Geography of the Wisconsin 2020 Presidential Election

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Wisconsin, Michigan, and Pennsylvania provided the greatest surprises of the 2016 Presidential Election. Donald Trump eked out victories in all three coupled with extreme quality (for both candidates) and energizing rural white voters through outlandish claims and “populist” rhetoric. In 2016, Hillary Clinton gambled by assuming she would win Wisconsin and never visited the state after winning the Democratic nomination. While holding a comfortable 3% lead in polls, Clinton would go on to lose the Badger state by 25,000 votes. Along with surprising victories in Michigan and Pennsylvania, Trump surprised the world and set in motion and unforbearable four chaotic years.

Heading into Election Day, Wisconsin Democrats feared a repeat of 2016. State polls had Biden comfortably ahead by 3 to 6% and nationally, Biden held a comfortable 7% lead. As polls closed, the country would be held in suspense for nearly a week. In Wisconsin, GOP created election laws prohibited the counting of absentee ballots before election day. Due to the large volume of early balloting, results based on one-day voting showed Trump held a comfortable lead, but as polls closed and the large cities of Madison, Green Bay, and Milwaukee released their votes in the early morning hours of November 4th, Biden would hold a nearly 25,000 vote (almost identical to Trump’s 2016 victory) (Figure 1). Due to the fact Biden held less than 0.5% lead, Trump could ask for a recount (at his expense). Though it was clear Trump would not win, he used the recount to perpetuate his election fraud narrative arguing for only a recount in the heavily Democratic counties of Dane and Milwaukee. Ironically, the recount increased Biden’s total nullifying Wisconsin’s two electoral votes.

Yet to tell the story of Wisconsin’s recent electoral swing the 2018 Gubernatorial Election provides a unique insight into a possible electoral landscape sans Donald Trump. For Wisconsin, the 2016 Elections illustrated obvious Democratic weaknesses in rural areas and the dangers of alienating the powerful African American voting block in Milwaukee County, but also highlighted some potential landslides through suburban areas, especially Waukesha County. By 2016, Republican lightning and Governor Scott Walker was seeking to win his 4th election in eight years. Though Trump took a combative stance towards Walker during the Republican Primary run, Walker would quickly embrace Trump in the preceding months after witnessing Trump’s success in 2016. Walker’s 2018 opponent was a quirky former teacher and head of the Department of Public Instruction, Democrat Tony Evers. The Plymouth, Wisconsin born teacher did little in the run up to the election and capitalized on Democrat’s long hold on toward Walker and the absence of Trump on the ballot. As has been the norm for recent Wisconsin elections, the result was a swoon with Evers’ surprising many by defeating Scott Walker with a back of a large voting margin from Milwaukee County at 12:45 AM. Figure 2 shows these results were in line with previous elections, except for longtime Democratic stronghold, Dane County. The Robust bipartisan election earlier elections with an impressive turnout for Evers, while excited 2016 rural Trump voters sat this election out. While Walker did very well in suburban areas, results were not as strong as had been in previous elections (especially in GOP stronghold Waukesha County and the manufacturing areas of the Fox River Valley between Appleton and Green Bay).

Though Wisconsin was perceived as the safest Biden state compared to Michigan and Pennsylvania, it was the narrowest victory in the end for Joe Biden. The election can be summed up by four key points: increased support for Trump, increased support of Biden in Dane County, decreased support for Trump in suburban areas, and decreased support for Trump in the Fox River Valley. Figures 1 and 3 clearly show Trump increased his support in Wisconsin’s rural areas compared to 2016. This trend was once again missed by polls. It can also be seen when comparing 2018 to 2020. Rural voters turned out for Trump, but not for Walker. Dane County also saw an increased support for Biden compared to Clinton. This can be attributed to Biden winning voters in Dane County and increased support throughout the Fox River Valley. While counties certainly did not flip, the decreased support for Trump, coupled with increased support of Biden, in Dane County, could not be made up by increases in the sparsely populated rural areas it had in 2016.

Moving forward, the biggest questions is what does a ballot without Trump look like? The 2018 Election of Tony Evers clearly illustrated the difficulty for Republicans to win statewide elections without rural voters. Dane County’s clear increase in Democrat voter turnout coupled with slight decreases in support in suburban areas and the Fox River Valley makes it clear that statewide victories will be difficult. Even with Trump on the ballot in 2020, Biden was able to continue some of these trends. As 2022 looms, Tony Evers is up for reelection and a U.S. Senate Election. Will these realities stick? A Republican victory is dependent on rapping rural vote, as well as winning back suburban voters, while hoping for depressed turnout in Dane and Milwaukee Counties. Without Trump on the ballot, these questions will remain.

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**Percent Biden Vote for the 2020 Presidential Election**

for Wisconsin at the Voting District Level

**Percent Evers Vote for the 2018 Gubernatorial Election**

for Wisconsin at the Voting District Level

**Percent Difference in Democratic Vote for the 2020 and 2016 Presidential Elections**

for Wisconsin at the Voting District Level

**Percent Difference Between Biden Vote (2020) and Evers Vote (2018)**

for Wisconsin at the Voting District Level