

## **Pandemics, Progressives, and Pastures:**

### **The Role of COVID-19 in Wisconsin's 2020 Democratic Primary Election**

As of December 1, 2022, COVID-19 has killed 1.1 million people in the United States.<sup>1</sup> A loss of this magnitude is nearly incomprehensible; every segment of American society has been impacted by the pandemic, and it will take decades to fully comprehend how it has transformed the nation. There is a clear need to examine how COVID has altered the American economy, social frameworks, health infrastructure, and political systems. The coronavirus and its corresponding preventative measures were one of the most contentious issues in U.S. politics, acting as a key issue in elections for the past three years. Just one month after presidential primaries began in 2020, thirty-two states issued a stay-at-home order.<sup>2</sup> Holding an election from six feet apart is a massive undertaking, and several states postponed their primary elections as a result, with some states opting to forego in-person voting entirely. The unique nature of pandemic voting creates a question: How did COVID-19 impact the outcome of the 2020 Presidential Primaries?

To understand the relationship between COVID-19 and elections, this paper will examine the 2020 Wisconsin Democratic Presidential Primary as a case study. Wisconsin became the first state to go ahead with an in-person presidential primary despite a stay-at-home order after a contentious power struggle between state executives and state legislature.<sup>3</sup> The results of the Democratic primary in Wisconsin would prove to be particularly interesting due to a huge loss of ground by progressives. In 2016, Senator Bernie Sanders won all but one county in the partisan primary.<sup>4</sup> In 2020, he lost every single county to Joe Biden.<sup>5</sup> The unique circumstances of the Wisconsin primary helps to tailor and narrow the question for this case study: How did COVID-19 impact voter behavior in the 2020 Wisconsin Democratic Primary?

Data analysis of Wisconsin counties showed that as the rate of COVID cases per 100,000 people rose, support for Joe Biden fell, with an accelerated affect in metropolitan counties. COVID presented not just as a public health issue but as a partisan political issue, and due to the nature of the two-party system, voters are forced to choose candidates they believe will win in general elections. In this case, Democratic voters were asked to choose between Bernie Sanders, a progressive outsider who had already lost a nomination to Hillary Clinton, and Joe Biden, a mainstream Democrat with previous experience in an executive office. Trump's popularity and relaxed approach to COVID-19 put stress on Democratic voters to defeat him in the general election, and in Wisconsin, they flocked to the safety of Joe Biden. Moreover, COVID-based poll closures in metropolitan areas and underfunded election administrations in rural areas raised the cost of voting for many Democrats, turning away already discouraged voters from the polls and resulting in a drop in overall turnout. The decrease in voter turnout, despite hurting Joe Biden in metropolitan counties, did not stop him from winning each county individually. Even though moderates lost votes in areas with higher COVID rates, progressive voters moved towards moderate "safety candidates" due to heightened voter stress in an increasingly polarized environment, resulting in a win for the mainstream Democratic candidate.

The importance of understanding voter behavior cannot be understated. Voter participation is the cornerstone of American democracy; it defines the nation. Without a clear knowledge of what motivates and dissuades constituents, the outcome of elections cannot be understood.

This paper is divided into four main sections to further explain the outcome of this election. The second section discusses previous literature on voter behavior, the urban-rural divide, and polarization, while the third section outlines the research methods used in the creation and testing of two hypotheses. Section four provides further context on Wisconsin as a battleground state,

the intersection of health and electoral systems in rural areas, and Bernie Sanders' 2016 win. Section five details data analysis as well as socioeconomic and environmental factors that may explain that data. Finally, Section six summarizes the contents of this study and details the practical application of this research for addressing COVID-19 as a voter issue and catalyst for behavior.

### *Literature Review*

There are several popular theories and models that help explain why voters choose certain candidates. In "The Psychology of Voting," political scientist Jon Krosnick summarizes three of the most popular theories. Representative voting occurs when voters select a candidate who shares their views, guardianship voting happens when voters choose a candidate they believe will be the best at "figuring out the problems," and performance approval transpires when a voter takes an "if it ain't broke, don't fix it" approach and opt to reelect the current incumbent.<sup>6</sup> Although these theories are extremely useful for analyzing voter behavior, they do not consider factors such as income or environment into account in their barest forms. For this reason, this literature review largely focuses on sources that specifically highlight rurality, income, and current events.

Much of the previous literature on voting patterns seeks to reveal the root causes of shifts to the right, particularly in marginalized areas. Thomas Frank's *What's the Matter With Kansas? How Conservatives Won the Heart of America* gained national attention for its attempted explanation of an increase in low-income voters choosing Republican candidates. Frank points to recent party polarization over cultural issues, calling the phenomenon "the Great Backlash."<sup>7</sup> He asserts that Republican conservatives emphasize cultural divides so that party membership itself signifies a certain set of moral values and life practices, stating, "...the backlash mobilizes voters

with explosive social issues—summoning public outrage over everything from busing to un-Christian art—which it then marries to pro-business economic policies.”<sup>8</sup>

Using his home state of Kansas as his main case study, Frank showcases his theory through historical analysis. He argues that Kansas was an “outlier state” in the early 1900s, unique in its embrace of left-wing populist leaders and socialist causes.<sup>9</sup> He alleges that American politics today is defined by a few hot-button cultural issues, using instances such as Democrat Kathleen Sebelius’ election in overwhelmingly conservative Kansas to showcase his point. He attributes this particular example to Democrats copying Republican’s “backlash” strategy, stating, “The Democratic Leadership Council...has long been pushing the party to forget blue collar voters...‘New Democrats’...stand rock solid on the pro-choice position while making endless concessions on economic issues...”<sup>10</sup> Frank’s argument emphasizes the marketability of outrage: elites are able to convince working class people, regardless of party, to deprioritize their economic interests in favor of social issues such as queer rights and abortion.

Frank’s theory accurately points out the effects of political polarization but does not provide sufficient statistical evidence to explain why low-income, rural voters may shift to the right. Frank does not employ effective quantitative evidence to prove that working class people are moving to the right and political polarization over social issues is the main catalyst for this phenomenon. The lack of statistical analysis generated much criticism for Frank’s work, most notably political scientist Larry Bartels’ “What’s the matter with *What’s the Matter with Kansas?*” In this response to Frank’s work, Bartels uses polling and National Election Study data to assert that the white working class has not abandoned the Democratic party, that they have not become more conservative, and that they do not value moral issues over economics,

particularly religious issues.<sup>11</sup> Despite the shortcomings of Frank's work, it may be useful in understanding voting in an increasingly polarized environment.

Andrew Gelman's *Red State, Blue State, Rich State, Poor State* rejects the idea that low-income voters are turning to Republican candidates, stating, "[It's] simply not true. Lower-income Americans don't, in general, vote Republican."<sup>12</sup> Gelman instead points to a paradox of state wealth and personal wealth, arguing that although rich states have become more likely to vote Democratic, individual wealthy voters within states are still more likely to vote Republican.<sup>13</sup> Gelman asserts that cultural issues drive the political decisions of wealthy voters, despite the fact that the "rich-poor divide" remains within states themselves.<sup>14</sup> Moreover, Gelman attempts to explain the fact that despite low income voters largely voting Democrat, Republicans often win elections in low-income states. He runs through several reasons why low-income voters may be attracted to economic conservatism, such as aspiration, skepticism of redistribution, and media access. Gelman's main methodology is research analysis, using information that comes from datasets such as the National Election Survey and pulling previously aggregated results from other work done by political scientists such as Bartels.

One issue that Gelman does not fully address is the effect of large cities on a state's voting patterns. There is a wealth of research that suggests an urban-rural divide in the United States, and that the presence of large liberal cities can seriously impact the "redness" or "blueness" of a state.<sup>15</sup> It is even more important when we consider the fact that the urban-rural divide is inherently tied to the low-income/high-income divide Gelman discusses.<sup>16</sup> Although Gelman makes references to the presence of suburbs, he does not fully explore the interconnectedness of income and rurality; any argument that does not acknowledge this intersection is missing a vital facet of American politics.

The intersection of rural voters and income is particularly important in the case of Wisconsin, where many voters live in rural areas. To that end, it is important to review literature that pertains to voter's attitudes and general beliefs about government in these areas. Katherine Cramer's *The Politics of Resentment: Rural Consciousness in Wisconsin and the Rise of Scott Walker* centers on a concept that Cramer calls "rural consciousness." She defines this concept as "an identity as a rural person that includes...a sense that decision makers routinely ignore rural places and fail to give rural communities their fair share of resources, as well as a sense that rural folks are fundamentally different from urbanites in terms of lifestyles, values, and worth ethic."<sup>17</sup> Cramer came to this theory through a series of interviews with rural Wisconsinites, and discovered a pattern of complaints that centered around government corruption, a lack of true representation, a feeling of powerlessness, and resentment towards elites, who were often equated with city dwellers.<sup>18</sup> The concept of "rural consciousness" can help describe emotional aspects that result from socioeconomic conditions in Wisconsin, which in turn can drive voting behavior.

The selected works speak to a variety of themes that are presented throughout this paper. John Krosnick's summary of popular voting psychology theories provides a baseline for voter motivations, while Thomas Frank and Andrew Gelman's texts help contextualize how rising polarization affects elections. Finally, Katherine Cramer's findings on resentment in rural areas offers specific data on Wisconsin, which helps to center the political experiences that are central to this case study.

### *Research Methods*

Both qualitative and quantitative research methods were used in this paper's analysis of the role of COVID-19 in elections. Because the pandemic became both a physical and cultural

phenomenon, a variety of research methods properly addresses the unique nature of voting during a pandemic.

When designing this research project, Wisconsin was chosen as a case study both for the robust data available on this election and its rich history. The Cheese State both is the birthplace of the Republican Party and the home to one of the strongest socialist movements of the twentieth century.<sup>19</sup> Even in recent times, Wisconsin is known to hold elections with narrow winning margins. In fact, Donald Trump won the state in 2016 by just 0.8 percent, while Joe Biden won Wisconsin by just 0.7 percent in 2020.<sup>20</sup> This tension and balance between two political extremes is what makes Wisconsin an interesting case study; incremental differences in voting behavior can swing the political pendulum in either direction, making understanding of this behavior even more important.

For the primary data analysis, state-generated records from April 1-7, 2020, were used because of their accessibility and thoroughness. The voting records from the 2020 Democratic Party primary election were accessed through the Wisconsin Election Commission, where state election results are compiled and organized by county, precinct, and district. The Wisconsin Department of Health Service's publicly available data on COVID-19 was also used for analysis. Data at the county level was chosen to compare the Democratic candidate's percentage of votes and the number of COVID-19 cases per 100,000 people, as the information at that level was more robust than district or regional data. Because the analyzed data was from very early on in the pandemic, probable cases were included alongside confirmed cases, as testing was not yet widely available, particularly in rural areas. Although other studies have utilized excessive death rates as a proxy for inaccurate case counts, no such data was available for Wisconsin at this time. Moreover, data on COVID-19 is integral to establishing the purpose and importance of this

paper. To discuss the implications of COVID, there was a need to establish that the pandemic was widespread enough to influence voting behaviors. The same principle applies to voting data; behavior cannot be analyzed without establishing a behavior change has occurred.

The analysis sections of this paper utilized the results from studies that were pulled from academic research journals and research organizations. The Pew Research Center, The University of Wisconsin-Marquette Law School Poll, as well as articles from publications such as the Election Law Journal were integral in establishing public opinion when discussing voter distress. The chosen polls were selected due to their appropriate time frame and accessibility. Wisconsin is considered a battleground state where the urban-rural divide affects voting patterns, and it was important to include demographic research polls to understand Democrats' choices. Voting is highly individualized and understanding cultural beliefs and regional experiences is helpful in interpreting data and applying existing theory more accurately.

Based on the literature review, two contrasting hypotheses emerged for statistical analysis testing.

**(H1):** Support for moderate "safety" candidates will increase due to high amounts of pandemic-related stress.

**(H2):** Pandemic-related stress will further polarization and support for progressive candidates will increase in areas with high rates of COVID-19.

This study will test both of these hypotheses against the available data in Wisconsin in order to better understand the impact of COVID-19 on election outcomes.

### *Background*

In order to properly analyze voter behavior, one must first understand the voter environment. It would be remiss to discuss Wisconsin without mentioning the urban-rural divide

in voting and the pandemic. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, Wisconsin is 97 percent rural land, and in 2020, approximately 75 percent of Wisconsinites lived in metropolitan areas.<sup>21</sup> There are twelve counties in Wisconsin that are considered 100 percent rural, and ten of those counties voted Republican in both the 2016 and 2020 presidential elections.<sup>22</sup> In fact, there was a 22-point difference in how rural and urban areas voted in the 2020 elections in the Midwest.<sup>23</sup> In the analysis section of this paper there is a thorough investigation of why this divide exists and what its impact on elections is.

It is also important to establish COVID's impact on Wisconsin before investigating its role in the presidential primaries. According to the Wisconsin Department of Health Services, there had been nearly 2,800 cases statewide at the time of the election, and the seven-day average of new cases was 147 the week of in-person polling.<sup>24</sup> The prevalence of COVID is yet another place where the urban-rural divide exists. A study published by the National Health Institute in 2021 that compared incident and mortality rates of COVID-19 between rural and urban areas found that the epicenter of the pandemic can be found in states that experience high infection and mortality rates in rural areas.<sup>25</sup> The study concluded that "a high burden of infection combined with lower healthcare capacity in rural areas implies that residents in these [rural] areas are at a higher risk of...infection and related morbidity and mortality..."<sup>26</sup> Because this case analysis is taking place within a mostly rural state, it is extremely important to center the urban-rural health divide and the urban-rural political divide. There is a myriad of reasons to choose Wisconsin as a case study, but the intersection of rurality, public health, and battleground politics makes the state an especially interesting case.

Access to health care and various forms of care engagement has been an ongoing issue for decades in rural areas. Rural communities generally face higher poverty rates, further

traveling distances to general practitioners and emergency care, pervasive substance use, and increased exposure to environmental hazards.<sup>27</sup> Moreover, due to the nature of seasonal work, rural citizens are more likely to be dependent on public health insurance and generally less likely to be insured.<sup>28</sup> Distance, lack of funds, and prevalence of chronic conditions all mean that rural communities are less likely to get necessary health care. Similar issues present in various forms of political participation, including voting. Rural areas often deal with smaller election staff and smaller budgets for election administration, and the large geographic size of rural jurisdictions means that voters often travel long distances to vote in person.<sup>29</sup> One study published in 2021 found that models using county level data in rural Appalachia showed that “poor health is significantly and negatively related to voter turnout.”<sup>30</sup> In the context of Wisconsin and COVID-19, it is vital to understand the complex relationship between rural health complications and voter participation.

In 2016, Bernie Sanders won all but one county in the Wisconsin Democratic Primary.<sup>31</sup> In order to establish why he lost ground in 2020, it is helpful to understand what made him popular in the first place. Senator Sanders is best known for identifying as a “democratic socialist” and happens to be the longest-serving independent in Senate history.<sup>32</sup> His 2016 and 2020 campaigns were marked by grassroots mobilization and small-dollar donors, and his policy often focuses on closing the income inequality gap and addressing social issues from a progressive perspective.<sup>33</sup> Sanders’ popularity in 2016 is largely credited to his brand of populism, a label which was repeatedly given both to him and former president Donald Trump.<sup>31</sup> Although the exact qualification for what makes a candidate a “populist” is often debated, it is generally agreed upon that a populist is a political actor who advocates for “the people” against another group of citizens they have deemed the elites.<sup>34</sup> Sanders’ found his elite in the “one

percent,” choosing to focus his campaign on economic inequality and pushing for increasing taxes on the ultra-rich.<sup>35</sup> As scholar Simon Julian Staufer points out, Sanders pits the diversity of his supporters against the homogeneity of establishment Democrats and American billionaires.<sup>36</sup> This working-class rhetoric—with the voting record to back it up—was very appealing to people who felt disillusioned by mainstream Democrats.

In the case of Wisconsin, Sanders’ popularity is easily understood by exit polls and demographic analysis conducted during the 2016 primaries. Nine in ten voters stated that they felt Sanders was honest and trustworthy, while only six of ten voters said the same about Hillary Clinton.<sup>37</sup> Moreover, the economy and income inequality were the top two voter concerns of that election, which spoke directly to the policy and rhetoric that Sanders presents.<sup>38</sup> Bernie Sanders also chose to campaign in some of the most rural areas of Wisconsin, while the Clinton campaign mainly focused on the reliably liberal areas of the state.<sup>39</sup>

This points to Katherine Cramer’s idea of “rural consciousness,” which was previously discussed in the literature review. Cramer’s work showcases the isolation and resulting resentment that people from rural states often feel toward their political leaders. This resentment towards elites matches well with Senator Sanders’ ideology and messaging; his “outsider” attitude and humble beginnings stand in stark contrast to Hillary Clinton’s perceived establishment ties. Sanders’ populist rhetoric and attention to working-class power undoubtedly won him the 2016 Wisconsin primary. The question then remains: What changed?

### *Analysis*

#### *The Relationship Between COVID and Voting: Data*

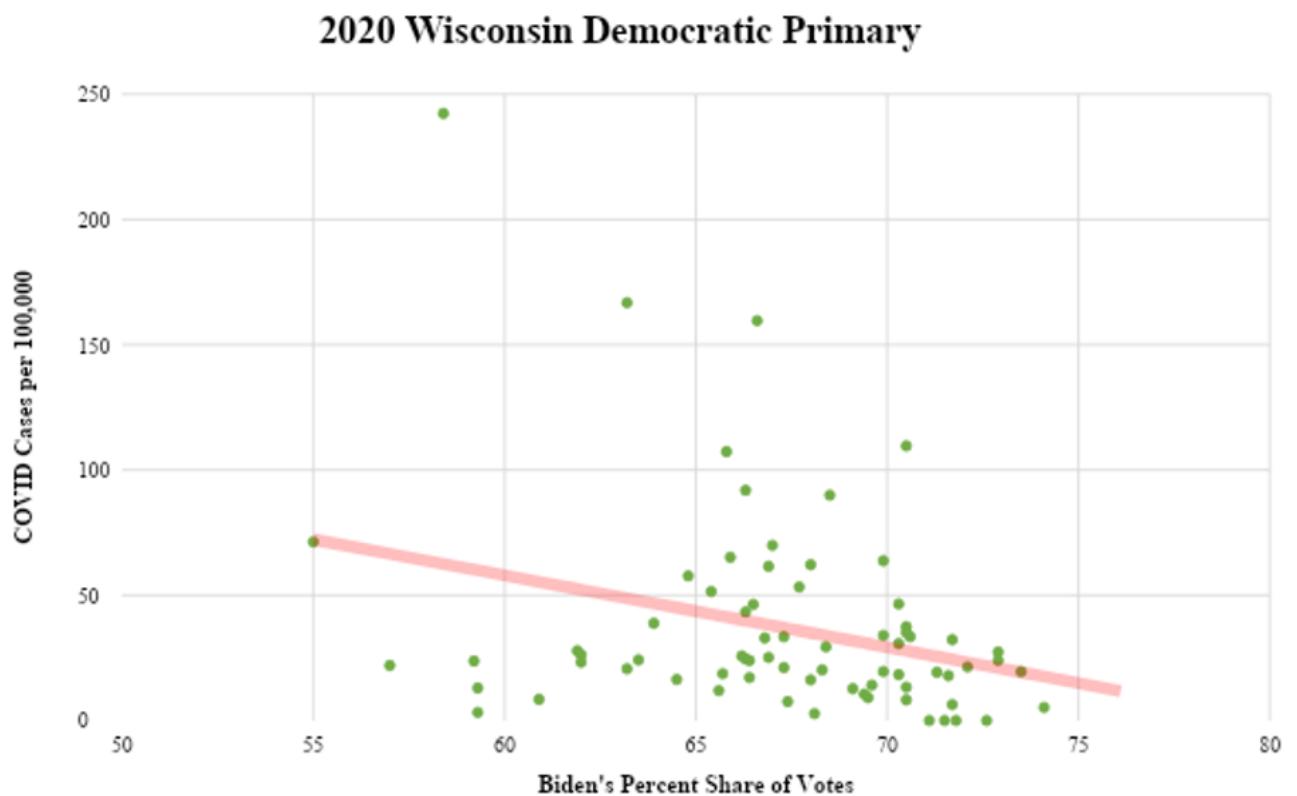
In order to analyze the relationship between COVID and voting behavior, a list of probable and confirmed cases in every county of Wisconsin from the start of the pandemic up

until election day was compiled. After converting this data from simple case numbers to cases per 100,000 people, it was possible to chart the correlation between COVID data and each candidate's share of the vote in every county. For this analysis, data was analyzed on the county level, using percent shares of the Democratic vote and COVID cases per 100,000 people.

Regression Statistics Figure One

|                   |          |
|-------------------|----------|
| Multiple R        | 0.28893  |
| R Square          | 0.08348  |
| Adjusted R Square | 0.070387 |
| Standard Error    | 3.976558 |
| Observations      | 72       |

Figure 1 showcases the correlation between Joe Biden's percent share of votes and the rate of COVID cases, with each point on the graph representing one county. This graph



|                     | <i>Coefficients</i> | <i>Standard Error</i> | <i>t Stat</i> | <i>P-value</i> | <i>Lower 95%</i> | <i>Upper 95%</i> | <i>Lower 95.0%</i> | <i>Upper 95.0%</i> |
|---------------------|---------------------|-----------------------|---------------|----------------|------------------|------------------|--------------------|--------------------|
| <b>Intercept</b>    | 68.35933            | 0.634153              | 107.7963      | 1.53E-79       | 67.09455         | 69.62411         | 67.09455           | 69.62411           |
| <b>X Variable 1</b> | -0.0291             | 0.011524              | -2.52505      | 0.013836       | -0.05208         | -0.00612         | -0.05208           | -0.00612           |

illustrates how as COVID cases per 100,000 people increase, his share of the votes decreases.

Specifically, the regression in the graph shows that Biden lost 0.03 percent of the vote per

COVID case, with a p-value of 0.01. The inverse phenomenon is

observed when analyzing Bernie Sanders’ share of the vote, shown in

Figure 2. For every COVID case, Sanders gained 0.03 percent of the

vote, with a p-value

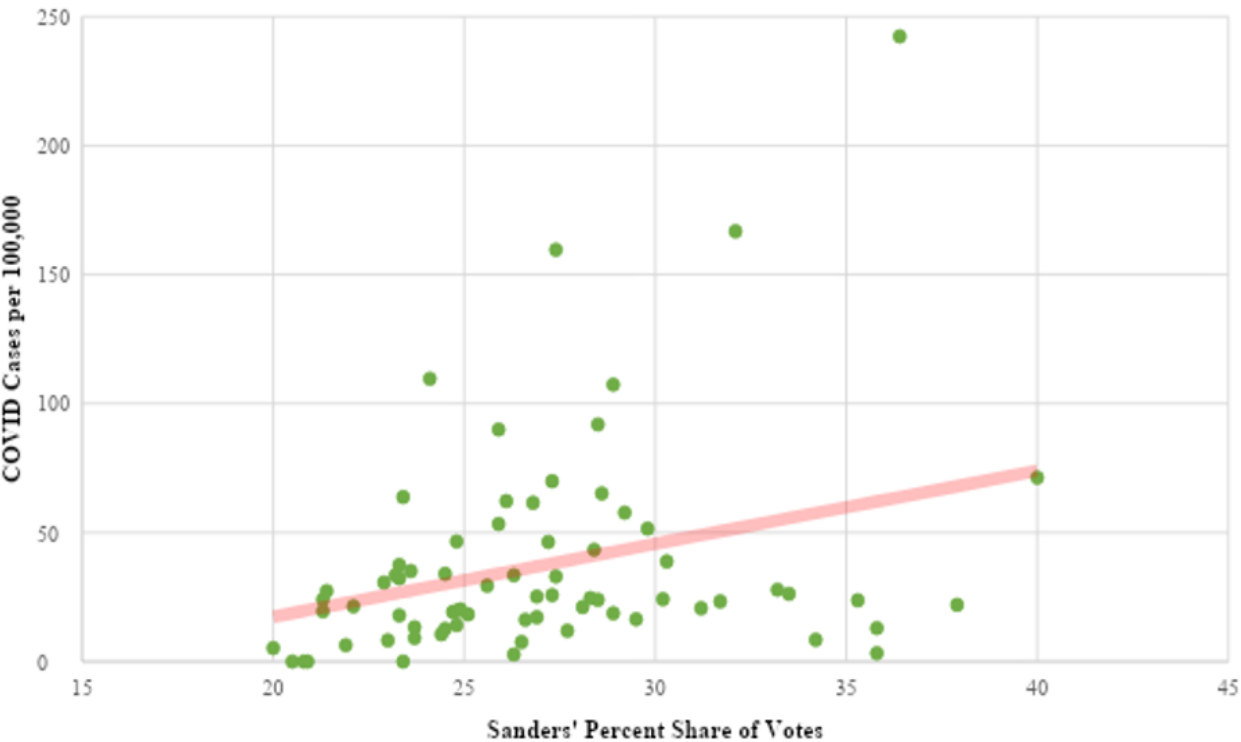
of 0.009. Although this may seem like a small effect, we must

acknowledge the importance of retaining every vote in a battleground state. As previously stated,

Regression Statistics Figure Two

|                   |            |
|-------------------|------------|
| Multiple R        | 0.30479966 |
| R Square          | 0.09290283 |
| Adjusted R Square | 0.0799443  |
| Standard Error    | 4.2308928  |
| Observations      | 72         |

2020 Wisconsin Democratic Primary



Biden

won

|              | Coefficients | Standard Error | t Stat     | P-value    | Lower 95%  | Upper 95%  | Lower 95.0% | Upper 95.0% |
|--------------|--------------|----------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|-------------|-------------|
| Intercept    | 25.7551335   | 0.67471247     | 38.1720134 | 1.3514E-48 | 24.4094619 | 27.1008051 | 24.4094619  | 27.1008051  |
| X Variable 1 | 0.03283089   | 0.01226157     | 2.67754385 | 0.00923287 | 0.00837596 | 0.05728582 | 0.00837596  | 0.05728582  |

Wisconsin by just 0.7 percent in the 2020 presidential election.<sup>40</sup> In a state where elections come down to such slim margins, every vote—and every 0.03 percent of the vote—counts. Biden’s

loss of votes is even more pronounced when we isolate the five least rural counties in Wisconsin, as shown in Figure 3. Isolating these counties allowed for a clearer picture of the relationship COVID has to rurality, or lack thereof. According to Figure 3's regression statistics, Biden lost 19.64 percent of votes for every COVID-19 case in these counties, with a p-value of 0.0008. However, this relationship was not observed when analyzing data from the twelve counties in Wisconsin that are defined as 100 percent rural. Although a regression of -0.37 was observed, the p-value for this data was 0.66, making it statistically insignificant. Figure 3 suggests that an increasing number of COVID cases is correlated with an increase in votes for Bernie Sanders in less rural areas; the next section of this paper will explore factors related to this phenomenon.

Regression Statistics Figure Three

|                   |            |
|-------------------|------------|
| Multiple R        | 0.99199934 |
| R Square          | 0.98406269 |
| Adjusted R Square | 0.97875025 |
| Standard Error    | 10.1474998 |
| Observations      | 5          |

#### *Politicization and Polarization: COVID as a Cultural Issue*

It is no secret that Americans are living through a time of increased polarization. A research report published by Pew Research Center in 2014 showed that the number of Americans identifying with the tail-ends of the ideological spectrum has increased from 10 percent to 21 percent over the last two decades.<sup>41</sup> At the same time, those identifying with the center of the ideological spectrum has minimized considerably: thirty-nine percent of Americans agree with an even number of Republican and Democratic ideals, as compared to 49 percent in 1994 and 2004.<sup>42</sup> Moreover, the study charted growing animosity between parties, indicating that individual Republicans and Democrats have increasing contempt for their ideological opposites. In 1994, only 16 percent of Democrats had “very unfavorable” views of Republicans.<sup>43</sup> In 2014, that number increased to 38 percent.<sup>44</sup> In the same timeframe, the number of Republicans who had “very unfavorable” views of Democrats grew from 17 percent to 43 percent.<sup>45</sup> This effect is

mirrored in elected officials: in the 112<sup>th</sup> Congress, every Republican official was more conservative than the most conservative Democrat, and vice versa.<sup>46</sup>

Having established increasing polarization in American elections, this paper can now review COVID as a political issue. Despite the pandemic being a public health issue, both the public and elected official's response to COVID has been divided along ideological party lines. Several studies agreed that Democrats have experienced an increase in their faith in medical scientists, and as a result are more likely to follow distancing guidelines, while Republican's faith has "remained flat."<sup>47</sup> Moreover, studies have shown that people on either side of the ideological spectrum are more likely to follow news coverage that aligns with their views, allowing them to "double down" through confirmation bias. One study which analyzed the connection between polarization and politicization noted that both newspapers and network news rely on polarized language when discussing the issue of COVID-19, which can "encourage individuals to follow political elites over experts."<sup>48</sup> The same study found that politicians appeared more often than scientists in newspaper coverage, although they received about equal network news coverage.<sup>49</sup> Dozens of other recent research reports have shown that news coverage and government official's statements majorly influenced public perception about mortality and case counts, as well as the effectiveness of preventative measures such as mask wearing, social distancing, and vaccines.<sup>50</sup>

Public opinion within Wisconsin provides further insight. The Marquette University Law School Poll from March 2020 asked respondents several questions about their experience with COVID-19. While 87 percent of Democrats stated that they were "very concerned" about a coronavirus outbreak in the United States, only 56 percent of Republicans shared that sentiment. At the same time, 44 percent of Democrats responded that they were "very worried" about

experiencing the coronavirus, but only 28 percent of Republicans said the same. This poll also asked respondents, “Do you think the decision to close schools and businesses, and to restrict the size of public gatherings is an appropriate response to the coronavirus outbreak or is it an overreaction that will do more harm than good?” While only 2 percent of Democrats stated that they felt it would be an overreaction, 16 percent of Republicans felt those actions would not be an appropriate response. The same poll showed clear party bias when asked about specific politicians. Eighty-six percent of Democrats stated that they disapproved of Donald Trump’s handling of the pandemic, compared to just 10 percent of Republicans. Sixty-two percent of Democratic voters stated that they strongly approved of the Wisconsin Democratic governor Tony Evers’ handling of the pandemic, while only 22 percent of Republicans said the same. At the same time, 73 percent of Democrats felt that Wisconsin was generally headed in the “right direction,” while only 51 percent of Republicans said the same. This poll provides important insight into voters’ view of COVID-19 policy; the pandemic became not just a public health issue, but a political one.

Exploring the nature of voting within a polarized two-party system helps to place this within the context of Wisconsin’s 2020 Democratic primary. Bernie Sanders ran as a social democratic populist outsider, and he had already lost one presidential nomination to Hillary Clinton in 2016. Joe Biden ran as an established mainstream Democrat with a recent history in executive office and a more moderate message. In a system where Democratic voters may only choose one candidate to face an extremely popular Republican nominee, they may feel pressure to choose the candidate they feel will win against the opposing nominee. At the time of the 2020 Democratic Primaries, Donald Trump was the presumptive—and eventually the actual—Republican nominee. His time in office was marked by controversy, extreme polarization, and a

fervent support base; at the time of the Wisconsin primaries, 61 percent of Republican voters said they had a “very warm” feeling towards Trump.<sup>51</sup> Moreover, Trump’s initial downplay of the coronavirus is likely to have caused anxiety in Democratic voters, who are statistically more likely to follow safety guidelines. A study that reviewed his executive leadership in regards to the pandemic as “failing to provide scientifically informed, normative leadership,” which resulted in a “delayed, disorganized response to the pandemic.”<sup>52</sup>

Trump’s popularity and lack of organized response to COVID may have increased anxiety in Democratic voters who were eager to defeat him in the general election. In a two-party system, voters may feel that the party in office is more important than the actual candidate in office. It is then reasonable to theorize that voters who chose Bernie Sanders in 2016 chose to elect Biden in 2020, believing that he is a more competitive candidate against Donald Trump on the national level. The health risks associated with pandemic may have further heightened voter anxieties about their party losing a second presidential election to Republicans, giving them even more incentive to vote for a moderate candidate.

One study published by the Cambridge University Press further explored the idea of the “safety” candidate. Authors James Bisbee and Dan Honig conducted a survey experiment that revealed that when prospective voters are exposed to high-anxiety circumstances, they are more likely to choose a “less disruptive” candidate.<sup>53</sup> They connected these results with COVID, finding that US House primary elections implied that mainstream candidates greatly benefited from the pandemic anxiety.<sup>54</sup> In the context of the 2020 Wisconsin primary, this idea is supported by the Marquette Law School University Poll from March 2020. When asked, “Regardless of who you think would win, which of the current Democratic candidates do you think would run the strongest race against Donald Trump in November’s presidential election?”

65 percent of Democrats said Joe Biden. 62 percent of likely voters said that they believed Joe Biden would run a stronger race, while only 24 percent of likely voters said they believed the same about Bernie Sanders. Bisbee and Honig's work on voting anxiety and safety candidates provides further context; on a state-wide level, Biden may have gained voters who previously voted for Sanders because he was seen as a "safety" candidate. However, on a county-wide level, their work is contradicted: Biden actively lost votes in areas with higher case counts.

Returning to Thomas Frank's *What's the Matter with Kansas?* and Andrew Gelman's *Red State, Blue State, Rich State, Poor State* may help us further understand how the politicization of COVID may have affected the primary elections. Frank's theory of "the Great Backlash" and Gelman's assertion about cultural issues driving behavior point to how polarizing issues can move people along the political spectrum. Gelman states, "...culture and religion are more important predictors of vote choice among the rich than the poor, and in that sense the country is polarized in two ways: *economically* between the rich and the poor, and *culturally* between upper-income Americans in red and blue areas."<sup>55</sup> Gelman's paradox, along with Frank's "Great Backlash" theory help to explain why Joe Biden lost votes in areas with high-COVID rates. At the time of the election, COVID rates were highest in counties with the least amount of rural area, which is why an increased rate of votes lost was observed. Moreover, because these counties include metropolitan areas, they experience higher income rates and wealth concentration.<sup>56</sup> Frank asserts that low-income voters are swinging right due to cultural issues, and in the context of Wisconsin's 2020 primary election, his assertion is inversely supported. The previously presented data shows that in less rural, higher-income areas, voters were less inclined to support the more moderate candidate as the COVID rates increased. Due to

the politicization and polarization of the pandemic, voters in rural areas may be less inclined to support a democratic socialist candidate, and instead opt for a candidate closer to the center.

To understand how COVID's politicization and resulting polarization may have impacted voter behavior, we can apply existing theories to new data analysis. Bisbee and Honig's attempt to explain the idea of the "safety candidate" provides an explanation for the statewide result; COVID-19's politicization and resulting pandemic anxiety may have led voters to choose a more moderate candidate, securing the primary win for Joe Biden. Thomas Frank and Andrew Gelman's assertion that cultural issues are now the main driver of voting behavior may help explain why Bernie Sanders gained votes in areas with increased COVID rates; voter distress in an increasingly polarized environment may have pushed voters to select a candidate most opposite to the one in office.

#### *Physical Changes: Voter Confusion and Voter Distress*

Environmental and socioeconomic distress can raise the "cost of voting," which refers to the burden placed on voters when trying to cast their vote. The onset of the coronavirus pandemic caused rapid changes that could greatly impact election results due to an increase in the cost of voting. It is important to note that Wisconsin was the first state to go ahead with in-person voting despite a statewide stay-at-home order, and at the time of the primary elections, only 11 percent of Americans said they were "very confident" that they could protect themselves from the coronavirus when out in public.<sup>57</sup> The coronavirus is highly contagious, and in the beginning stages of the pandemic Americans felt unconfident they could prevent community transmission. This is likely connected to the fact that while the percentage of eligible voters who casted ballots decreased, the number of absentee votes skyrocketed. In 2016, Wisconsin had a 49 percent turnout rate in the primary election, a number that dropped to 31 percent during the

pandemic.<sup>58</sup> Similarly, only 10 percent of voters utilized absentee ballots in the 2016 primaries, but approximately 80 percent of the vote in the 2020 primary was absentee ballot.<sup>59</sup>

Wisconsin's rurality means that it has both a decentralized electoral system and a decentralized health care system. The rapid rise of absentee ballot submissions put a strain on an already downsized staff; the state-wide lockdown coincided with a 7,000 person election staff shortage and a personal protective equipment (PPE) shortage.<sup>60</sup> In order to suppress voter turnout, the city of Milwaukee reduced its number of polling places from 180 to 5, while Madison reduced its number from 92 to 66.<sup>61</sup> Although exact times wait times increased dramatically with some voters waiting until after midnight to cast their ballot.<sup>62</sup> The availability of COVID protections also varied wildly; some municipalities had symptom screenings, protection barriers, and disinfectant, while other workers were not even supplied with masks.<sup>63</sup> A 2021 study published in the Election Law Journal observed a statistically significant correlation between poll closures and areas with high-population density, which is associated with reduced voter turnout in those areas. Authors John Curiel and Jesse Clark found that "the pandemic led to a series of poll closures that systematically impacted racial minorities and areas of high population density. Further, these poll closure costs as measured in increased distance to and size of polls are associated with reduced voter turnout..."<sup>64</sup> Overall, the decentralized nature of the elections process was made extremely visible by irregularities in polling places, particularly in counties with smaller rural area percentages. These irregularities compounded with the health risks of indoor gatherings, dramatically increasing the cost of voting.

These findings could help explain the accelerated phenomenon observed in Figure 3. Decreased overall turnout could swing the vote in either candidate's direction, particularly in metropolitan areas where voters are more concentrated.<sup>65</sup> Poll closures and fear of COVID-19

increase the cost of voting, which may dissuade already apathetic voters from participation and further incentivize voters with high levels of concern over issues such as the pandemic and the urban-rural divide.<sup>66</sup> Moreover, the highly publicized struggle over poll closures and the very idea of holding an election during a pandemic may have created a perceived further disenfranchisement of rural voters, who have statistically worse health outcomes. Katherine Cramer's concept of "rural consciousness" states that rural voters are more likely to perceive the government as working against them, not for them, whether or not that perception is evidence-based.<sup>67</sup> Cramer states, "...I heard [rural voters] claiming that the government and public employees are the product of anti-rural forces and should obviously be scaled back as much as possible."<sup>68</sup> Rural voters experience a high cost of voting through environmental factors: increased rates of poverty mean that rural workers may not be able to take time off work to vote and poor health infrastructure means they may not be willing or able to vote in person during a pandemic. The legal battle over the circumstances of the election and the state-wide stay at home order likely pushed rural voters to flock towards the "safety candidate," while it pushed certain metropolitan voters toward a more progressive candidate who promised dramatic change. Despite the fact that voters in metropolitan areas were somewhat less likely to vote for Joe Biden in correlation with a high-COVID case rate, Biden still won every county. Even if certain sects of moderate Democrats were pushed away from the polls due to the high cost of voting, it was not enough to offset Biden's urban support bases, and it did not necessarily aid Bernie Sanders.

In an overwhelmingly rural state where voters are more likely to experience higher rates of poverty, a lack of nearby healthcare, and limited insurance, voting during the pandemic posed a serious risk. This would be especially concerning for the elderly, who are overrepresented in rural counties, experience a higher risk for severe or long term COVID complications, and are

some of the most reliable political participants.<sup>69</sup> Moreover, the closure of metropolitan polling places raises the cost of voting for urban voters, which may have turned some already-apatetic voters away from the election. The resulting fall in voter turnout is almost certainly a factor in how the primary election played out; political participation in a pandemic is markedly different from normal participation and should not be ruled out as a cause for behavior change.

*Pulling It Together: What's the Matter with Wisconsin?*

In the research methods section of this paper, the two hypotheses were introduced:

**(H1):** Support for moderate "safety" candidates will increase due to high amounts of pandemic-related stress.

**(H2):** Pandemic-related stress will further polarization and support for progressive candidates will increase in areas with high rates of COVID.

The data analysis previously provided indicated that, statewide, as COVID rates rise, so does support for Bernie Sanders. When focusing on metropolitan counties, rising COVID rates was correlated with an accelerated loss of votes for Joe Biden, but not an accelerated gain of votes for Sanders. Despite this, Joe Biden still won every county in Wisconsin. "Safety candidate" theories and cultural polarization may help explain why the two phenomena coexist: while populist candidates may be more popular for those who are experiencing acute stress due to the pandemic, the majority of voters are more inclined to select a candidate they think will be more effective in the national election. Moreover, the increased cost of voting due to the pandemic may have turned away potential Democratic voters statewide, hurting Sanders' chances statewide, but particularly in metropolitan counties. In short, H1 is supported by the data analysis, but H2 is not.

## *Conclusion*

The findings of this paper assert that COVID-19 plays an important role in influencing voter behavior, especially within the context of the Wisconsin 2020 Democratic Presidential Primary. Data analysis showed that Joe Biden lost 0.03 percent of the vote per COVID case, while Bernie Sanders gained 0.03 percent of the vote. This effect was amplified when data was restricted to the five counties with the lowest percentages of rural area, and a regression of 19.64 percent was observed for Joe Biden's share of the vote. However, no statistically significant regression was observed in these five counties for Bernie Sanders' share of the vote.

There are a number of potential reasons why counties with higher case counts, in this case metropolitan counties, were somewhat more likely to vote for Sanders, despite the fact that Sanders lost each county overall. The COVID-19 crisis came in a time of existing extreme polarization, and it quickly became extremely politicized and polarized along party lines. Voters who previously voted for Sanders—and watched him lose the DNC nomination—may have lost faith in his message and opted a “safety candidate” to defeat Donald Trump in the general election, especially in the face of a worldwide pandemic. Biden's win may have been a result of increased voter anxiety and voter's perceived safety in moderation. Moreover, metropolitan areas which experienced higher rates of COVID at the time of the election were more likely to have an increased cost of voting through irregular polling access, while rural areas experience an increased cost through decentralized voting systems and environmental factors such as health risk and increased rates of poverty.

In metropolitan areas, this increased cost of voting may have turned some moderate voters away from voting, while it incentivized more progressive voters to “double down” on progressive candidates who promise drastic change. Statewide, increased cost of voting may

have contributed to the overall downturn in voter turnout, which likely diminished both Sanders' and Biden's share of the vote. These factors, along with the presented data, showcase two coexisting phenomena: while metropolitan areas with high COVID rates were somewhat less likely to vote for Joe Biden, he still won the overall election with high margins of success.

The implications of this study may help us understand how voters behave in times of crisis, and how public health impacts voting in areas with urban-rural divides. Voter anxiety is heightened by health crises such as COVID-19, and a lack of organized response may prompt voters to change their preferred candidate. Moreover, in rural areas where voting systems are often decentralized and the cost of voting is heightened by environmental factors, voters may feel additional pressure to vote differently, or not at all. Rural voters often feel that mainstream parties are unwilling and unable to meet their needs, and compounding anxiety may lead to political apathy. Further research of this phenomenon may consider factors such as concentrations of liberal voters in metropolitan areas, race distribution in rural and urban areas, and other demographic factors that may impact voting behavior. Understanding voter behavior is key to understanding the outcome of elections.

The United States is currently faced with the task of energizing voters in a time of increased polarization, economic distress, multiple public health crises, and dwindling political participation. Research that focuses on what speaks to voters, particularly marginalized voters, can be vital to helping political candidates and political leaders understand how to energize their base and familiarize themselves with the needs of their constituents. It is impossible to understate the enormity of this issue: voting is the cornerstone of democratic processes, and it touches every aspect of American government.

## ENDNOTES

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- <sup>21</sup> Ibid.
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