortion to election supervision.

## **Tony Evers**

Wisconsin's Tony Evers, low-key educator and administrator, ousted Republican Gov. Scott Walker in 2018, then spent much of the next four years at loggerheads with the Republican-held legislature. Running for reelection in 2022, Evers emphasized the need to keep GOP legislators in check on such issues as abortion; his call resonated and Evers won a second term by an expanded, but still modest, margin.

Evers (it rhymes with "weavers") was born in Plymouth and met his wife, Kathy, there in kindergarten. His father practiced medicine at Rocky Knoll, a state tuberculosis sanitarium that also treated patients with silicosis, a disease often contracted by inhaling factory dust. His father would often testify on his patients' behalf. "It was about social justice," Evers told the *New Yorker*. "He could have gone into private practice, but he didn't. He decided to be a county employee and work with people who struggled." Evers earned a bachelor's, a master's and a Ph.D. from the University of Wisconsin-Madison and began his career in education as a science teacher in Baraboo, later becoming a principal in Tomah and running school districts in Oakfield and Verona. Eventually, Evers became deputy state superintendent of public instruction; during that time, he fought and beat esophageal cancer. In 2009 Evers was elected state superintendent, a nominally nonpartisan post, and was

easily reelected in 2013 and 2017. After he won his third term, Evers began considering a run for governor.

Walker had spent two terms implementing a muscular conservative agenda, making him both a political celebrity and a target. He notched a 53%-46% victory in a 2012 recall, becoming the first governor anywhere to survive such a vote, then won a second term in 2014. By 2018, however, Democrats were energized against President Donald Trump, and Walker's bid for a third term became a titanic battle in a politically engaged and narrowly divided state. The Democratic primary field was larger than any in state history, and it was not predestined that Evers would prevail. His rivals included Mahlon Mitchell, president of the Professional Fire Fighters Association of Wisconsin; former legislator Kelda Roys; state Sen. Kathleen Vinehout; former state Democratic chair Matt Flynn; Madison Mayor Paul Soglin; and activists Mike McCabe and Josh Pade. Evers portrayed himself as a steady pragmatist, and he ran away with it, winning 42 percent, lapping Mitchell (16 percent) and Roys (13 percent). A Madison-based newspaper, the Capital Times, called the race "bland vs. bland." But Walker and Evers differed sharply on policy.

For years, Evers and Walker had tussled over education budgets, higher education politics and legal issues. Walker portrayed himself as the "education governor" based on his efforts to expand school choice, but Evers painted the incumbent's record on school funding as a negative. A major issue in the contest was a deal Walker had negotiated in 2017, with President Donald Trump's backing, to subsidize the building of a new, 13,000-employee factory complex in Mt. Pleasant for Foxconn Technology Group, the Taiwanese-based manufacturing partner for such tech giants as Apple, Sony, Microsoft and Nintendo. Trump joined Walker in Wisconsin to break ground, but as time went on—and as Foxconn failed to live up to its promises of job creation—voters in the state became less enamored with the project. Walker and the legislature had approved some \$4.5 billion in tax incentives to support the project, reportedly the nation's largest-ever subsidy for a foreign company.

The winner was in doubt until late absentee returns from Milwaukee County sealed the contest for Evers, 49.5%-48.4%, a margin of just over 29,000 votes. Crucially, Walker bled support in the Republican bastions of suburban Milwaukee. According to exit polls, Walker had won voters with college degrees by one point in 2014 but lost them by 13 points in 2018. The skirmishing didn't end on Election Day: To the outrage of the victorious Democrats, Republicans in a lame-duck session sought to tie Evers' hands as much as possible. In 2019, the GOP-controlled legislature blocked Evers' proposed expansion of Medicaid under the Affordable Care Act, and

continued to block it for the rest of Evers' first term, making Wisconsin the rare presidential blue state not to expand the program, alongside Georgia. The GOP also kept Evers from reversing part or all of Walker's restrictions on labor unions, and they steamrolled his efforts to tighten gun laws, taking just one minute to dispense with a special session the governor had called to address the issue. The legislature also ousted Evers' handpicked agriculture secretary, a historically rare move that Evers called "political B.S."

Evers wasn't shy about blocking the legislature's priorities, either. He vetoed several antiabortion bills, and he issued some 78 budget vetoes. A few notable bills did make it into law with bipartisan support, including changes to drug prescribing rules, a measure on hemp regulation, and an expansion of student loan forgiveness for minority teachers. In 2020, Evers vetoed a GOP-backed tax cut, saying he wanted a mix of education spending and broad-based property tax relief instead. He also held back state subsidies for the Foxconn project after it became clear the project's scale was far smaller than initially promised. But three sometimes overlapping issues dominated the year: the coronavirus, race and elections.

Evers repeatedly clashed with the legislature over such issues as stay-at-home orders and mask mandates, and at some points the governor was overruled by the state Supreme Court. One heated battle occurred in April, during the early weeks of the pandemic, as the state was preparing to hold a primary election. After some waffling about whether to hold the election as planned, Evers called the legislature into special session, seeking to delay the election and conduct it by mail, a course some other states had taken by then. But legislators swiftly rebuffed him. Eventually, the court blocked an effort by Evers to implement the delay through an executive order. On Election Day, voters complained of long lines; in Milwaukee, the number of polling stations was cut from 180 to five. But the Republicans' victory on the rules may have been pyrrhic; the battle seemed to energize Democrats, enabling them to flip a Supreme Court seat that was the most important contest on the ballot.

In August 2020, when police shot a Black resident of Kenosha and protests turned violent, Evers called in the National Guard, but some saw his leadership as ineffectual. Evers again called the legislature into special session, this time to address policing and criminal justice, and once again GOP leaders gavelled it in and out almost instantaneously. On the right, the events in Kenosha, combined with Evers' policies on the coronavirus, helped sharpen calls for a recall election, but the effort fizzled.

In the 2021-2022 legislative session, Evers vetoed a record 126 bills, exceeding the previous record of 90 set nearly a century earlier. He vetoed measures that would have shielded gun manufacturers from lawsuits, rejected any federal attempt to ban assault weapons, cut unemployment benefits by up to 12 weeks, expanded private-school vouchers to households of any income level, and made it harder to vote absentee. “My vetoes reflect my belief system,” Evers said, framing his role as that of a goalie trying to block bad legislation. In 2022, the Supreme Court overturned *Roe v. Wade*, leaving an 1849 state law banning abortion without exceptions for rape and incest poised to go into effect. Democratic Attorney General Josh Kaul sued to prevent its implementation, and Evers called two special sessions. The first, which came after a leak of the Supreme Court ruling but before it was officially released, was to consider a repeal of the 1849 law; GOP legislators gaveled it to a close within 14 seconds. Evers called a second special session in September, seeking a popular referendum on whether to repeal the law. But Republicans once again bottled up the effort.

Evers’ clear support for abortion rights likely helped him win a second term. In the GOP primary, voters nominated construction executive Tim Michels, who, with the backing of former President Donald Trump and the ability to self-fund his campaign, defeated former Lt. Gov. Rebecca Kleefisch and state Rep. Tim Ramthun. Initially, Michels supported the 1849 law before softening to accept carve-outs for rape and incest. “I am pro-life and I make no apologies for that,” Michels said during the sole general-election debate. Former President Barack Obama joked at a rally for Evers that “he’s got more of a Clark Kent vibe than a Superman vibe,” but voters seemed to prefer that to unified Republican control, which meant the possibility that Michels’ remark that “Republicans will never lose another election in Wisconsin after I’m elected governor” could become reality. Evers won, 51.2%-47.8%, a margin of about 90,000 votes, or three times larger than his 2018 victory.

In exit polls, more voters chose abortion as their top issue than any issue save the economy, and more than four in five of abortion-focused voters chose Evers. Wisconsin’s geopolitical shifts from recent election cycles—namely, urban and suburban areas trending blue, while rural areas trended red—held in 2022. Michels flipped three historically Democratic rural counties in the Driftless region (Crawford, Richland, and Grant) that had backed Evers in 2018, and he also flipped Kenosha, possibly due to lingering concerns over crime. But Evers gained ground compared to 2018 in six counties he lost in both elections—the WOW counties (Waukesha, Ozaukee, and Washington in the Milwaukee suburbs), where he shifted the margins

between seven and 17 points in the Democratic direction, and the BOW counties (Brown, Outagamie, and Winnebago) in the Fox River Valley, where he shifted the margins by two to four points towards the Democrats. Evers also flipped Door County, on a peninsula between Green Bay and Lake Michigan, and increased his vote total in heavily Democratic Dane County (Madison) by 16,000 votes.

With the heavily gerrymandered Republican legislative majority intact, Evers prepared for an extended run as a “goalie” in his second term. But he was buoyed by the emergence of a projected \$6.6 billion surplus. Then, in April 2023, Evers got a big boost as a Democratic aligned candidate won a supreme court seat, flipping the court in his direction.