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[00:00:00] **Speaker 1** Okay, I'm recording here, and then I'm just gonna. Clap. Okay. All right. I'm just sitting here. It's all good. And you might just give me a little test audio.

[00:00:12] **Speaker 2** Sure. The most interesting thing about King Charles the first is that he was five foot eight inches tall at the start of his reign, with only four foot ten inches tall at the end.

[00:00:23] **Speaker 1** That's perfect. All right, I'm ready to go over. Rolling. Yeah. Okay, so we have it for the cameras. Could you please introduce yourself and tell us what you're doing where we are?

[00:00:33] **Speaker 2** I'm Jonathan Kasper. I'm a professor of history at the University of Wisconsin. Milwaukee. At Waukesha.

[00:00:40] **Speaker 1** So tell us, where does Wisconsin fit in national politics?

[00:00:44] **Speaker 2** Wisconsin is incredibly important, as it has been for the last few election cycles. It is a swing state in the sense that it could go either Republican or it could go Democrat. And our electorate is about evenly divided. All of the polling recently shows an extremely close race. And nationally, it's a very close race. So Wisconsin's ten electoral votes could be very critical for both the Republicans or the Democrats.

[00:01:10] **Speaker 1** So does this provide us with a lot of the spotlight and attention nationally?

[00:01:14] **Speaker 2** I think we're going to see an awful lot of Kamala Harris and Donald Trump over the next few weeks. They're going to be here a lot.

[00:01:22] **Speaker 1** How did we get to this point of Wisconsin being such a prominent and watched and important state nationally?

[00:01:28] **Speaker 2** The big turning point, I think, in Wisconsin in terms of national attention was the 2016 election. Wisconsin, Michigan and Pennsylvania were part of what Hillary Clinton famously called the Blue Wall, the guaranteed Democratic states that were going to ensure that she would win in 2016, and she lost all three of them. 2016 was the first time since 1984 that Wisconsin voted for a Republican presidential candidate. So it was a it was a surprise. But people who really paid attention knew that it well, not as surprising as it looked. Wisconsin usually has very close elections, particularly presidential elections. And in fact, the closest election was in 2000, when al Gore beat George Bush by about 8000 votes. So this is something we've known for a long time, but really exploded onto the public consciousness in 2016.

[00:02:21] **Speaker 1** And then in 2020 as well. Right.

[00:02:23] **Speaker 2** 2020, it was the reverse. Donald Trump beat Hillary Clinton by about 20,000 votes in 2016, and it was the reverse. In 2020, turnout was up by about 11%. He was up, particularly in Milwaukee, about 4.3%. And as a result, Joe Biden beat Donald Trump by about 22,000.

[00:02:45] **Speaker 1** Historically, tell us about the path, to 2024 and where we stand now and how Wisconsin has changed and voted over the years.

[00:02:53] **Speaker 2** Well, if we go back to, let's say, world just after World War Two, that's where we really see the the current situation beginning. Wisconsin had long been a Republican state between the Civil War and the mid 50s. It was almost always a Republican governor, and the Republicans usually controlled both houses of the legislature. However, the Republican Party was not monolithic. There was an important faction in the Republican Party, the progressive faction led by Bob La Follette fighting Bob. And that really was the big political contest between Republicans who would win the nomination. And then they would go on to defeat the Democrat in the general election. That faction becomes an independent political party in the 1930s, the Progressive Party. And for a time, they're in control. Really? That coalition falls apart. And in the late 40s and early 50s, the Democratic Party sort of absorbs a lot of those old progressives. It builds on the organized labor movement in Milwaukee and Kenosha and Racine. It pulls on farm voters in northern Wisconsin. So the Democratic coalition starts to emerge, led by people like Gaylord Nelson, Bill Proxmire, Jim Doyle, senior Ruth Doyle. They really create a Democratic Party. That is what we would think of as a modern Democratic party. The New Deal tradition, the Franklin Roosevelt kind of tradition. Very pro-worker pro farmer, really drawing heavily on the on the leadership from Madison. The Republican Party, for a conservative party appropriately has remained pretty consistent. It is it is has long been a very conservative, pro-business party. And that goes even went back, into the late 19, late 1800s.

[00:04:42] **Speaker 1** Okay. Wisconsin, often called a bellwether state. Why is that? And what does that mean, exactly?

[00:04:52] **Speaker 2** Oh, bellwether is sort of, a state where it's a microcosm of what the national picture looks like and like the national picture. Wisconsin is pretty evenly divided, and in ways that are very predictable. So, for example, Democrats do very, very well in Dane County, in Milwaukee County. So the big cities Madison and Milwaukee and to a smaller extent in some of the smaller cities, La Crosse, Eau Claire, Stevens Point have all become sort of major Democratic centers. Republicans have traditionally done very well in suburban areas, particularly the Milwaukee suburbs, but increasingly they've done very well in rural and small town arrows. So this reflects very much what we see nationally, sort of the the large cities in the Midwest and in the coasts are Democratic. A lot of the rural areas are red. So if you look at a map broken down by counties, there's a lot of red, but not a lot of voters, whereas there's a little bit of a lot of blue, a lot of voters. But it sort of equals out.

[00:05:56] **Speaker 1** Oh, how does that impact what campaigns do here?

[00:06:00] **Speaker 2** Well, it really impacts strategy, because what Democrats really have relied on the last few election cycles is a big turnout in Madison. In Milwaukee, if they can pile up big totals in those two counties and those two cities, they're going to win the election. That's what Hillary Clinton failed to do in 2016. The Democratic turnout, those two places was down significantly. It came back up in 2020. It came back up in 2018 with the election of Tony Evers. So there is that that strategy works. What we're starting to see, though, that I think is interesting, are two trends. One is that with Donald Trump at the head of the ticket, those old suburban counties like Washington, Ozark and Waukesha, which used to be the the heart of the Republican Party, are a lot less Republican than they used to. I don't think they're going to go Democratic in 2024. But, you know, the margin might be 55% instead of 60% or 70% as it has been in the past. But in an election that close, you know, a few thousand voters might make the big difference. The other thing that I've been noticing is that in some parts of the state, particularly in Eau Claire County, Saint Croix County, Iowa County and Suffolk County, those are trending much more Democratic as well. And I think that is sort of the Madison blob spreading westward or the lacrosse suburbs or the, Minneapolis suburbs. Those are more, voters, much more sympathetic to the Democratic Party.

[00:07:44] **Speaker 1** So as each campaign is just trying to, in these areas, just shrink their loss margin. Is that what they're.

[00:07:53] **Speaker 2** Trying to that's really the strategy is, is we have to turn out more of our voters than they do of theirs. And I think energizing the the base is a really big part of that. I think Donald Trump's pick of JD Vance really was trying to appeal to that kind of small town, or rural voter that, throughout the Midwest, but particularly in Wisconsin. And I think Kamala Harris kind of took the wind out of that by choosing, the governor of Minnesota. Walz is, incredibly folksy, down to earth kind of guy that will resonate with Midwestern voters, particularly western Wisconsin.

[00:08:32] **Speaker 1** Tickets back in history again since the 1990s. Tell us about Wisconsin's politics up to this point today.

[00:08:40] **Speaker 2** Then the 1990s is an interesting time. It was a time when the Republican and Democratic parties were pretty evenly matched. Tommy Thompson was an incredibly popular governor, so he really had a lock. He was elected four times, which is a record in terms of Wisconsin governors. But the Assembly was mostly Democratic. They controlled it by 5 or 6 seats, usually. The the Senate was primarily Democratic. They control it by about 2 to 3 seats. The Assembly, I should say, was Republican, and they controlled about 5 to 6 seats. That's the that period of time where we saw the, the caucus scandals with, Speaker Scott Jensen and, Senate Majority Leader Chuck Walla. It was a really sort of hardnosed era of very competitive politics. What changed, really was the election of Barack Obama in 2008. Democrats took both houses of the legislature. But then there's the backlash election in 2010. So in 2010, Wisconsin voters elected Scott Walker. Republicans gained control of both houses of the legislature. They gained control of both houses of Congress. So it's sort of changes dramatically. And the Republicans had control of the redistricting process. And the new districts that were drawn up after the 2010 census really locked in that Republican majority. So Democratic candidates in the Assembly, for example, could win, 51, 52% of the vote and only gain 30 to 40 seats. So that structural advantage was really significant. And as a result, the Republicans have controlled state government really since then. Tony Evers election 2018 was the first breakthrough of that. Now, with new districts being drawn for this election, I think we're really in for, an interesting moment when potentially we could see divided government again, with the Democrats gaining control of one House and the Republicans having another. And I think that will force them, I think, to work together more closely. The really mean spirited Partizan politics that we've seen since then, isn't going to work well, because you have to appeal to voters in a competitive district that aren't diehard, supporters of one party or the other.

[00:11:08] **Speaker 1** So it seems that, you know, there's been a lot of back and forth, you know, electing Scott Walker, but also electing Tammy Baldwin statewide, electing Tony Evers. Yeah. But then also Ron Johnson. How do you make sense of the back and forth of Wisconsin politics?

[00:11:24] **Speaker 2** It is. It is confusing. We have the oddest pair of senators, I think, in the country. Part of it is, I think really that it's about personality as well as politics. Tammy Baldwin is a very popular incumbent. She is she surprisingly, she has a lot of support in rural areas because, she can speak to farm issues. She can speak to issues like education and health care particularly, and veterans issues that are of concern to people in small towns. Our behavior as absolutely baffling to, national pundits, they're never quite sure what to make of us because of things like electing Tammy Baldwin and Ron Johnson. Flipping back and forth with governors, we had. 16 years of Tommy Thompson, and then his is Lieutenant Governor Scott McCallum taking over. And then we had Jim Doyle for two terms, and then Scott Walker for two terms and and a recall election. So he won three statewide elections and then lost to Tony Evers. So I think personality appeals and I think after all of that, really hard nosed politics, Tony Evers was a very appealing, kind of laid back, comforting kind of figure that a lot of Wisconsin voters found appealing.

[00:12:54] **Speaker 1** What is it that really drives the fluctuation between each party and statewide races and where we where we stand nationally? What is it that makes us so different that way?

[00:13:08] **Speaker 2** Well, I think there is a degree to which issues really do drive this. Wisconsin voters, I think, like a lot of voters nationwide, are very uncomfortable with overturning Roe v Wade. And so what we've seen in a couple of recent Supreme Court elections is speaking out against the need to protect abortion rights has motivated a lot of voters. It has certainly energized the Democratic voters. But I think also a lot of independents who are concerned that perhaps that's gone too far and perhaps, kind of fearing this sort of slippery slope argument. Like what? What next? Might we have confidence that we've had for for decades that might be taken away from us? So those sorts of issues are important. On the other hand, Wisconsin, particularly in rural and small town areas, has also tended to respond well to, cultural issues. There are a lot of pro-life voters in Wisconsin. There are a lot of voters who are voting for, a kind of an America First idea. And of course, the economy, encumbrances tend to do poorly in elections where the economy is declining. So part of the concern with, Reelecting Joe Biden was that inflation and housing prices and rent were really becoming a problem. I think that's been mitigated to a large degree, because Kamala Harris is is kind of fortunate in having been not a particularly public vice president. She's not going to get, I think, blamed quite as much as as Biden would have been for the poor economic, and can she can speak to the improving economics. The inflation is down. Job growth remains pretty robust. Interest rates are going to start to come down soon. Whereas I think Donald Trump has in some ways, the problem of incumbency. Weirdly, he's not the incumbent, but he was president. And people will remember that in 2020 things weren't so great. So we do care about issues. We care about personalities. We tend to like sort of maverick politicians. I think one of the things that that appeal to a lot of voters was that Trump was kind of a maverick, unusual politician. He was colorful and, didn't necessarily toe the party line. So, Scott, we like I mean, we elected, Bill Proxmire, who was a very maverick politician, a very independent politician. Lee Sherman Dreyfus as governor in, 78, same kind of independent. I'm not going to just do what the party tells me. So I think I think Trump in 2016 kind of appealed to that a little bit as well. I don't know whether that will continue in 2024 or not.

[00:16:06] **Speaker 1** We'll find out. Does the Wisconsin electorate change, or is it largely about voter turnout that drives this back and forth? And who ends up winning?

[00:16:19] **Speaker 2** The electorate does change. And one of the things that's really hard to get a sense of is, you know, every four years you've had, you know, four group, four cohorts essentially turn 18. So the youth vote is really intriguing. Generally, I think it's safe to say that the youth, younger voters tend to be Democratic. They did not seem to be particularly enthusiastic about Joe Biden. They seem to be more enthusiastic about Kamala Harris. Every, election, there are, changes in terms of young people leaving the state, too. I mean, we've we've been concerned about the so-called brain drain. So are those young voters staying or are they leaving? And where are they living? They tend to cluster in certain kinds of places, like Madison. Madison, is a wonderful place to live, but it's a very expensive place to live. And so younger voters are sort of moving close by. So that's changing the makeup of some of south central Wisconsin and making some of those counties that had been reliably Republican a little bit more, a little bit more Democratic. Likewise, in the suburban counties of, Milwaukee, that's an aging population, and younger people are moving into it. And again, younger people tend to be a little bit more Democratic and Republican. So the electorate is is shifting. The other thing interesting, too, is, of course, northern Wisconsin has been losing population pretty steadily for for decades. So even though that is solidly now Republican territory, there's not a lot of votes in the number of votes up there are declining.

[00:18:09] **Speaker 1** So we are described as deeply purple state, but it's not purple throughout. It's red and blue.

[00:18:14] **Speaker 2** Yeah. It's pixilated I think is the best way to think about it.

[00:18:22] **Speaker 1** Is there also growing moderate movement in Wisconsin?

[00:18:25] **Speaker 2** I think Wisconsin voters fundamentally are pretty moderate. I mean, there are famously, Madison is got the reputation for being one of the most liberal places in in the country. Milwaukee kind of has that reputation, too. But for a lot of Wisconsin voters, it's often very basic bread and butter issues. And, they are concerned about the economy. They are concerned about education. They are concerned about health care. So there are things that that I don't think either party really has a lock on. And trying to appeal to those independent, moderate voters about who is best positioned to handle these very basic issues is going to be a key thing for this campaign. And really, Wisconsinites have tended to voted pretty moderate candidates. Tommy Thompson was a Republican, but in many cases he was, had some pretty progressive issues.

[00:19:27] **Speaker 1** So where do we fit with our neighbors? Do we, we need our neighboring states like Wisconsin in the back and forth, or are they more in one camp and the other.

[00:19:39] **Speaker 2** That we used to be a lot more similar than we are? If we look at the Midwestern states, I think Wisconsin is probably very similar to Michigan. And those are two of the big three swing states, really, that are going to probably determine this election. Ohio and Indiana have become pretty solidly Republican, much less purple than Wisconsin. Iowa has become pretty reliably Republican. Interestingly, Iowa voted for Barack Obama in 2008, but has become solidly Republican. Minnesota is really kind of the odd duck and being pretty reliably Democratic. I think in part because the Democratic farm Democratic Party in Minnesota properly is the Democratic Farmer Labor Party. And so they have really maintained those agricultural and organized labor ties in a way that has been a struggle for, other Rust Belt states.

[00:20:42] **Speaker 1** The RNC was here in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. DNC is not far in Chicago. What what are you looking for at the DNC as far as Wisconsin politics?

[00:20:54] **Speaker 2** Well, I think we're going to see Wisconsin getting a lot of attention in the DNC. It is close. I think we'll see a lot of Wisconsin politicians there. I suspect that the post convention campaign season will probably begin in Wisconsin and continue into Michigan and continue into Pennsylvania.

[00:21:16] **Speaker 1** How about the change with the Biden being at the top of the ticket? Now it's Vice President Kamala Harris. What impact might that have here in Wisconsin?

[00:21:24] **Speaker 2** What I've seen in Wisconsin is just a tremendous shift in enthusiasm. As we said earlier, voter turnout is absolutely essential. And I think that was something that President Biden was going to really struggle with in Wisconsin is finding voters enthusiastic, particularly young voters who are enthusiastic. Kamala Harris and and Governor Walz have really seem like they've reinvigorated the campaign. The crowds that they attracted in Eau Claire were astonishing. They are leaving behind very energized, enthusiastic, ready to work and ready to go knock on doors supporters in Wisconsin. So the momentum has shifted dramatically, and I think we're going to see that continue as, more and more voters become interested and find out more about these candidates. And, Governor Walz is such a wonderful, folksy kind of candidate. I think he's really going to appeal to Wisconsin voters.

[00:22:28] **Speaker 1** Wisconsin's been called unpredictable. It's also been called a battleground state, a swing state, tipping point, all of that. Where do you see it in the future, in the next couple of decades? Will we keep that?

[00:22:39] **Speaker 2** I think it's going to continue to be close. It's hard to anticipate long term demographic shifts, but, I mean, we've been close since 2000. I think we're going to remain close. It really is going to, I think, continue to come down to attractive candidates who can generate a lot of enthusiasm and really get voters excited to vote. Willing to go convince their neighbors to vote. Willing to put signs up in their yard. Momentum is is surprisingly strong. It reminds me of of watching football. They always talk about momentum. Who's got you know, there's a change in the sense and in who's going to win and there's a sense of energy. And that's kind of what's going on here, too, in politics, is that people feel enthusiastic and hopeful and they want to feel hopeful. Voters fundamentally want to feel optimistic. They want to feel hopeful. And I think whichever party can give them that, it's going to have an edge.

[00:23:42] **Speaker 1** Okay. Well thank you, professor joining us.

[00:23:45] **Speaker 2** Glad to do it.

[00:23:48] **Speaker 1** Is there anything else that I didn't ask that's important?

[00:23:51] **Speaker 2** No, I think that's pretty much everything that I had in my notes covered some ground.

[00:23:56] **Speaker 1** Fascinating. Can you again.

[00:23:59] **Speaker 2** It was so helpful to have you nodding over there and just like, okay, good.

[00:24:02] **Speaker 1** I'm saying that was I cannot, but I can't be too right. Yes.

[00:24:05] **Speaker 2** Think about it. That was great.

[00:24:07] **Speaker 1** So I have it again for the camera. Can you pronounce your first time listening?

[00:24:10] **Speaker 2** Jonathan. Casper.

[00:24:11] **Speaker 1** Eric. Got spirit. Okay, great. Let's do room tone. Yeah, let's do, like, five or 10s should be enough. You don't do 3030. Okay. You just said rarely do I use 30. I sit here awkwardly for a bit. That's good. All right.