

Policy Memo

Wisconsin Institute for Law & Liberty

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Poll: Messaging Reopening in Wisconsin

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Executive Summary

Wisconsin's statewide 'Safer at Home' order was lifted by the Wisconsin Supreme Court on May 13, effectively ending nearly two months under a stay-at-home mandate. WILL conducted a survey experiment from May 15- 19, 2020 with more than 550 Wisconsin voters to determine if different messages and facts impact respondents' views on reopening, future stay-at-home orders, and other current measures intended to combat the spread of COVID-19. We find that opinions about reopening the state are relatively firm and cleave to partisan lines. Some of our key results are described below.

Majorities continue to support public measures intended to stop the spread of COVID-19

- 68% agree that masks should be required in public.
- 57% disagree with religious exceptions to stay-at-home orders.
- 58% say the goal of coronavirus policy is to 'flatten the curve'; 30% said the goal is to eliminate the virus.

A message test to examine the extent to which new information could make people more comfortable with reopening the state found limited success in moving voters.

- Support for reinstating coronavirus-related restrictions drops from 51% agreement in the control group to 38% agreement when respondents are exposed to messages about lockdowns and deaths of despair.
- Messages related to the constitutionality of lockdowns, the length of time it may take the economy to recover, and scientific evidence on the lack of proof that stay-at-home orders have been effective failed to shift opinions.

Comfort with reopened Wisconsin falls along party lines in some cases.

- Significantly higher percentages of Republicans are likely to visit restaurants than Democrats or independents.
- Less partisan division exists on willingness to shop at local stores.

Achieving public health metrics can improve comfort with reopening

- Among those who thought Wisconsin's reopening occurred too fast, majorities support a phased reopening, as well as testing and contact tracing at recommended levels.
- 48% indicate a willingness to return to a stay-at-home order in event of second wave of COVID-19.

School closings increase support for Education Savings Accounts:

- Support for Education Savings Accounts (ESAs) in Wisconsin hits 58% when respondents are told that parents are incurring costs as a result of schools moving online. 55% support ESAs when told that the cost is largely incurred by low-income parents.

Introduction

How a particular policy is discussed can have a significant effect on the beliefs people hold about that policy. Medicare for All is popular, until you inform people that it could cost them access to their private insurance.¹ Reframing the “Estate Tax” as the “Death Tax” famously shifted public perceptions on the issue.²

As of May 2020, nearly every state in the country had entered some form of reopening in the wake of ‘stay at home’ orders intended to counter the COVID-19 pandemic. The Wisconsin Supreme Court struck down Wisconsin’s ‘Safer at Home’ order on May 13, lifting the statewide restrictions on Wisconsin citizens and businesses in place since March.

But with Wisconsin effectively ‘open,’ questions remained about the public’s views on returning to normal. Without a statewide order, vigilance to ‘flatten the curve’ now largely depends on the actions of citizens, businesses, and communities.

To better understand the views of Wisconsin voters, we conducted an opinion poll and survey experiment to better understand views on different COVID-19 policies and see if any messages moved voters on their views.

The Sample

We collected 556 responses from likely voters in the state of Wisconsin from May 16th through 19th using respondents provided by Dynata. Based on turnout in the 2016 presidential election in Wisconsin, this gives us a margin of error on our topline findings of 4%.

Respondents were 77% white, 12% African American, and 5% Hispanic. The median income of respondents in the poll was between \$50 and \$75,000 per year. The median age range of respondents was between 40 and 65. These numbers are relatively in line with recent exit polls³ in the state, with slightly more African American respondents and slightly fewer white respondents than would be expected. A sizable percentage of our sample have had their employment impacted by the virus. 32% of respondents reported that they had lost their job, been furloughed, or had their hours cut since the pandemic began.

¹ <https://reason.com/2019/01/24/new-poll-shows-medicare-for-all-is-popul/>

² <https://www.businessinsider.com/death-tax-or-estate-tax-2017-10>

³ <https://www.cnn.com/election/2016/results/exit-polls/wisconsin/president>

When discussing the differences in the effects of messages, we rely on difference-of-means t-tests that determine whether responses differ significantly depending on exposure to various messages. Formally, let μ_c equal the mean response in the control group and μ_t equal the mean response in each message (treatment) group. We test:

$$\mu_c = \mu_t$$

Topline Findings

All respondents were given the following questions before the experimental portion of the study began:

Masks in Public: “To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement: As coronavirus restrictions begin to be lifted, people should be required to wear masks in stores.”

Agree: 68.4%

Disagree: 16.43%

No Opinion/Don’t Know: 15.19%

We asked respondents whether they believed that masks should be required in stores as the state reopens. A solid majority of respondents—68.4%—agreed or strongly agreed that they should be worn. This varied significantly by partisanship. About 55% of Republicans said that a mask should be required compared with a much larger majority of 81% among Democrats. Independents were in the middle, with about 62% supporting such a measure.

Goal of Restrictions: “What would you consider the overall goal of coronavirus- related restrictions?”

Eliminating the virus entirely: 29.37%

Bending the curve of cases to prevent hospitals from being overwhelmed: 55.8%

Something else: 11.17%

No Opinion/Don’t Know: 3.67%

Respondents across the board do agree that the goal of coronavirus restrictions has been to bend the curve rather than to eliminate the virus entirely. Only 29% of respondents said that virus elimination was the goal compared with a majority of 56% that said the goal is bending the curve. Perhaps hearteningly, the numbers did not vary extensively by partisanship in this case. 29-30% of Democrats, Republicans, and independents think the goal is virus elimination. Republicans were slightly more likely than the other groups to say that they “Don’t Know.”

Religious Exceptions: *“To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement: An exception to coronavirus restrictions should be made for religious services.”*

Agree: 27.17%

Disagree: 57.19%

No Opinion/Don't Know: 15.64%

57% of respondents did not believe there should be exceptions for religious services from restrictions. As would be expected, this varied by partisanship. 42% of Republicans agreed with exceptions compared to 20% of Democrats and 18% of independents.

Reopening Wisconsin

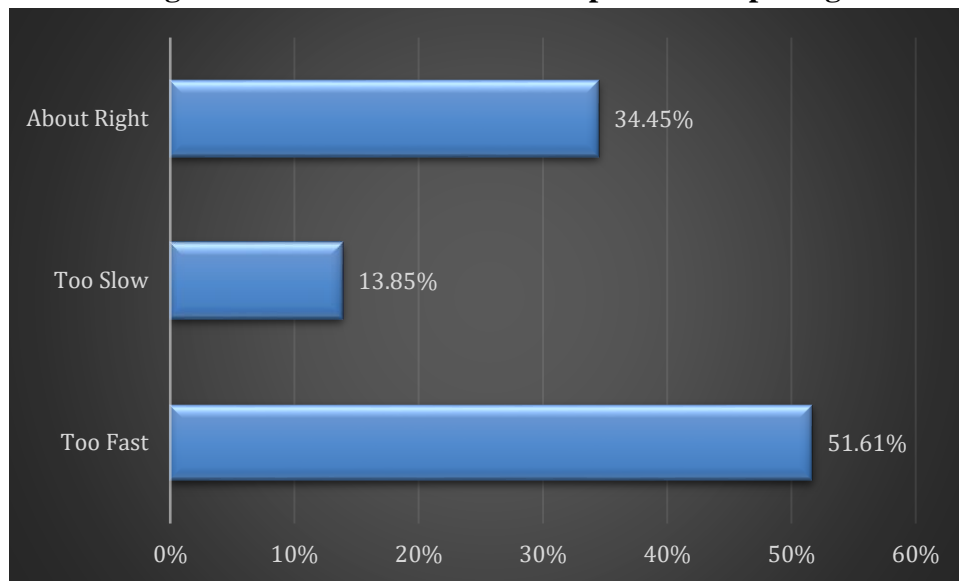
With Wisconsin's economy reopened in mid-May, we randomly exposed respondents to four messages (plus a control group) to determine if opinions about reopening could be influenced by new information about the coronavirus and the consequences of sustained lockdowns. Messages focused on economic consequences of shutdowns, the constitutionality of shutdowns, scientific evidence countering the shutdown narrative, and a message focused on the potential increase in suicides and “deaths of despair” resulting from shutdowns. Respondents were randomly assigned to see one of the following messages (the control group saw a message to continue on to the next screen) before all respondents provided their opinions on three related topics: the speed of reopening, whether they would support a renewed “Safer at Home” order, and whether they would support new restrictions in the event of a second wave of the virus in the fall.

Type	Message Text
Economic Focus	Some economists say that the economy will take up to three years to recover from the coronavirus shutdowns.
Constitutional Focus	Some scholars say coronavirus "stay at home" orders are a violation of fundamental constitutional rights.
Science Focus	Some research suggests that "stay at home" measures have had little impact on the growth of coronavirus infections in a state.
Despair Focus	Some experts say that deaths of despair may, in end, take more lives than the coronavirus itself.

For each randomization, we will examine the results overall, along with any notable crosstabs.

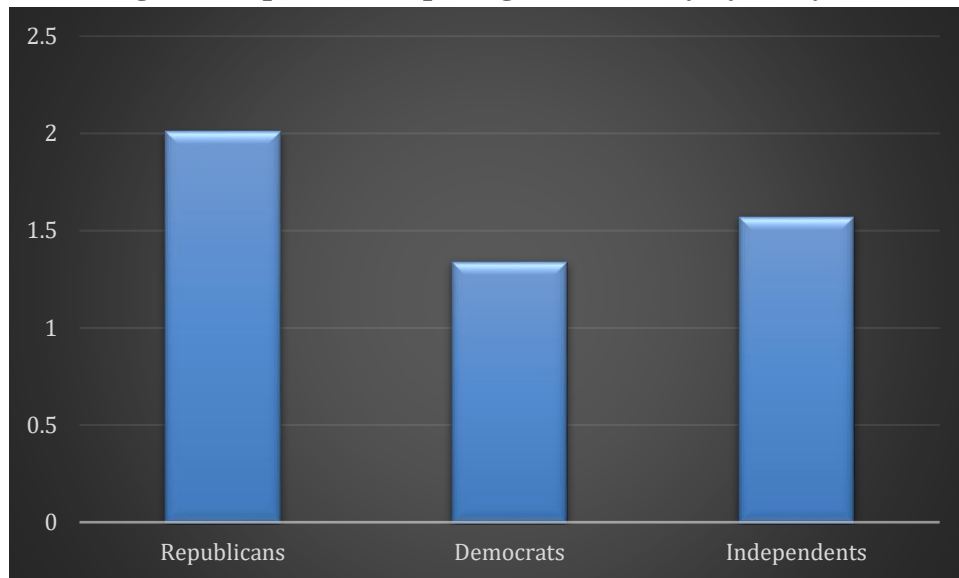
Speed of Reopening: *“Recently, many state-level coronavirus restrictions in Wisconsin were lifted. This happened...”*

Figure 1. Overall Beliefs about Speed of Reopening



Overall, we see no effect of any of these messages on agreement with the speed of reopening. About 52% of respondents believe opening was too fast, while 48% believe it was “about right” or “too slow.” It appears that Republicans are significantly more likely to support reopening than Democrats and Independents across all conditions, as displayed in Figure 2 below.

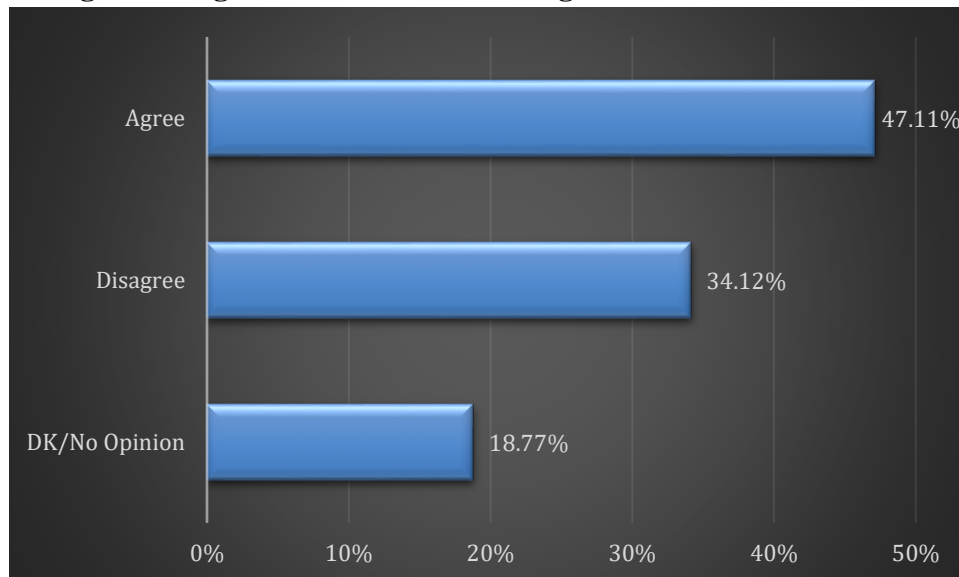
Figure 2. Speed of Reopening the Economy by Party ID



Note: '3' represents reopening time was "too slow" '2' represents reopening time was "about right" and '1' represents reopening time was "too fast."

Reinstating 'Safer at Home': *"To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement: Statewide coronavirus restrictions should be reinstituted in Wisconsin."*

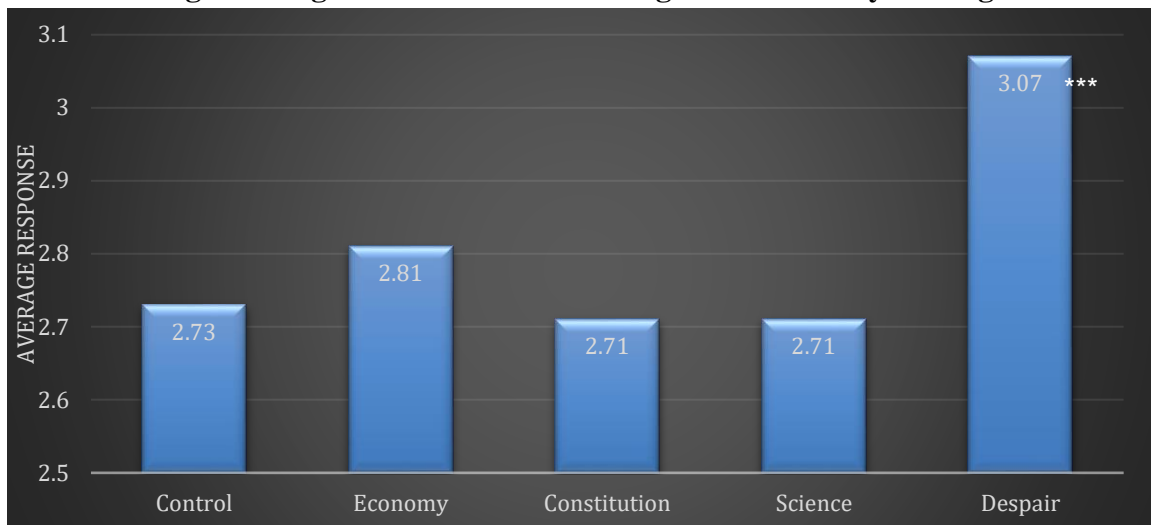
Figure 3. Agreement with Reinstating Coronavirus Restrictions



Next, we asked respondents whether they believed coronavirus restrictions should be reinstated. Across conditions, about 47% agree with reinstating restrictions compared with 34% who

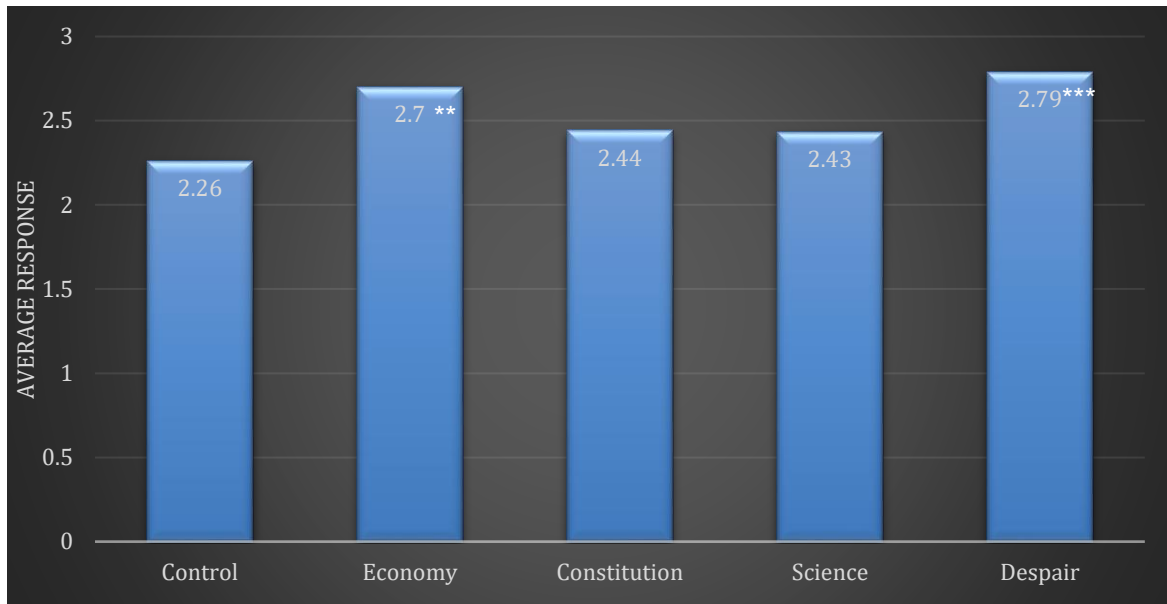
disagree. Here, we do see variation based on message exposure. Those in the Deaths of Despair focused condition were significantly less likely to support reinstating restrictions in the state. This indicates that making people aware of the potential for unintended consequences of coronavirus restrictions can have still have a meaningful impact, and penetrate the partisan bubble.

Figure 4. Agreement with Reinstating Restrictions by Message



*Note: Responses range from 1=Strongly Agree with reinstating restrictions to 5=Strongly Disagree with reinstating restrictions. $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$*

On this question, messages also had an impact on those who have had their employment affected by the response to COVID-19. Among this subset (32.37% of all respondents), both the Deaths of Despair and Economy messages significantly increased the extent to which people said reopening was “just right” or “too slow” relative to the control group.

Figure 5. Agreement w/ Reinstating Restrictions by Message—Respondents w/ Job Impact

*Note: Responses range from 1=Strongly Agree with reinstating restrictions to 5=Strongly Agree disagree with reinstating restrictions. $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$*

The difference holds for the Economy message even after accounting for Party ID, as shown in the regression analysis below. While Democrats who have had their jobs impacted remain more likely to support reinstituting “Safer at Home” restrictions, the economic message still has a statistically significant impact in the opposite direction.

Table 1. Effect of Messages on Support for Reopening Among Those Economically Impacted

	(1)
VARIABLES	“Safer at Home” Reinstituted?
Democrat	-0.952*** (0.267)
Republican	0.068 (0.292)
Constitution	0.090 (0.315)
Despair	0.446 (0.302)
Economy	0.590** (0.287)
Science	0.196

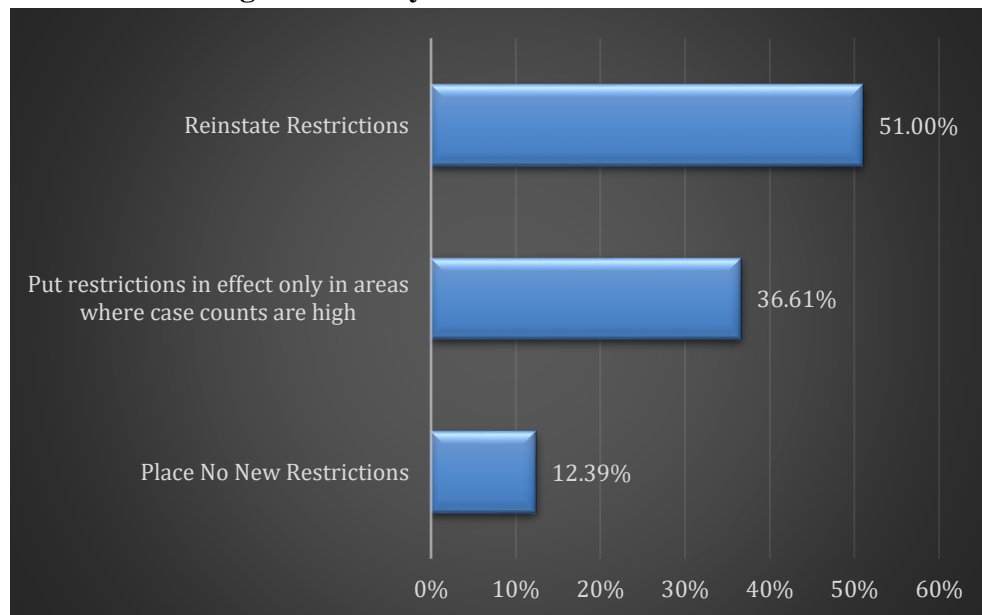
	(0.292)
Constant	2.72***
	(0.298)
Observations	179
R-squared	0.158

Standard errors in parentheses

*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

In the Event of a Second Wave: *“If a significant second wave of the virus comes in the fall, what should the Wisconsin government do?”*

Figure 6. Policy in the Event of a 2nd Wave



Overall, support remains high for reinstituting restrictions in the event of a “second wave” of COVID-19. Across conditions, we see 51% of respondents would support bringing restrictions back while 37% would oppose such a policy. Our message tests did not significantly impact the outcomes here, either overall or for subgroups.

How to Ensure Comfort with Reopening: *“How comfortable would you feel lifting coronavirus restrictions if each of the following were true?”*

Given that a high number of respondents expressed fears about reopening, we wanted to see which particular policies would increase comfort with reopening. We asked those who expressed that Wisconsin’s reopening occurred “too fast” (51.61% of respondents) about their level of comfort if certain benchmarks were met or policies enacted.

Scenario	Percent saying “Comfortable” or “Very Comfortable”
Testing is available to the level recommended by the CDC.	62.92%
Contact tracing is possible to the level recommended by the CDC.	59.93%
Reopening is done in phases, with the lowest infection rate regions opening first.	50.75%
Infection rates in the state have declined for 7 consecutive days.	29.37%
Older and high-risk individuals remain quarantined while younger people return to work.	24.33%

Three scenarios cross the threshold where more than 50% of respondents say they would be comfortable. The outcome which would yield the highest comfort is that coronavirus testing be available at the level recommended by the CDC. A statistically indistinguishable percentage of respondents said that contact tracing at CDC-recommended levels would make them comfortable. Currently, the CDC recommends tracing to an extent that “*Follow up (isolation, self-monitoring, and rapid testing of selected contacts) can be initiated for nearly all identified contacts of newly identified cases*”⁴. However, it remains unclear when Wisconsin has met this standard. That said, the state has been hiring a number of contact tracers in recent weeks⁵ [OBJ] which suggests progress is being made toward this goal.

By some metrics, the state is already close to meeting testing goals. For instance, the John Hopkins Coronavirus Resource Center sets a metric of less than 5% of tests coming back positive as evidence that sufficient testing is being conducted.⁶ Currently, Wisconsin sits at 5.14%, barely above this threshold. Attention should be paid to this number, as it can play an important part in assuaging reopening fears.

⁴<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/downloads/php/CDC-Activities-Initiatives-for-COVID-19-Response.pdf>

⁵ <https://biztimes.com/wisconsin-making-progress-toward-1000-contact-tracers-goal/>

⁶ <https://coronavirus.jhu.edu/testing/testing-positivity>

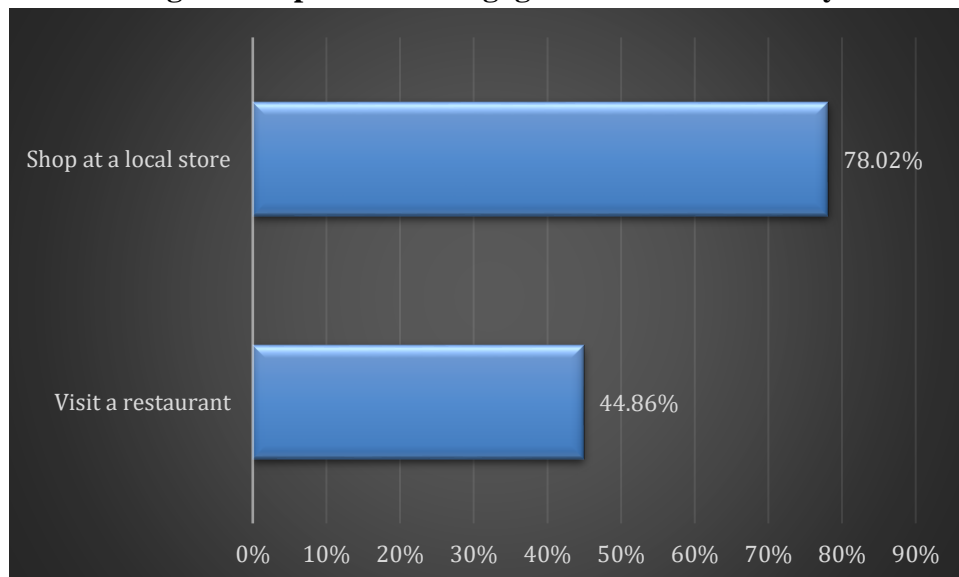
Participation in a Reopened Wisconsin Economy

To examine the extent to which people are willing to participate in the economy now that it has opened up, we randomly exposed respondents to two messages, plus a control group. These messages focused on the scientific evidence that social distancing and common-sense cleanliness can be effective, as well as a message highlighting the possible effect of a renewed shutdown on small businesses.

Type	Message Text
Business Focus	According to some research, more than half of American small businesses may be in danger of closing in the next six months in the wake of quarantine measures.
Social Distancing Focus	Some scientists say that practicing smart social distancing and wearing a face mask can significantly reduce the risk of contracting or spreading the coronavirus.

Visiting Restaurants and Stores: “Would you be likely to do each of the following in the near future?”

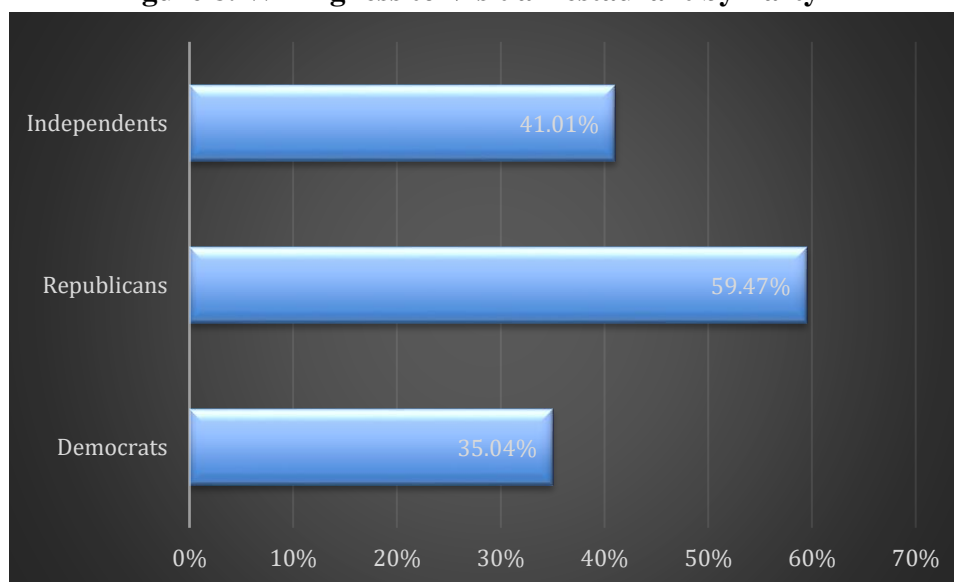
Figure 7. Openness to Engage in Economic Activity



Before considering crosstabs, there is a big gap between those who say they would visit a store and those who say they would visit a restaurant. 78% of respondents overall report that they would go shopping, but about 34% fewer say they would go to a restaurant. This may simply reflect that even during the pandemic, many of us have continued to visit grocery stores and other stores that provide necessities.

Republicans were significantly more likely than Democrats to say that they would visit a restaurant. About 59% of Republicans said that they would, compared with 35% of Democrats and 41% of independents.

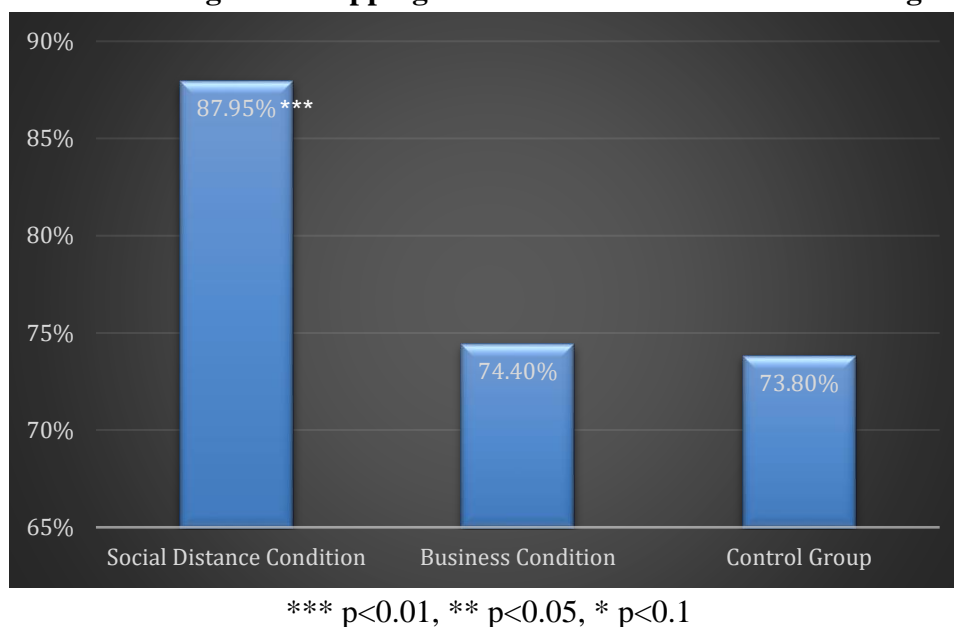
Figure 8. Willingness to Visit a Restaurant by Party ID



While the low percentages of people willing to visit restaurants could be bad news for the economic recovery, some hope is found in the share of people who would be willing to shop at a local store across partisan lines. 82% of Republicans reported a willingness to do so, compared with 75% of Democrats and 78% of independents. None of these figures is statistically distinguishable, meaning that party identification has less effect on people's willingness (or perhaps ability) to participate in this segment of the economy.

Neither of the messages had a significant impact on willingness to go out relative to the control group. Partisan patterns held regardless of message exposure with the exception of the subgroup of voters who have less than a college degree. Among these respondents, information that social distancing could be an effective means of reducing the spread of the virus increased the willingness of respondents to shop at local stores by about 13%.

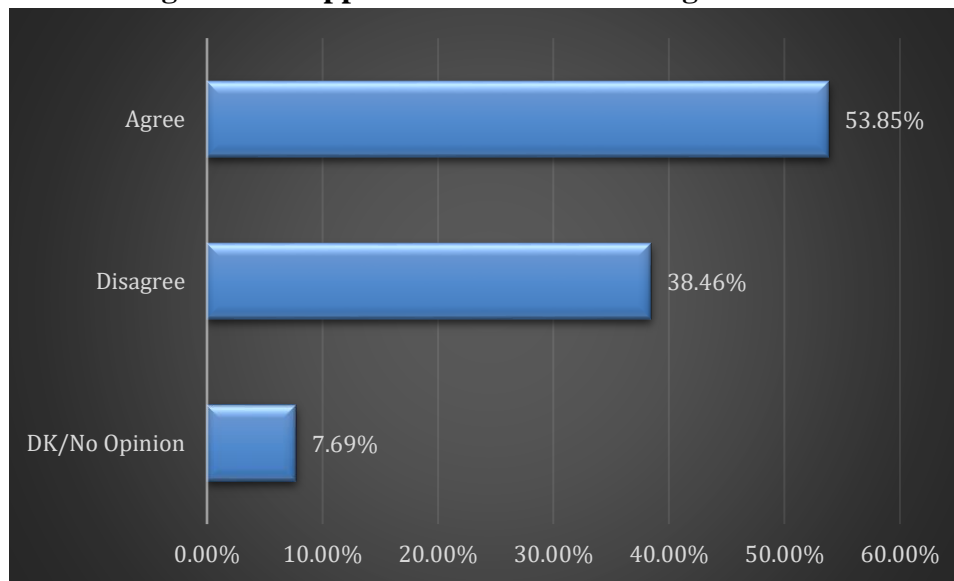
Figure 9. Effect of Messages on Shopping at Local Stores—Less than a College Degree



COVID Boosts Support for Education Savings Accounts

Support for ESAs: *“An Education Savings Account takes some portion of the funding that would otherwise go to a school district and provides it to families to purchase educational materials, courses, or other supplemental materials. Do you agree or disagree that such a program should be implemented in Wisconsin?”*

Figure 10. Support for Education Savings Accounts



A previous poll⁷ conducted by WILL on education since the outbreak of the coronavirus found that many Wisconsin families have had to spend their own money on educational materials, and that low-income families were particularly hard hit. Our final message test examined whether exposure to this information altered support for Education Savings Accounts (ESAs). We tested a message both with and without the fact that low-income families were more likely to spend money, plus a control group.

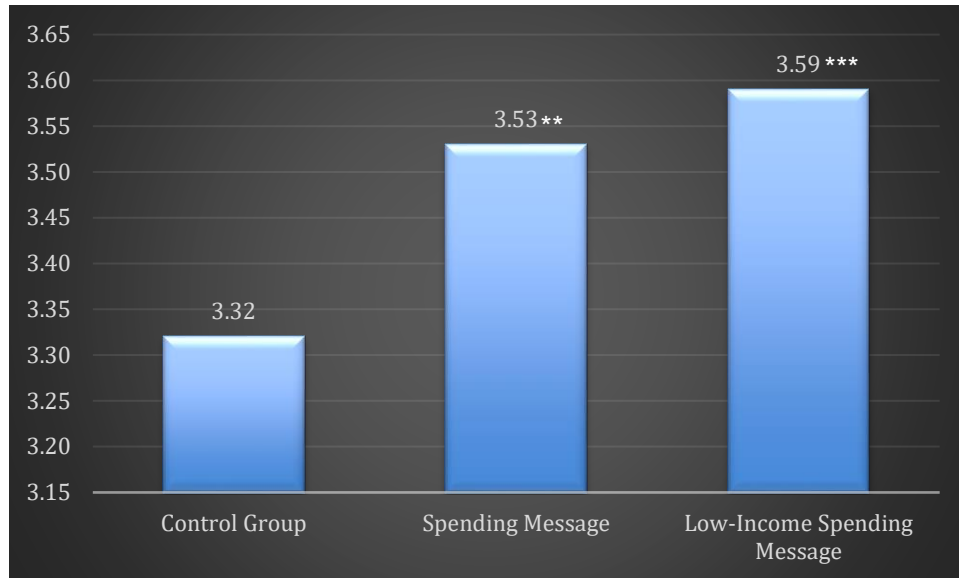
Type	Message Text
Educational Spending Focus	According to a recent survey, many Wisconsin families have had to spend money on educational materials since the outbreak of coronavirus.
Low-Income Educational Spending Focus	According to a recent survey, many Wisconsin families have had to spend money on educational materials since the outbreak of the coronavirus. Low-income families were even more likely to have spent money.

High levels of support exist overall for an ESA. 53% of respondents expressed support for an ESA across all conditions, while only about 19% of respondents expressed opposition.

While high support exists overall, this was an area where the message tests did lead to substantial movement. In the control group that saw no message, the average response was 3.32 on the 5-point scale--closest to an ambiguous opinion. But exposure to both messages about families having to spend money on educational materials since the outbreak significantly increased support above the 3.5 threshold. Both of these differed to a statistically significant extent from what was found in the control group, though they did not differ from each other; suggesting that the addition of the fact that these families tended to be low-income was ineffectual. About 45% of respondents supported an ESA in the control group compared with 58% when told about the cost to all parents and 55% when told about the cost to low-income parents.

⁷ <https://www.will-law.org/will-surveys-wisconsin-parents-on-education-and-covid-19/>

Figure 11. Effect of Messages on Support for Education Savings Accounts

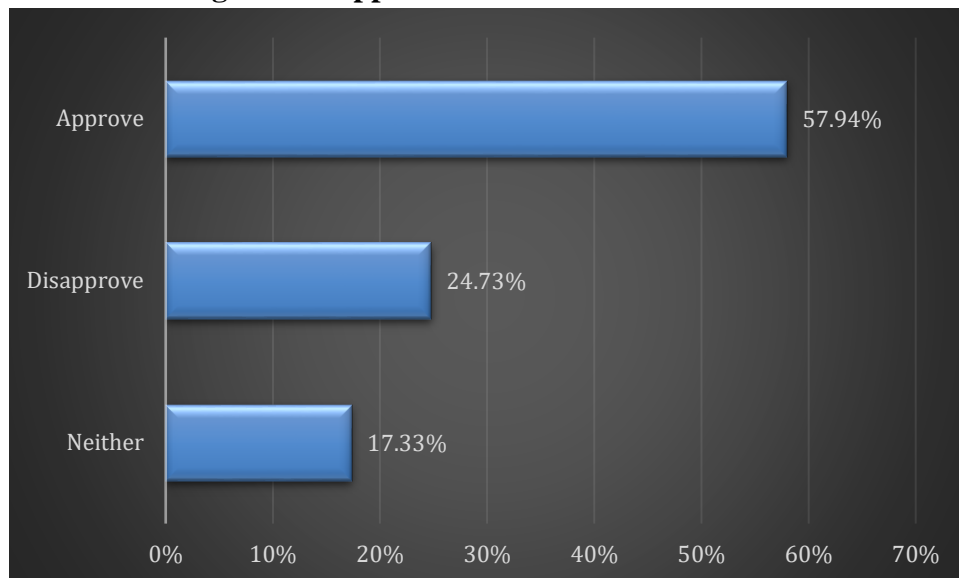


*Note: Responses range from 1=Strongly Disagree with an Education Savings Account to 5=Strongly Agree with an Education Savings Account*** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$*

Approval of Response

Evers' Approval on Pandemic: *In general, do you approve or disapprove of the way Governor Tony Evers has handled the coronavirus outbreak?*

Figure 12. Approval of Evers on coronavirus

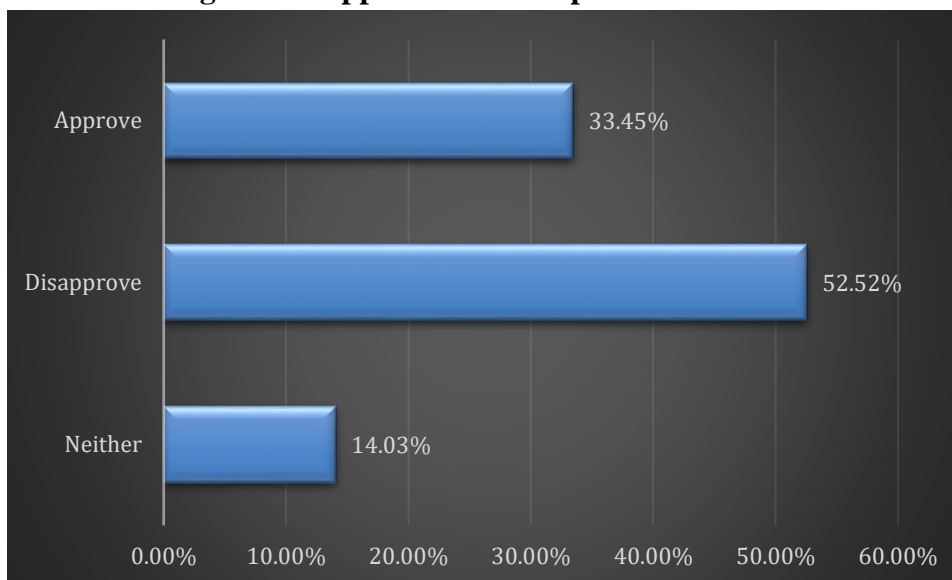


In our only questions that occurred after the experimental portion, we ask respondents whether they approve or disapprove of how Governor Evers has handled the coronavirus. We find that 58% express approval, while about 42% express either disapproval or no opinion. The approval percentage is in line with other recent polls,⁸ giving us further confidence in the validity of our overall results.

We asked respondents the same question about President Trump's handling of the pandemic.

Trump's Approval on Pandemic: *In general, do you approve or disapprove of the way President Trump has handled the coronavirus outbreak?*

Figure 13. Approval of Trump on coronavirus



The disapproval percentage is very much in line with the Marquette poll, however the approval percentage is lower. It is likely the inclusion of an ambivalent position (“Neither approve nor disapprove”) accounts for the difference.

Conclusions

Beliefs about the proper response to the coronavirus appear to be highly crystallized along partisan lines. Few of the messages attempted here significantly shift policy preferences about reopening the economy, or reinstating lockdowns. It is possible that exposure to news media is sufficiently high in this case so that these messages were not novel enough to move public opinion.

⁸ <https://law.marquette.edu/poll/>

That said, there is some intriguing evidence that information about the cost in lives from a coronavirus lockdown-caused depression can shift beliefs about the value of reinstating coronavirus restrictions. Also, as more and more people are affected by job losses and job cuts, there is evidence to suggest that they will be increasingly receptive to information about why reopening the economy was a sound and justifiable decision.

Appendix

Cross-Tabs for Key Questions

Opinion on Reopening						
	Republican	Democrat	Independent	Female	Low Education	Job Lost
Control	1.97	1.35	1.58	1.56	1.62	1.53
Constitution	1.85	1.33	1.62	1.59	1.67	1.52
Despair	1.86	1.30	1.64	1.40	1.68	1.59
Economic	2.18	1.34	1.54	1.54	1.77	1.59
Science	2.10	1.38	1.63	1.58	1.65	1.61
Opinion on Reinstating Restrictions						
Control	3.47	2.17	2.75	2.64	2.68	2.26
Constitution	3.20	2.20	2.89	2.81	2.98	2.45
Despair	3.54	2.43	3.17	2.96	3.17	2.85
Economic	3.53	2.15	3.07	2.71	2.91	2.75
Science	3.50	2.11	2.89	2.68	2.50	2.44
Wave 2 Response						
Control	1.91	1.43	1.70	1.64	1.69	1.67
Constitution	1.76	1.48	1.45	1.63	1.63	1.50
Despair	1.70	1.40	1.80	1.46	1.61	1.36
Economic	1.86	1.35	1.72	1.48	1.61	1.55
Science	2.07	1.32	1.79	1.72	1.60	1.59
Count of Activities						
	Republican	Democrat	Independent	Female	Low Education	Job Lost
Control	2.56	1.88	1.89	1.89	2.09	2.09
Social Distancing	2.64	1.88	2.26	2.18	2.36	1.98
Business Failure	2.66	1.82	2.31	2.17	2.26	2.46
Education Savings Account						
	Republican	Democrat	Independent	Female	Low Education	Job Lost
Control	3.20	3.59	3.14	3.67	3.37	3.31
Spending Info	3.53	3.70	3.37	3.44	3.86	3.79

Low Income Spending Info	3.26	3.73	3.49	3.52	3.65	3.91
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