An Experiment in Wisconsin Changed Voters’ Minds About Trump

Changing voters’ minds is famously difficult, but a recent progressive effort found real success.

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No state has haunted the Democratic Party’s imagination for the past four years like Wisconsin. While it was not the only state that killed Hillary Clinton’s presidential hopes in 2016, it was the one where the knife plunged deepest. Clinton was so confident about Wisconsin that she never even campaigned there. This year, it is one of the most fiercely contested states. The Democrats planned to hold their convention in Milwaukee, before the coronavirus pandemic forced its cancellation. Donald Trump is also making a strong play for Wisconsin.
Trump’s weaknesses with the electorate are familiar: Voters find him coarse, and they deplore his handling of race, the coronavirus, and protests. One recent YouGov poll found that just 42 percent of Americans approved of his performance as president, while 54 percent disapproved. But when the pollsters asked about Trump’s handling of the economy, those attitudes reversed: 48 percent approved and 44 percent disapproved, despite the havoc wreaked by the pandemic.

The high marks that voters give Trump’s economic record are a key obstacle to Democratic efforts to win back Wisconsin and other upper-midwestern states. But a surprisingly effective progressive effort this spring to undermine Trump’s approval ratings on the economy provides a model for how the president’s opponents can hurt Trump where he’s strongest—and maybe even tip the election to Joe Biden.

[David A. Graham: Brace for the blue shift]

Changing voters’ minds is famously difficult. Recent national campaigns have spent more effort on increasing turnout—getting sympathetic voters to go to the polls—than on winning over new supporters. Political scientists and pollsters have found that as the country grows more negatively polarized, fewer true swing voters are up for grabs.

But the Wisconsin effort, notable for both its approach and its scale, seems to have found some success. From February to May, the advocacy group Opportunity Wisconsin, with help from a progressive advocacy organization based in Washington, D.C., called the Hub Project, managed to do remarkable damage to Trump’s standing with a group of persuadable voters. The effort sought to identify voters who took a favorable view of Trump’s record on the economy but who might still be receptive to alternative perspectives, then spent weeks targeting them with messages arguing that the economy was actually not working for Wisconsin, and that Trump’s policies weren’t helping.

“The most impressive thing is that they clearly had some effect in changing how people think about Donald Trump, and that’s just really difficult to do,” says David Broockman, a political scientist at UC Berkeley who studies persuasion. “For a real program to have effects on what people think about Trump in the field, not an artificial setting like a focus group, is quite impressive. There’s very little I’ve seen this election cycle that has found that.”
Research by Broockman and Yale’s Josh Kalla from earlier this year showed that while messages about Biden could swing voters’ opinions about him, views about Trump were almost immovable.

The Opportunity Wisconsin push was built on a combination of tactics old and new, simple and sophisticated. The group is officially nonpartisan, and does not disclose its donors. But Meghan Roh, a former Democratic House and Senate staffer who is the group’s program director, told me it was formed out of a concern that progressive organizations weren’t speaking effectively to people in Wisconsin. Trump’s strong economic numbers in the state jumped out as a perfect example.

As my colleague Ronald Brownstein reported in 2019, citing Hub Project research, a potentially crucial group of voters approves of Trump’s handling of the economy, but is skeptical of his overall performance. The president’s numbers on the economy remain a rare bright spot for him, even amid coronavirus-induced economic devastation. Just a few months ago, there was routinely a double-digit spread between those who approved and disapproved of his handling of the economy—but Trump’s numbers remain narrowly positive, according to RealClearPolitics’ average.

The national trend holds true in Wisconsin. In a recent Marquette Law School poll, 51 percent of Wisconsinites approved of Trump’s handling of the economy, versus 46 percent who did not. (In the same poll, respondents favored Biden over Trump, 48 percent to 42 percent.)

With Trump even more embattled than he was a year ago, these voters who approve of Trump on the economy but not on much else are even more crucial in November. Opportunity Wisconsin saw this as a classic chance to attack an opponent’s strength, rather than his weakness.

[Read: Wisconsin’s warning for the November election]

“There was this perception that the president’s economic strength was based on the stock market or jobs numbers, but when you drilled down a little more and had conversations with people about their own experience, they did not see any benefit from the president’s tax law or his opposition to raising the minimum wage,” Roh says.
The plan was to figure out how to convince voters in Wisconsin, on a large scale, that Trump’s handling of the economy was actually worse than they thought. Opportunity Wisconsin and the Hub Project started with a survey of 27,000 voters, designed to identify persuadable Wisconsinites.

Then Opportunity Wisconsin conducted focus groups around the state, trying to identify voters who might be persuadable and the values that mattered to them. They zeroed in on people who were sympathetic to conservative economic ideas but also concerned about what they saw in their own families and communities. For example, some participants talked about the importance of low taxes and reducing regulation, but also complained that the cost of living was rising too quickly and the economy was working only for the wealthy.

Drawing on this research, the Hub Project selected roughly 500,000 voters to target in a larger push, using voting history and consumer data in addition to standard demographic data. For the purposes of measuring how effective its work was, it split the whole into a treatment group, which would receive targeted messages, and a control group, which would not.

Identifying a group of persuadable voters is not the same as knowing both what messages to send them and how to send them. Opportunity Wisconsin found messengers who could speak to local issues around the state—meatpacking in Green Bay, farming in the Driftless Area. A man in Green Bay described being unable to make his rent, even as the company whose factory he worked in got big tax breaks under the 2017 tax cuts. A Wauwatosa woman recounted how she got a second job to pay off her student loans, but then lost both of her jobs due to the pandemic. “President Trump only started to acknowledge this crisis after Wall Street started to suffer,” she said.

Then Opportunity Wisconsin launched a big effort to push these messages out from February to May. The group featured the stories it gathered in videos posted on social media and in paper fliers sent to mailboxes—roughly one a week for 11 weeks, an unusually large volume. Some of the messengers told their stories at gatherings, alongside officeholders such as Senator Tammy Baldwin and Lieutenant Governor Mandela Barnes, both Democrats. (These gatherings were planned to be held in person around the state, but most of them had to be switched to digital because of the pandemic.)
The Hub Project then conducted a new survey of the large group to measure the effects of the messages. The results surprised even the groups: The push knocked Trump’s approval on the economy down by 2.3 percent, approval of his tax cuts down more than 5 percent, and belief that his policies helped the Badger State down more than 8 percent. (The 2016 race in Wisconsin was decided by less than 1 percent of voters, or about 23,000 votes.) The effects were larger than those of most Trump-focused persuasion efforts, and the use of a control group means the results are highly reliable.

What the numbers don’t explain is why this worked so well: Was it the tailored local messages? The heavy volume of mail? Some combination of the two? The results do, however, provide some proof of concept. “The central thesis of this program was: Can we identify a group or groups of Americans who are open to hearing a progressive argument about the economy? And if we make that argument, can we win that argument?” says Bryan Bennett, the director of polling and analytics at the Hub Project. “This says yes.”

The results open new lines of research for campaign groups such as Opportunity Wisconsin and for scholars of persuasion such as Broockman. But the most pressing question for the election is what effect the campaign might have had on Trump’s chances. Opportunity Wisconsin didn’t measure voter preference, and there’s no easy way to know whether souring voters on Trump’s economic policies is enough to get them to change their vote. Persuasion effects also tend to decay closer to Election Day, as voters are bombarded with messaging from all sides.

“The big question is how significant the economy is in voter decisions, as opposed to cultural issues,” Charlie Sykes, a longtime Wisconsin conservative commentator and prominent Trump critic, told me. The president has already made clear he intends to emphasize wedge social issues in the remaining weeks of the campaign. The question is whether voters buy it. “I look at those numbers and think, If this is the one thing that’s holding Trump up, then he’s in a lot of trouble. Because if you knock out that leg, what’s he got left?”

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