

Can Wisconsin government ever become functional again?

Written by Wisconsin Examiner Republish
Friday, 18 March 2022 15:43

<http://newiproggressive.com/images/stories/S5/evers-2019-sos-s450.png>



Wisconsinites are becoming increasingly frustrated by politicians in Madison who seem more interested in partisan bickering than the people back home.

MADISON - Politics have become so dysfunctional in Wisconsin that the Legislature has taken to simply ignoring the things people actually care about, in order to focus on wild conspiracies about how the election was stolen from Donald Trump.

From removing toxic chemicals from our drinking water to adequately funding our schools to dealing with a [completely unnecessary backlog of professional licenses](#) that is preventing hair dressers, psychologists and hundreds of other types of professionals from getting to work, our state government is stuck.

Gov. Tony Evers expressed his frustration with this state of affairs at a lunch at the Madison Club hosted by WisPolitics Thursday. In answer to my question about breaking through toxic partisanship, he lamented the way voters have become turned off. "They're saying, 'I don't really care. I don't care about what these issues are, because you're never going to solve them because Republicans and Democrats can't get along.'"

Focusing exclusively on disagreements between Republican legislators and the Democratic governor is unhelpful and not totally fair, Evers added, since he signs many more bills than he

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vetoed. He pointed to the bipartisan effort that led, this week, to the [legalization of fentanyl strips](#), which can prevent overdose deaths.

But, as WisPolitics' Jeff Mayers quickly pointed out, Evers has also set a new record for vetoes. And legislative leaders have complained loudly that Evers doesn't reach out and talk to them — "so there isn't a great relationship."

In answer to my question about what Evers can personally do to make government work better for people, he said he tries to avoid partisan bickering, to remain above the fray. "To stay on the highest road I can," to avoid the "tit for tat, back and forth," although, he concedes, sometimes he slips.

Maybe there's not much he could have done to get along better with Republican leaders. Immediately after he was elected, they began their campaign to try to take away his powers. When they asked if he would meet with them every Wednesday like Republican Gov. Scott Walker did, Evers told them no. He'd meet with them sometimes, he said, but "I'm not Scott Walker."

The rest is familiar, frustrating history. The Republicans who control the legislative branch have applied themselves vigorously to impeding everything Evers tried to do, repeatedly gaveling in and out of the special sessions he called without debating school funding or gun safety or health care or policing. Maybe more diplomacy could not have prevented the politicization of the pandemic, which Evers calls "really unfortunate." The GOP celebrated the Wisconsin Supreme Court's decision to [end Evers' safer-at-home](#) public health order, just as [research demonstrated](#) that it was saving thousands of lives, Evers pointed out. "What's the tradeoff?" he added. "Letting more people die in order to accomplish a political goal?"

Perhaps Evers can be forgiven for sounding a little bitter, considering how mindlessly destructive his political opponents have become. A few times during the lunch, he took detours from the high road.

When Mayers asked him about strategies to mitigate learning loss during the pandemic, he

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reminded everyone that he had called on the Legislature to take up his proposal to spend some of the unprecedented state surplus on schools, adding, “I was hoping to have the Legislature come into special session — that would have been nice.”

Likewise, as Republicans lean into the idea of rising crime and call for more funding for police, Evers pointed out that they “could have and didn’t” increase the state’s shared revenue payments to cities. “If you want a more robust police force, if you want better violence protection programs — violence prevention programs — that’s where the money comes from,” he noted.

“It’s a big deal. And I have, in two budgets, I’ve had increases for that. That would have made a hell of a lot of difference. And that’s the first thing Republicans cut out of the budget,” he added, “So take that.”

So much for avoiding tit for tat.

Evers has, in fact, put forward a series of constructive policy proposals. While the Republicans spread fear and make campaign ads casting Milwaukee and Kenosha as the dark streets of Gotham, Evers has fixed the roads, put money into schools and businesses and expanded broadband — mostly thanks to federal pandemic relief money he was able to direct. He put millions into improving housing, unemployment programs, transportation, and education — long-term strategies to make Wisconsin a safer, more livable place for everyone. And he talks about how we have to “connect the dots” between these investments and reducing crime and having a better state.

Republicans used to be better at connecting the dots themselves. As Wisconsin mourns the passing of former Republican Lt. Gov. [Margaret Farrow](#), who was a champion for the UW System and our state’s great public schools, and lionizes former Republican Gov.

[Tommy Thompson](#), Wisconsin’s No. 1 booster who frequently worked across the aisle, it is remarkable to see how far we’ve fallen.

As Evers spoke, Assembly Speaker Robin Vos was running around the state spreading the idea that our election in 2020 was afflicted with “widespread fraud.”

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Vos has tried to stop short of throwing in with the lunatic fringe that claims, against all evidence, that Trump somehow won Wisconsin and Joe Biden is not really the president, while still feeding the base with the absurd and everlasting Gableman investigation, while keeping his distance from its wild claims. This week, for the first time, he adopted the position that fraud in Wisconsin elections is rampant.

“That’s not leadership,” said Evers, who is convinced Vos knows better. “I just find that repugnant,” Evers added. “I think he’s one of the smartest people I’ve ever met, and I think this is one of the dumbest things he’s ever said.”

“Robin Vos could end it today and say, ‘Gableman, go home. Stop your circus,’” Evers added.

Instead, Vos is keeping the circus going.

When it comes to connecting the dots, the most significant connection of all is between Republican attacks on democracy and the failure of our government to actually meet the needs of the people.

This breakdown will accelerate if a Republican candidate beats Evers in November and, after becoming governors, signs the whole raft of ill-considered election bills Evers has promised to veto.

The good news for democracy is that Evers won a surprise victory in the Wisconsin Supreme Court, which chose his maps over the Legislature’s alternative, which made our already worst-in-the-nation gerrymander even worse.

A big part of the reason our state government is not meeting the needs of the people is the way the maps are designed to lock in Republican control and eliminate competitive elections. Politicians who get to pick their own voters don’t need to listen to the majority’s concerns.

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The Supreme Court decision on Wisconsin's voting maps is only a partial victory, since the court insisted ahead of time that the new maps make the least changes possible to the existing gerrymandered maps.

But it is still a significant advance, says attorney Jeff Mandell of the progressive law firm Law Forward, who was involved in the redistricting lawsuits.

Mandell calls the court's acknowledgement that the Voting Rights Act requires a seventh majority-Black Congressional district in Milwaukee "a big deal."

And the anticipated outcomes of elections under the Evers map, which the court chose, "bring us significantly closer to fair maps in Wisconsin than we've been in a dozen years," Mandell says.

In addition to giving more Black Wisconsinites the opportunity to elect candidates of their choice, the Evers map reduces the lopsided Republican majority in the Legislature.

Mandell points to [modeling](#) that shows Evers' maps will cut back the Republican dominance of the Assembly from a 61-seat majority to 55 seats.

"If the hypothesis is that Wisconsin should have about half Democrats and half Republicans representing an evenly divided state, cutting the Republicans majority by six is half-way to fair," Mandell says.

You have to hand it to Evers and his team: playing by unfair rules, they beat the Republicans at their own game. They did remarkably well on a tilted playing field. That's a hopeful sign.

Plus, Mandell adds, "There's no reason to believe these maps will hold up for an entire decade."

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There will be more lawsuits and more elections, including for the Wisconsin Supreme Court itself. A court with a different ideological balance could take up the maps again, before the next census.

Maybe Evers is the right leader for the moment – chipping away doggedly, if sometimes grudgingly, scoring small victories and not giving in to discouragement.

To defend democracy and restore sanity to our state, for now, it looks like that's our best shot.

by Ruth Conniff, [Wisconsin Examiner](#)
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