

September 22, 2020

**To: A Better Wisconsin Together Institute, Inc.**  
**Fr: Brian Stryker / Molly Murphy / Oren Savir / Graham Willard**  
**Re: Wisconsin Focus Group Findings**

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*The following is based on a series of four online focus groups conducted by ALG Research among:*

- *College-educated women in southeast Wisconsin, September 8, 2020.*
- *Non-college educated women in northeast and central Wisconsin, September 15, 2020.*
- *Mixed-gender seniors in northeast Wisconsin, September 16, 2020.*
- *College-educated men in southeast Wisconsin, September 17, 2020.*

*Participants were screened to be politically Independent or soft partisans.*

*Verbatim responses are used throughout this report. They have been edited for grammar, spelling, and length where noted. Because these are qualitative data, they are not statistically representative, and cannot be projected onto the universe as a whole.*

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Wisconsinites have had a large volume of news to consume in the past month – but a steady theme emerges in conversation with them that COVID-19 remains the dominant issue, through which most others are filtered. Swing voters describe a sense of flux, seeing the health and economic situation as simultaneously steady and uncertain. Especially by the third week in September, the focus for them had drifted off Kenosha and back to the health (primarily) and economic (secondarily) crisis facing the state.

These voters show little knowledge of anything happening in Madison and assume the legislature is busy addressing the pandemic, even as they believe there is too much in-fighting and partisan bickering, which they attribute to both parties.

## **Key Findings:**

- **COVID remains the biggest issue for voters.** Asked both how things are going in Wisconsin and what big issues are going on in the state, voters went straight for the pandemic and its impact on daily life, with schools being the primary lens. Perceptions vary with many expressing a feeling of indecision, flux, or anxiety about the short-term future. Even those who felt things are going okay made the

point of putting it in context, i.e., “I think things are going okay considering the fact that we are in this state of flux.”

- *“Things are just nuts. Between our Presidential race, the rioting, protests which are massive numbers, COVID of course, that’s the main thing.” – NE Seniors*
  - *“People are unsure. Unsure with the pandemic, unsure with the school situation, unsure with politics.” – NE Women*
  - *“Bumpy. Contentious I think is a good word. During the week you really wouldn’t be able to tell much because most people are at home working.” – SE Men*
  - *“Less than so-so, worrying about the college thing.” – SE Women*
- **Kenosha is fading as a top-of-mind issue for swing voters, regardless of their position.** The women in the southeast were the most likely to bring up Kenosha on their own as a major issue going on, likely because we talked to them a week before anyone else. Those in the other groups who did bring it up placed it as a lower tier issue compared to COVID and the economy and barely brought it up as a major concern unless prompted.
  - **Participants were sympathetic to the Governor but see him as ineffective.** The idea that Evers is trying, doing his best, or has people’s best interests in mind came across all four groups. But many participants also thought he has not proven effective – some because he is being thwarted by the legislature, but others because of what they see as him not being a strong leader or not having a plan.
    - *“I think he’s trying to do the right things but it’s not always coming across very well. And I don’t know if he’s really leading the state in the right way or not. He’s probably not doing some things he should be doing.” – NE Seniors*
    - *“I honestly was more negative until the whole pandemic started, now I’m positive. I feel bad for him, everyone attacks him all the time. He really tries hard to do what he thinks is best. Morally I agree with him. Maybe not politically but morally.” – NE Women*
    - *“Kinda stifled. Somewhat by himself and his positions, but slightly by the legislature.” – SE Men*
    - *“He’s just trying to keep up. I think if not for COVID and all the protests, those challenges are just too great for him and seems like where his focus is. It seems to be a huge challenge, not just for him but the Governors of all the states.” – SE Women*

- **There's no desire for a recall.** Even voters who disliked Gov. Evers do not have an appetite for going through this again after watching it play out with Walker. Even the more Republican-leaning participants said, effectively, “We voted, it's already done.”
- **Participants have very little sense of what's going on in Madison.** Few have any idea what either party is up to, and even on the Governor most assume he is either dealing with coronavirus or draw on his education background to assume he is doing something with schools. There is no sense that Republicans are blocking COVID efforts or refusing to convene.
- **School reopening is a big piece of the COVID puzzle for people, but feelings are complicated.** Many talked about their concerns in the context of schools reopening, whether because they have kids in school being impacted or because reopening puts the recovery in flux. Many express concern about kids missing school or not getting a full education, but the division between wanting kids in school in person or virtual appeared to depend heavily on whether anyone vulnerable lives at home. There's no easy consensus on this, even among people who agree on the severity of COVID.
  - *“I'm very concerned about schools and kids missing out on a big chunk of education.”* – NE Women
  - *“Being older, if I'm sick then I pass it on to the grandkids because my grandson is going to school. But then it's worry about them coming home with it too.”* – NE Seniors
  - *“All my kids are grown but I have grandkids, and I want them to go back to school as opposed to virtual. I'm all for virtual, it's going to keep them safer, and everybody's circumstances are different... it's the schooling, that's my concern.”* – SE Women
  - *“I am considered high risk, I have a heart condition. So we chose to keep the kids virtual, so it's, it really is just trying to keep away from, limiting our contact with people, limiting their contact with friends, and just going day by day.”* – SE Women
- **People generally support shutdown measures, but they also see limits in terms of sustainability and getting people to cooperate.** Asked point blank, most say the health dimension of the pandemic is more important than the economic and wish people would be more cooperative. But they also think there limits to such measures, and many are eager to get kids back in school and

businesses open as quickly as possible. While most report seeing people wear masks out in daily life, they also don't see the situation as sustainable.

- *"They're both [health and economy] really important. And you can't have good health without people having jobs."* – NE Women
  - *"I think the two week thing is a very good idea but it has to be everybody, because if there's no transmission for two weeks then it would die out. But not everyone participates."* – NE Seniors
  - *"I would say when this all hit originally they should have shut everything down quickly to get a handle on everything, and now I feel like they're going too far the other way where they know more about it but they're still keeping it closed."* – SE Men
  - *"In Milwaukee county we've had some businesses get fined, but pretty much no one else... They're not going to go into a business and enforce it."* – SE Women
- **Even among people who disapproved of Safer-At-Home ending via lawsuit, there wasn't outrage over it.** People are not organically angry over this, and few drew a direct line from this order to the problems Wisconsin is facing now (they were more likely to blame this on college kids).
    - *"I think it was because the court, from what I remember, overruled Tony Evers' decision to do the mandate order to stay at home. It was illegal I guess you would say for him to do it."* – NE Seniors
    - *"There was only a certain amount of time that he was allowed to say we had to stay home, and they were complaining that he was going way longer than what the law allowed."* – SE Women
    - *"I guess I see both sides, you want to see businesses open and you want to keep people safe."* – NE Seniors
- **People think the way to fix the economy is to deal with COVID.** Whether people think the economy is improving or not, virtually nobody thinks it's back to normal. They also do not see an end in sight, and though some talk about stimulus or aid, many are at a loss about exactly what needs to be done. However, there is more certainty that COVID is the driver of everything.
    - *"I think they should be helping small businesses, but they also just did that and a lot of money went to people who didn't need it."* – SE Women
    - *"I feel like overall it's going okay. It's certainly struck some people... there are certainly small businesses that are closing, but there seem to be a lot of jobs available."* – NE Women

- *“The fed is trying to keep everything afloat. But there’s so many unemployed, Congress can’t get its act together to pass another stimulus. What good news is there?” – SE Men*
- *“For the most part it seems within the general area it seems like everything has survived. There’s been a few businesses that have had to close, but for the most it seems like everything is on the upswing.” – SE Women*