

Chalkboards and Campaign Checks:

Political Contributions of
Wisconsin Teachers and
Education Reform



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Executive Summary

At every level, politicians must listen to their voters if they want a shot at reelection. But it can often be a challenge to figure out exactly who those voters are, particularly at the state level where polling is more limited. For Republican politicians, this can make issues surrounding public education particularly challenging. In many communities, school districts may be among the largest employers, and elected leaders think they are making trade-offs between the desires of parents and the desires of educators in their community. But if those voters are already closed off to these politicians, the calculus may change. Using data on donation patterns among teachers in Wisconsin, we examine just how partisan the voting bloc is.



94.8%

94.8% of donations went to Democratic candidates or organizations during the 2020 and 2022 reporting cycles among all teachers.

Only 5.2% of donations went to others, including non-conservative-aligned entities such as the Green Party.

88.5% of donations went to Democratic candidates or organizations during the 2020 and 2022 reporting cycles among Wisconsin-based teachers.

When considering only those who list a Wisconsin address, donations still disproportionately favor Democrats.

88.5%



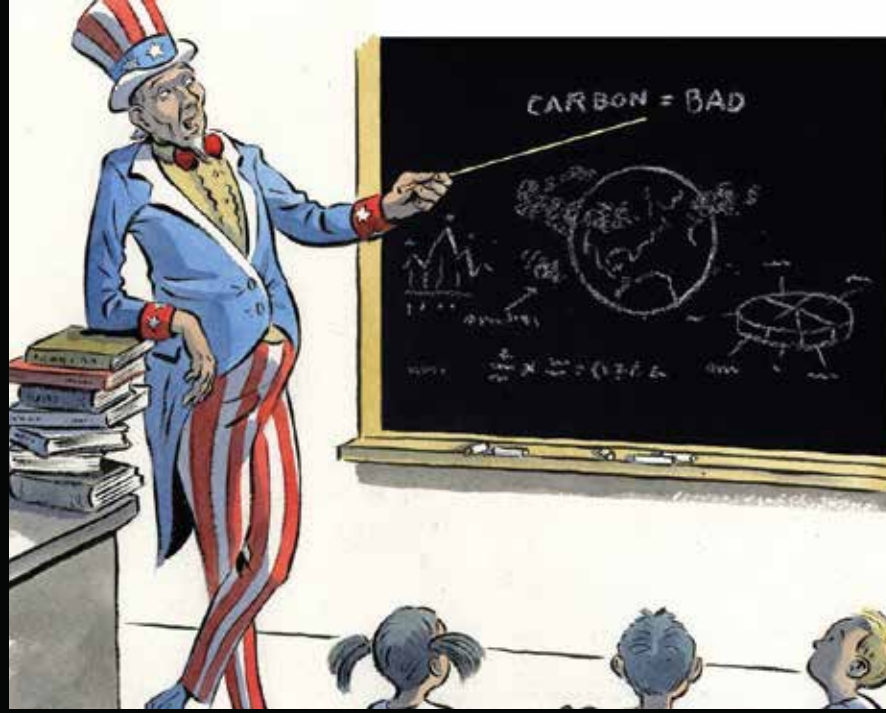
100%

100% of donations from the WEAC Conduit went to Democrats during the 2020 and 2022 reporting cycles.

No single Republican received a donation via the state teachers union's pass through organization.

Implications for Indoctrination

While many teachers may try to keep their personal feelings out of the classroom, the overwhelming majority of one-sidedness uncovered here means that some left-leaning ideology will inevitably slip through.



*Out-of-state influence is
evident in the data.*

31%

Out of the donors that list teacher as an occupation, nearly 31% are from out of state.

7%

Californians make up 7%.

4%

New York teachers make up nearly 4%.

Education & Elections

Conservatives vs. Liberals

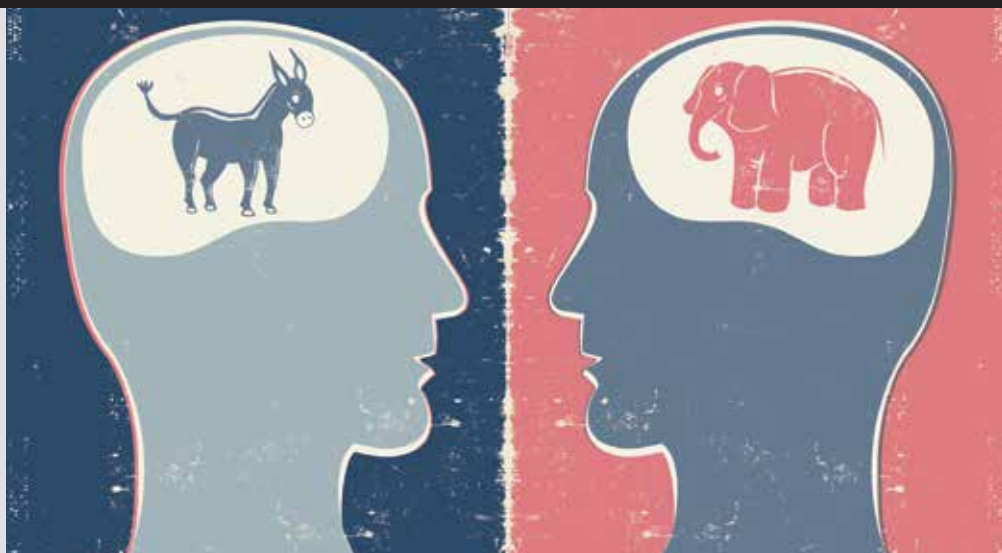


When it comes to the topic of education and elections, conservative candidates are often found tip-toeing around the ideas of school choice or school consolidation out of fear of losing support from public school teachers who may vote for them. On the surface level, this may make sense. Particularly in rural communities, school districts may be among the largest employers and often receive a lot of community support and engagement.



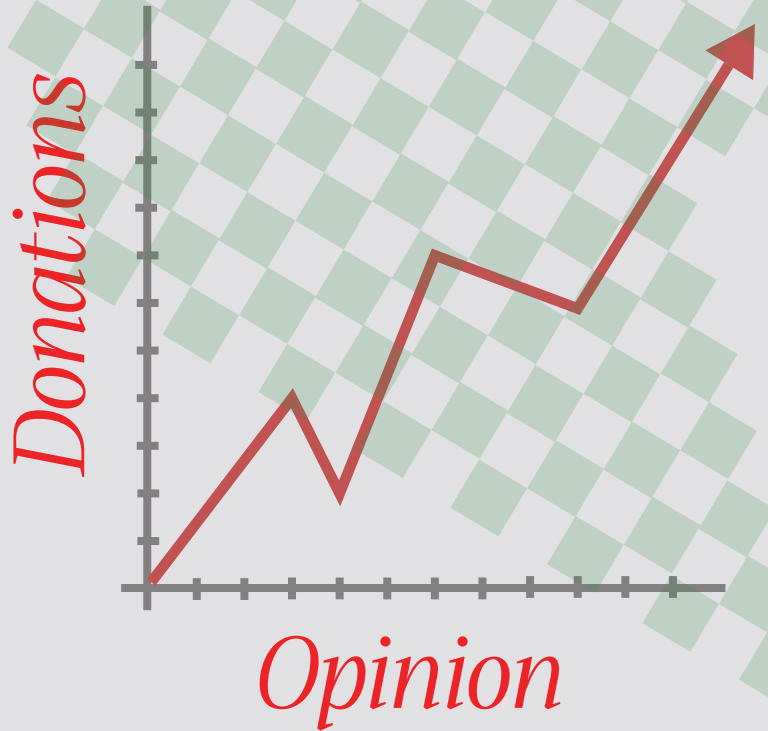
WILL recently conducted a study of 2020 and 2022 election donations at the state level in Wisconsin, and found that an overwhelming number of donations from public school teachers went to Democrat candidates. This does not mean that candidates should spend more time and money trying to sway the teacher vote; it means the opposite.

This is all the more critical because the position of teachers unions on issues like school choice is at odds with the general public. Recent surveys have shown that Republicans and independents are more likely than not to support school choice—as is a decent percentage of Democrats. According to a survey conducted by School Choice Wisconsin in February of 2022, 77% of Republicans expressed support for school choice, as did 53% of independents and 36% of Democrats.¹



Donations as a Measure of Opinion

Some may wonder how useful political donations can be in identifying what a particular group may think and how they will vote. While such metrics are imperfect, they have long been used by political scientists in measuring opinion, particularly among highly invested subsets of the population. Unlike responses to poll questions, donations represent an actual sacrifice on behalf of the donor, signifying commitment. This is especially valid when considering one given socioeconomic slice of the population. It might be hard to assess an entire electorate just based on the opinions of the type of people who give to political campaigns, but just looking at members of one profession can give a clear picture. For example, researchers at Penn State used the political donations of CEOs as a measure of their ideology, and its correlation to corporate social responsibility.² In another example, scholars looked at concentrations of political donors and the political opinions of residents of those areas, and found an ideological correlation.³



Most importantly for our context here, political donations are an important measure of political engagement and interest.⁴ While most Americans don't make political donations,⁵ those who do are often thought leaders who influence the opinions of others. Thus, the donations under study here are considered to be a reasonable proxy for the political opinions of teachers more widely in Wisconsin.



Teacher Donation Patterns

That teachers unions tend to be heavily Democratic is not a new suggestion. According to a 2021 analysis from Roll Call,⁶ the largest recipients of funding in 2021 from the American Federation for Teachers and the National Education Association included the Democratic-candidate supporting House Majority PAC, the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee, and the Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee. A 2019 analysis by Verdant Labs⁷ found that about 87% of high school teachers' donations go to Democratic-aligned entities, compared to about 13% to Republican entities. Even more directly related, the scholars from the Heritage Foundation

conducted a similar study to what is being conducted here using donation data from rural Texas. Their paper focused on rural areas because, historically, rural conservatives have been a road block to education reform due to similar concerns about their voters' loyalty to the local school district.⁸ This research found that 90.2% of political donations in rural Texas counties went to Democrats, even though Republican Governor Abbott received 80% of the vote in those same counties. Our work here seeks to replicate this on a Wisconsin dataset.

Methods & Composition of Donor Base

We collected data on political donations during the past two major election cycles—the Fall 2020 Presidential Election and the Fall 2022 Gubernatorial election. Data was collected from the state’s Campaign Finance Information System, which is administered by the Wisconsin Ethics Commission.⁹ Data was collected for each election cycle from each report produced throughout the year—from the January Continuing Report through to the January Continuing Report of the following year.

Campaign donors are asked on these reports to include their profession when making a donation. (It is worth noting that individuals are not required to list their profession, so the base of donors who are teachers may be larger than what is reported here.) Therefore, we searched the database for those who listed listed “teacher.”

The data does not include donations to federal campaigns (Presidential, Senate, and Congressional). Instead, we focus on donations to state-level campaigns and organizations, from Governor to State Assembly.

We first culled the list of respondents who mentioned non-school related occupations such as “yoga teacher,” and then culled donations to non-partisan races. We chose to include those who listed “retired teacher” and “substitute teacher.” It should be noted that some entrants we included may not be associated with public education; some may be private school teachers. And a few, like the person who listed “animator designer teacher,” could well be at the college level.

With those caveats, we arrived at a list of 1,678 donations over the two election cycles. Now, the vast majority of donors (99.46%) fall indisputably into one category out of “teacher, teacher’s assistant, substitute teacher, or retired teacher.” Table 1 lists the breakdown.

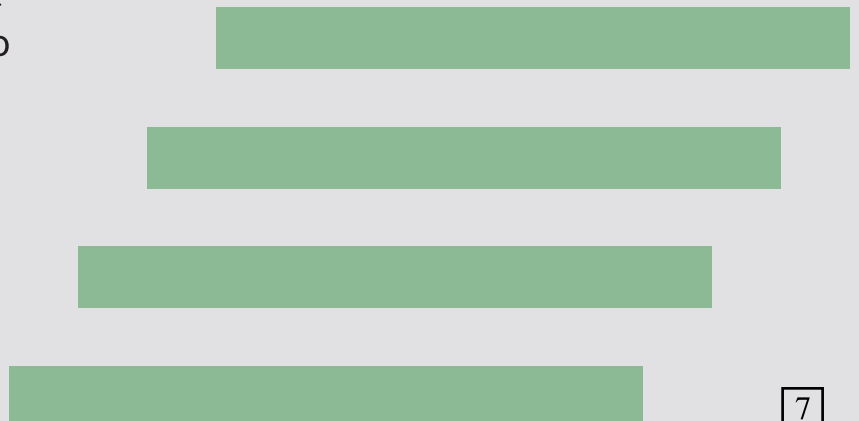


Table 1. Occupation Breakdown of Donors

Occupation	of All Donors
Teacher	86.63%
Retired Teacher	6.29%
Substitute Teacher	5.81%
Teacher's Assistant	0.81%
Other	0.38%

Our next consideration was the breakdown of where these donors were based. Perhaps surprising to some, only 69.29% of these donations came from Wisconsin residents. Table 2 lists the top five states for donations. More than 9% of donations from those listing a teaching-related profession came from those who list their home state as California. New York and Massachusetts come before Wisconsin's neighboring state of Illinois. In our analyses, we include figures for both.

Table 2. Home State Breakdown of Donors

State	Percentage of Donations
Wisconsin	69.29%
California	6.80%
New York	3.77%
Illinois	3.16%
Massachusetts	2.12%

Though we cannot say for certain, the presence of so many out-of-state donors is likely explainable by large-scale national fundraising efforts, such as ActBlue, as well as teacher-focused organizations that primarily donate to Democrats, like the NEA. While this may not be as indicative of the personal feelings of the donor as an individual donation to a candidate might be, we think it a reasonable assumption that these teachers agree, in general, with the goals of the organizations they are donating to. Once we had culled the list to those we believe to be teachers, we looked to see the political party to which each donation went. We go over the results of that analysis in the following section.

Another way that people can contribute to campaigns is through what are known as "conduits." Conduits are intermediary organizations that pass donations through, earmarked by the donor to particular candidates. One important conduit in Wisconsin is run by the Wisconsin Education Association Council (the state's teachers union). Known as "WEAC We Can Do It," the conduit claims to facilitate donations to candidates that are "pro-public education."¹⁰ We further examine the contributions made by teachers through this conduit, and where that money went.

Results: All Donors

We first consider all “teacher” donors, both Wisconsin-based and out-of-state ones. Among all donors who list “teacher” as their profession, 94.8% of donations went to Democratic candidates. The top five largest recipients of donations are listed in Table 3 below. Note the results below combine the two years of data that we examined, though most of the campaigns listed were prominent in both years.

Table 3. Top 5 Recipients among All Donations

Committee	Number of Donations
Tony for Wisconsin	940
Democratic Party of WI	299
Waukesha County Dems	243
Friends of Jacob Malinowski	164
Emily Siegrist for Wisconsin	130

Perhaps unsurprisingly, Governor Evers’ 2022 reelection campaign drew the largest number of donations at more than 940. Next were the state Democratic Party and the Waukesha County Democratic Party. Jacob Malinowski had the highest number of donations to a non-statewide race or party in his race against Ken Skowronski for his district in the southwestern Milwaukee suburbs. Emily Siegrist was next on the list with 130 teacher donations for her race against Dan Knodl in the northern Milwaukee suburbs. The highest Republican recipient—the Rebecca Kleefisch campaign—received 45 donations.

Between both election cycles in our analysis, a total of \$290,644 was contributed to Democratic candidates, compared with \$50,398 to other candidates.

Results: Wisconsin-Only Donors

The donation counts among teachers who listed Wisconsin as their state of residence are found in Table 4. In this subset, 88.5% of donations went to Democrats.

Table 4. Top 5 Recipients among Wisconsin-based Donations

Committee	Number of Donations
Tony for Wisconsin	719
Democratic Party of WI	245
Waukesha Democratic Party	234
Kenosha Democratic Party	98
Democratic Party of Rock County	87

As before, Governor Evers was by far the largest recipient of donations with 719. County parties take on a more prominent role among in-state donors, with the Waukesha, Kenosha, and Rock County Democratic parties most prominent.

Results: WEAC Conduit

There is not much analysis that can be done here, because every single WEAC conduit donation in the reporting periods in both 2020 and 2022 examined went to Democratic candidates. The top recipients of conduit contributions are listed in the Table below. Evers received the most donations, followed by Attorney General Josh Kaul. All other recipients received 2 or fewer. \$41,860 was contributed via the conduit in 2022. A much smaller amount of \$4,325 was contributed during 2020, likely due to the absence of statewide races on the ballot.

Table 5. Recipients of more than 2 WEAC Conduit Donations

Recipient	Number
Tony for Wisconsin	76
Kaul for Attorney General	69

Conclusion

Historically, teachers unions have been a perennial barrier to education reform. At least in part, this is based on concern among legislators that providing competition to local public schools will cost them votes. The evidence here suggests that this is not generally the case. From the perspective of elected Republicans, almost all teachers are already committed non-supporters. The intensity of that non-support hardly matters in a nation where each person only gets one vote.

This paper also serves to highlight further potential evidence of the leftward leanings of Wisconsin classrooms. If the vast majority of teachers come from one side of the aisle, it is highly likely that this flows into the teaching they provide to students across the state. WILL has previously highlighted some of the questionable readings being used in Wisconsin schools,¹¹ and shows once again how critical it is that policymakers consider remedies like curriculum transparency.

Education has moved into the forefront of the political discussion, and policymakers are evaluating with new intensity important education issues like school choice and public-school funding formu-

las. Considering these complex issues, they must not ignore the opinions of teachers in their community. But neither should they vote against education reform for fear of losing phantom support from this set of voters that might be all but nonexistent to begin with.

Of course, these results are only as good as the data that was used to craft them. Wisconsin has more than 62,000 teachers,¹² and the retired teachers and teaching aids add to that total. While a survey of more than 1,000 people would be considered sufficient to represent the entire state of Wisconsin in a poll with a margin of error of about 3%, we should recognize that unique type of data under study here was not gathered at random, and must include the caveat that representativeness is a bit unclear. But given the overwhelming one-sidedness of the findings, we feel confident in saying Wisconsin's teaching workforce leans strongly Democratic, even if not quite to the margins found in this dataset.

Endnotes

1. <https://schoolchoicewi.org/broad-cross-section-of-wisconsin-voters-want-school-choice-universal/>
2. <https://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/document?repid=rep1&type=pdf&doi=755590a5857d62a242d7fae0048e6cd38bc1ba2c>
3. https://www.researchgate.net/profile/James-Gimpel/publication/251337507_The_Political_Ecology_of_Opinion_in_Big-Donor_Neighborhoods/links/5cbf17a74585156cd7ac1cad/The-Political-Ecology-of-Opinion-in-Big-Donor-Neighborhoods.pdf
5. <https://www.jakebowers.org/PAPERS/BowersTesta-06-2012-Participation.pdf>
4. https://www.researchgate.net/profile/James-Gimpel/publication/251337507_The_Political_Ecology_of_Opinion_in_Big-Donor_Neighborhoods/links/5cbf17a74585156cd7ac1cad/The-Political-Ecology-of-Opinion-in-Big-Donor-Neighborhoods.pdf
6. https://rollcall.com/2021/04/28/donations-from-teachers-unions-spiked-as-congress-debated-school-reopening-virus-relief/?utm_source=piano&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=2906&pnespid=k.ZntehfBAGNf1NaQISGtXGha4s7k9O9rAtJTzOr
7. http://verdantlabs.com/politics_of_professions/index.html
8. <https://www.heritage.org/education/commentary/progressive-teachers-vs-conservative-families-school-choice-can-help-level-the>
9. <https://cfis.wi.gov/Public/Registration.aspx?page=ReceiptList>
10. <https://weac.org/weac-conduit/>
11. <https://will-law.org/curriculum-transparency/>
12. https://dpi.wi.gov/sites/default/files/imce/eis/pdf/schools_at_a_glance.pdf



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