Tuesday, October 15, 2024 / Can Democrats win back rural voters?

[HALF SECOND OF SILENCE]

[BILLBOARD]

SCORING IN <Wayward Willy - BMC>

SEAN RAMESWARAM (host): When you close your eyes and think of Wisconsin, what color is it?

Is it blue?

*<CLIP> DAVE THOMPSON (Wisconsin Democratic voter) Well, I don't want to run down anybody, but I didn't want Trump. <laughs> Well, that's that that's a fact. You know, I don't like the way he talks. I don't like how he runs people down.*

SEAN: Or is it red?

*<CLIP> JAMES RHODY: Number one is abortion. I believe that it is absolutely wrong to kill anyone, especially those who are the most unprotected and innocent. And the Republican Party seems to be the only ones doing much about it.*

SEAN: The answer, of course, is purple.

*<CLIP> McDonald’s commercial  
 DONALD TRUMP: Together Grimace, we could own this town.*

SEAN: But the Democrats are doing their darndest to try and win back what used to be a progressive stronghold.

We’re three weeks away from the election, and we’re heading to Wisconsin for our series on battleground states here at *Today, Explained*.

[THEME]

*<BUMPER> Today, Explained. Battleground states.*

*AVISHAY ARTSY (producer): Wisconsin!*

ROB MENTZER (rural communities reporter for Wisconsin Public Radio): I'm Rob Mentzer. I am the rural communities reporter for Wisconsin Public Radio. And I happen to live in central Wisconsin, in Wausau, which is a small city here in sort of north-central Wisconsin.   
  
SEAN: And can we just talk really quickly about what Wisconsin looked like, I don’t know, before Donald Trump? It used to be a progressive place, right?

ROB: Wisconsin has a very long history of progressive politics. From the turn of the 20th century, it was actually one of the birthplaces of the progressive movement. Robert LaFollette was a populist governor, later U.S. senator. He was beloved by the state's farmers, by rural areas. And you can draw a straight line from that progressive movement in Wisconsin to a lot of the New Deal legislation and into modern progressivism, for sure.

SEAN: Hm! And what changed? Is it as simple as Donald Trump or is there more to that story?

ROB: I think that it goes back a little bit further than that.

SCORING IN <Shadow Man - BMC>

ROB: So in 2010, there was a massive wave election for Republicans. And one of the Republicans elected that year was Scott Walker, who became Wisconsin's governor.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w6QizkhszDE)*> FORMER WI GOV-ELECT SCOTT WALKER: Well finally here tonight I get to tell you, come today, you don't have to be afraid anymore, because help is on the way! [applause]*

ROB: Some people will recall the, the first thing he did in office was to introduce a bill that essentially removed collective bargaining rights from most public unions; teachers, government workers.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IFU7mn9pOhA)*> SCOTT WALKER: We're going to do what it takes to get this budget on track.*

ROB: And there was a huge backlash to this. There were weeks of protests in the state capitol.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IFU7mn9pOhA)*> ABC NEWS: [crowd chanting “We are Wisconsin!”] Today they were nearly 40,000 strong. State workers and their supporters, upset by what they see as a frontal assault on their benefits and their union rights.*

ROB: But Republicans won that battle. And then, because 2010 was a redistricting year, they used their trifecta power to entrench those majorities in the legislature. Walker survived a recall election in 2012. He won reelection in 2014. And that gets us to the Trump era in 2016.

SCORING OUT

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JVBfaH-Qedw)*> MEGYN KELLY, Fox News: Hold on. Standby. There's a, there's a big old call to make right now and that is Fox News is projecting that Donald Trump has won the state of Wisconsin. Donald Trump has won the state of Wisconsin and there goes her blue wall … which is momentous. Wisconsin! Wisconsin was barely in play!*

ROB: Hillary Clinton famously did not visit Wisconsin during the 2016 campaign.

SEAN: Hm!

ROB: And she did not win Wisconsin on election night, 2016. Now, the reasons for that are complicated. But I think that manufacturing really is a big part of it. It's one of the absolute pillars of Wisconsin's economy. There are a lot of rural communities where a paper mill, or a window and door manufacturer, a Harley Davidson plant, are the biggest employers. They provide the most jobs. And there was a real and a long term decline in that share of manufacturing jobs in Wisconsin that you can trace as far back as the 1970s all the way into the 2010s.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q4qbBy6_uTc)*> WISN: Chrysler shut down its engine plant on Kenosha’s west side today. A factory that once employed 14,000 people.*

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ND62xgM-uQE)*> WISN: Train maker Talgo says it will shut down its Milwaukee manufacturing plant in early 2012.*

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p61N9jjq1iQ)*> WISN: REPORTER: The former home of General Motors in Janesville sits empty and a sad reminder to local residents of what once was.   
GUY: “I’d still be working there if it was open.”*

ROB: Some people absolutely blamed NAFTA for that or other free trade agreements. Those were things that President Bill Clinton had signed into law, was an advocate for…

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b3ooMrgXido)*> FORMER PRESIDENT BILL CLINTON, at the 1995 signing of NAFTA: We are on the verge of a global economic expansion that is sparked by the fact that the United States at this critical moment decided that we would compete, not retreat.*

ROB: … and Hillary Clinton was associated with, while Trump was vocally against.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N-9mJR3SvfA)*> FORMER PRESIDENT DONALD TRUMP: Your husband signed NAFTA, which was one of the worst things that ever happened to the manufacturing industry…*

*FORMER SEC OF STATE HILARY CLINTON: Well that’s your opinion, that’s your opinion.*

ROB: Also, in the 2010s, we saw a lot of consolidation of dairy farms, a lot of closures of smaller farms.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xIRw2VVKlK4)*> PBS: Last year, more than 2,700 dairy farms went out of business in the U.S., the bulk of them here in Wisconsin, long known as America's dairyland.*

ROB: And I think that those things were part of the change in rural areas that voters reacted to. I spoke with John Germain, who is co-chair of the Democratic Party in Taylor County. This is a very sparsely populated rural county in north central Wisconsin. And he said the last time that the area was remotely close was in 2008 when Barack Obama won Wisconsin in a landslide.

*<CLIP> JOHN GERMAIN (co-chair of the Democratic Party in Taylor County): Things shifted pretty rapidly after that. And Trump really keyed into the rural voters, I think, with some of their grievances. And, you know, it's not just this county. Obviously, all the rural counties across the country are similar…*

SEAN: Is that how Biden flips it back in 2020? ‘Cause he's got that Obama affiliation and he doesn't have that NAFTA affiliation?

ROB: In a word, no.

SEAN: Okay! <laughs>

ROB: The election in 2020 looked a lot like the election in 2016 in Wisconsin. The rural vote came out for Trump in huge numbers.

SEAN: Hm!

ROB: Bigger than 2016.

SEAN: Hm!

ROB: The only thing is that the vote in Madison and in other Democratic strongholds was a little bigger.

SEAN: Hm!

ROB: Democrats gained ground in the suburbs in Wisconsin in 2020, and it put Biden over the top by about 20,000 votes in Wisconsin, which was enough, but which was less than 1%. But the sort of rural base of Trump voters, they absolutely turned out.

SEAN: Okay. So, so let's talk about where that leaves us this year, in 2024, in just a few weeks now. It sounded like you were saying you'd expect Wisconsin to go for Trump again from your vista, is that, is that right?

ROB: Well, I'd certainly expect that the part of the state that I live in to go for Trump again, there's no, there's no question about that, I don't think. It is worth saying that Democrats this year have put a lot of money and resources and volunteer time into rural Wisconsin. And I did talk to some Democrats. For instance, Jim Davis is co-chair of the Taylor County Democratic Party who said that some Harris supporters are actually scared to put up signs.

SEAN: Hm!

*<CLIP> JIM DAVIS (co-chair of the Taylor County Democratic Party: I live out in the country where, you know, people are worried about somebody stealing signs or painting your signs. I'm going to get bullet holes in my signs. And that's not a lie. I mean, that's what happens. And, but I don't care. You know, I'm not going to let somebody, you know, tell me that I can't, I can't be a Democrat and I can't show people that I'm a Democrat.*

SEAN: And what are Democrats doing to sort of shift the narrative in rural communities in Wisconsin, Rob? What are they doing to mobilize Democrats and to make new Democrats in these communities where you've been hanging out?

ROB: Democrats have opened something like fifty offices, field offices around the state, including more than thirty in counties that Trump won in 2020. They are out knocking on doors and doing direct mail and all the other sort of campaign outreach tactics, including a lot more in-person work than was the case four years ago. We've also seen how Kamala Harris is trying to reach out to Republican voters directly. This month, she campaigned with Liz Cheney, a former member of House Republican leadership.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G8ntjxd4N9c)*> LIZ CHENEY: I tell you I have never voted for a Democrat, but this year I am proudly casting my vote for Vice President Kamala Harris. [applause]*

ROB: They did that event in Ripon, Wisconsin, which is where the Republican Party was born in the 19th century. And it was explicitly understood as a way to reach out to voters who consider themselves Republican but may be open to voting for Harris.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zVwpabMpqKY)*> VICE PRESIDENT KAMALA HARRIS: No matter your political party, there is a place for you with us and in this campaign.*

ROB: And then there's Harris's vice presidential choice. Tim Walz talks about having rural roots, growing up on a farm in Nebraska. And he just sort of comes off as a rural guy.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oHtYcbH50ag)*> VP CANDIDATE TIM WALZ: … and I was a better shot than most Republicans in Congress and I got the trophies to prove it.*

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/shorts/bmpueugJ3kM)*> FORMER PRESIDENT BARACK OBAMA: You can tell those flannel shirts he wears don’t come from some political consultant. They come from his closet. And they have been through some stuff.*

ROB: I passed on a highway in central Wisconsin, one of those like giant yard signs that said Harris 2024, and someone had, the person who put it up, had spray painted Tim Walz for V.P. underneath it. I guess just as a way to like…

SEAN: <laughs>

ROB: …emphasize, like, he's also part of the ticket. And I do hear from people in rural areas in Wisconsin who feel like they connect with Tim Walz, a hunter. He wears a, a camo cap and all those, you know, small town football coach. And then one other factor this year is that for the first time in more than a decade, Wisconsin has new voting maps that actually do give Democrats a chance of taking back a majority in at least one house of the state legislature.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YdiyvsQKviM)*> CBS 58: On Monday, Governor Evers signed new maps he drew that will significantly weaken Republicans' advantage in the state Legislature.*

*GOV. TONY EVERS: It's a new day in Wisconsin. [applause]*

ROB: I think that for sure has brought some new attention, some additional energy to Democratic organizing on the local level.

SEAN: So do you think it could work? Do you think Democrats could win back rural voters in Wisconsin?

ROB: Well, they could win back *some* of the rural voters, maybe.

SEAN: <laughs>

SCORING IN <The Blue Danube - BMC>

ROB: The Democrats I talked to, their goal is to lose by less in these rural areas. So one of those, Jim Davis, said that they're not even remotely thinking that they're going to get over 50% in Taylor County.

SEAN: Hm.

*<CLIP> JIM DAVIS: You might get some people to change their mind. Who knows? And it might get us to that 35% because that's that's that's the, that's the golden number.*

SEAN: Oh!

ROB: And so if they can get to 35% in areas where maybe they're lucky to scrape 25%, that can really make a difference in a state as close as Wisconsin.

SCORING BUMP

SEAN: Rob Mentzer. Wisconsin Public Radio. Catch us on their airwaves every weeknight. Go Badgers.

We’re gonna hear about what unifies rural voters across these United States when we return on *Today, Explained*.

[BREAK]

*<BUMPER> Hey, do you know about the USA, do you know about… Wiiiiiscooooonsin*

SEAN: *Today, Explained*. Sean Rameswaram. Wisconsin Rob has left the building, but we got Nicholas Jacobs from Maine with us now. Nick and a pal wrote a whole dang book about rural voters. It’s called *The Rural Voter*. It was an attempt to try and sort out all the arguments people have been having about roughly 20% of the American electorate after 2016. We asked him what he learned beyond, just, like, you know, they’re whiter than urban voters.

NICK JACOBS (assistant professor, Colby College): So in 2016 and in 2020, rural voters as a bloc, given their size and given their tendency to vote overwhelmingly and increasingly for the Republican Party. Rural voters in the last two elections for president were just about as important for Donald Trump as union voters were for Democrats.

SEAN: Hm.

NICK: They were a larger share of the Republican coalition than Black voters were for Democrats or young voters were for Democrats. So this is an enormous voting bloc and a very influential voting bloc, owed not just to its size, but the lopsidedness of its voting patterns in the last couple of elections.

SEAN: And you're referring to this bloc as a bloc. Is it a bloc because it typically votes the same way?

NICK: Thirty years ago, I don't think it would have been fair to talk about a ‘rural voter’.

SCORING IN <Ladybug - BMC>

NICK: You would have had the rural Maine bloc versus an urban Maine bloc or rural Virginians versus urban Virginians or suburban Virginians. We only use that term “rural voter” recently because on average, nationwide, they increasingly are voting similar to one another. That doesn't mean that all rural voters are and it doesn't mean that all rural voters across the country are. There's very important differences in the Deep South where rural communities look very different, especially in terms of their racial composition, than, you know, rural communities in the Midwest or rural communities in the Northeast. That matters for voting outcome. Rural communities out in the West are some of the most rapidly diversifying…

SEAN: Hm!

NICK: …communities in this country. When we talk about rural voters as a voting bloc nationwide, the other thing that's true is it seems like the move towards the Republican Party in rural communities across the country is being driven by a very similar set of reasons. And a lot of these reasons have to do with anxiety about the future of their community. And some of that anxiety is about the economic well-being of their community. Some of those motivations have to do with a sense of cultural precarity. By which we mean that rural people feel that rural ways of living are not appreciated. And some of it has to do with grievance towards government. A lot of people are attuned to the fact that rural areas on average are poorer than urban communities and suburban communities. But it's not just about this relative deprivation. There's a story told in many rural communities about the source of that deprivation and one of the central characters in that is, is government.

SCORING OUT

NICK: These changes that have taken place in rural areas across the last 40, 50 years. Many people do not view those changes as inevitable, but the result of choices that were made and choices that were made to the detriment of of rural life.

SEAN: I want to hit these, these three motivations that you just mentioned. I mean, the economy. Donald Trump was president and he gave massive tax cuts to the rich. I want to talk about, you know, rural communities. Donald Trump is literally from a, you know, tower in Manhattan and now lives in a pink mansion in Florida. And I want to talk about resentment of government because he promised to drain the swamp and then he didn't. And now he wants to go back to the swamp. Like, why is it that in 2024, if you're a rural voter and these are three of your chief concerns, you're still maybe leaning towards Donald Trump?

NICK: Well, some of it has to do with the options that are given to rural Americans. And Trump is one option. And, by default, a Democrat is the other option. I think it's still a very open question how much of this rural Republicanism or rural tendency to vote Republican is a vote against Democrats so much as for Republicans. We know it's both. And, of course, it can be both even among one voter. But I would start with that, right, that's, a lot of this transformation in rural partisanship is a reaction against the Democratic Party. And we hear this all the time, right, that we didn't leave the Democratic Party, but the Democratic Party left us.

SEAN: Mm.

NICK: And, you know, I, certainly, there, there are folks that say that, and that's about the Democratic Party's perceived cultural liberalism, embrace of certain issues that might not mesh well. Certainly some of that has to do with the Democratic Party's embrace over the last 30, 40 years of racially progressive policies and, okay, and that explains a little bit of that. But some of it also is that the Democratic Party is, is, is the party of government, right, it openly celebrates itself as the party of government and has done so for the last 20 years.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aYKKsRxhcro)*> FORMER PRESIDENT BARACK OBAMA: Government has the capacity, the federal government has the capacity to help open up opportunity and create ladders of opportunity and to create frameworks where the American people can succeed.*

NICK: And, you know, if you're going to be the party of government, you're going to take some hits by people that have bad experiences or at least tell themselves a story that their relative deprivation is the fault of government. And not just government, but experts in general. Now, there is something about Trump in 2016, too, right? So it's the push and the pull. And there is absolutely something about Donald Trump, who – I'm glad you said it, because it's the thing I like pointing out the most – is authentically not rural…

SEAN: <laughs>

NICK: …doesn't pretend to be rural, doesn't put on the Carhartt. But what Donald Trump does do is he doesn't pretend to be something he's not, which is how rural constituencies are often treated. What Donald Trump does say is he says, ‘I'm not a part of this system that you hate so much.’

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.c-span.org/video/?445385-1/president-trump-remarks-elkhart-indiana)*> TRUMP: Under my administration we’re fighting against the lobbyists, the special interests, and the corrupt Washington politics.*

NICK: And that had just gut level attraction among so many people.

SEAN: Mm-hm.

NICK: And you're right. I think the question that we should be asking ourselves right now is, now that he is so in the mainstream, has he lost some of his luster?

SEAN: The Democrats are trying so hard right now to appeal to these kinds of voters. I mean, Kamala Harris can't stop talking about her Glock.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.instagram.com/kamalaharris/reel/DA2GEQSKi77/)*> VICE PRESIDENT KAMALA HARRIS: I have a Glock. And I’ve had it for quite some time.*

SEAN: She picks Tim Walz as a running mate. I can't count how many Tim Walz, you know, camo hats I've seen. You know, Biden shut down the border. She's got these populist economic policies. She's trying to seem like she's out there for the everyday American. Do you think any of that changes this perception your average rural voter has of the Democratic Party? Or is it all for naught? Because I've seen a lot of people in Washington, D.C., wearing that camo hat, but I haven't been hanging out in rural America. So I'm, I’m just curious.

NICK: <laughs> I've seen one.

SEAN: Ok. <laughs>

NICK: Or two. <laughs>   
  
 SCORING IN <Frogs Not Hopping - BMC>

NICK: Look, it's a start and you gotta start somewhere. And so I've been pretty clear in my writing. I think the Democratic disadvantage in rural communities is problematic, not because I think Democrats have the solutions for rural prosperity, but because I know as a political scientist that when one party dominates a region, when one party so dominates that the other party just doesn't show up and contest a lot of races, that's not good for our democracy.

SEAN: Mm.

NICK: Our political system requires competition. I know we all hate the two party system, especially this time of year, but that's the system we got. And in order for it to work, we need both parties to show up.

SCORING BUMP

SEAN: Nick Jacobs. Colby College. Waterville, Maine. The book he wrote with Dan Shea is *The Rural Voter: The Politics of Place and the Disuniting of America.*

Avishay Artsy produced the show today. He was edited by Amina Al-Sadi, fact-checked by Laura Bullard, and mixed by Rob Byers and Andrea Kristinsdottir.

We’re heading to North Carolina next week on *Today, Explained*.

[10 SECONDS OF SILENCE]