

JULY 2026



BRIDGING THE GAP

**Re-Engaging Populist-Leaning
Conservatives with Classical
Conservative Principles**



A Research Report and Messaging Toolkit for Re-Engaging Populist-Leaning Conservatives in Wisconsin

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Executive Summary	2
What the Research Found	2
Key Statistics at a Glance	3
About This Project	4
Research Methodology	4
Phase 1: Qualitative Research	4
Phase 2: Quantitative Survey Research	5
Who Is a “Populist-Leaning Conservative”?	5
MAGA vs. Non-MAGA: Key Differences	6
Detailed Research Findings	6
What Wisconsin “Populist Leaning Conservatives” Care About Most	6
Trust in Institutions	7
Elections and Election Trust	8
Checks, Balances, and Executive Power	10
Economic Issues and Free Markets	10
Federalism and Local Control	11
Civic Engagement and What Drives Participation	11
Messaging Toolkit	13
Overarching Messaging Position	13
Messaging Strategy	13
Message Construction Framework	14
The Five Messaging Pillars	15
Sample Messages by Pillar	17
<i>Pillar 1: Trust in Democratic Institutions</i>	17
<i>Pillar 2: Rule of Law & Checks and Balances</i>	18
<i>Pillar 3: Respect for Opposing Views</i>	19
<i>Pillar 4: Free Markets</i>	19
<i>Pillar 5: Federalism & Local Control</i>	20
Tone of Voice	21
Responding to Opponents	22
Dos and Don’ts	23
Word Equity: What Language to Use and Avoid	23
Channel Guidelines	25
About the Wisconsin Institute for Law & Liberty	26

Developed in
Partnership:



Based on Qualitative Research (February 2026) and Quantitative Survey Research (April–May 2026)

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Wisconsin Institute for Law & Liberty (WILL), in partnership with Heart+Mind Strategies, undertook a two-phase public opinion research initiative to understand how to re-engage populist-leaning conservatives in Wisconsin with classical conservative principles: rule of law, federalism, free markets, respect for opposing viewpoints, and trust in democratic institutions.

This report presents the full findings from both research phases and translates them into a practical messaging toolkit for center-right communicators, policymakers, and organizations operating in Wisconsin and nationally. The findings reflect this specific segment only and should not be generalized to the broader conservative movement.

Unless otherwise noted, all percentages in this report reflect a sample of 250 Wisconsin registered voters who identified as Republican or Republican-leaning and agreed with at least three of six statements reflecting populist skepticism of institutions and government. Questions concerning presidential and gubernatorial executive orders were administered using a split-sample design, with approximately half of respondents receiving each version.

What the Research Found

The research produced five core insights that should anchor messaging strategies:

1. Economic pain is the entry point — not abstract principles.

Cost of living and the economy dominate concerns across all segments. Inflation, grocery prices, housing, and healthcare are of central importance. Any message that does not acknowledge this pain first will lose the audience before making any other point.

2. Building trust may be easier at the local level.

The transparency and verification that builds trust is easier to see at the local level. People also have more trust in local authorities like polling place workers (81%) and their local sheriff (73%) than the media that reports on elections and the civic process — trust in local media is 50% and just 28% for national media.

3. Transparency and verification build trust; reassurance alone does not.

Simply asking this audience to trust institutions does not work. But showing them how elections work — chain of custody, bipartisan observers, public machine testing, post-election audits — moves confidence meaningfully. Confidence comes from learning the facts of election processes, not just being told to trust blindly.

4. Anti-corruption frustration is the bridge to checks and balances.

Ninety-eight percent say addressing anti-corruption and transparency in government is important — the strongest and most consistent finding in the study across every subgroup. This audience sees

corruption two ways: taxpayer money wasted or stolen, and certain people getting special treatment while everyone else plays by the rules. Most say it's both, so anti-corruption messaging needs to hit both dimensions. The practical implication: don't sell checks and balances as a constitutional principle. Sell them as the mechanism that keeps corrupt politicians from getting away with it. That argument holds equally across MAGA and non-MAGA — 67% agree that "real accountability requires checks and balances, not unilateral authority."

5. They trust the people they can see running elections more than the system those people run.

Eighty-five percent are confident their local elections will be conducted fairly. Confidence in future national elections is 21 points lower, at 64%. That gap is the opportunity. Trust exists at the local level and can be built on, but only through specific and visible proof — not broad reassurance. Respondents said passage of the SAVE Act would lift their confidence in national elections from 64 percent to 84 percent (91 percent among MAGA respondents). Specific safeguards do what general reassurances can't. Use Voter ID as the gateway, then walk people through what Wisconsin actually does to verify results.

KEY STATISTICS AT A GLANCE

98%

Say addressing corruption
& transparency is important

90%

Support more
government audits

90%

Say "you can disagree and
still respect someone"

70%

Find overregulation of
small business argument
persuasive

85%

Say SAVE Act would
increase election
confidence

70%

Concerned about WI
Governor's executive
order power

67%

Say checks and
balances require real
accountability

82%

MAGA: 2024 election was
fair vs. 27% saying
2020 was fair

ABOUT THIS PROJECT

WILL launched this initiative to identify messaging strategies that can re-engage populist-leaning conservatives with the classical conservative principles that support free, fair, and trusted democratic institutions — rule of law, federalism, free markets, checks and balances, and respect for opposing viewpoints. The goal is not to change this segment's political identity, but to reconnect them with the foundational values they may already hold. This project was conducted in partnership with Heart+Mind Strategies.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This report is based on two phases of original public opinion research conducted by Heart+Mind Strategies on behalf of WILL in early 2026. Both phases focused exclusively on populist-leaning conservatives in Wisconsin. Throughout this report, percentages and scores come from the quantitative survey. Findings described in terms of what participants said, described, or expressed come from the qualitative discussions, which identify themes rather than measure prevalence.

Phase 1: Qualitative Research

Element	Detail
Method	BrightBoard™ online bulletin board
Field dates	February 24–26, 2026
Duration	3 days
Sample size	n=27
Audience	Wisconsin residents 18+, Strong/Lean Republican, populist-leaning
Mix	Age, gender, region, education, employment, income

The qualitative phase explored topics in depth through open-ended responses and follow-up probes. These sessions explored a variety of issues, including the sources of trust and distrust in elections, attitudes toward federalism and local control, economic concerns and price regulation, views on accountability and corruption, and messaging that drives civic engagement.

Phase 2: Quantitative Survey Research

Element	Detail
Method	Mixed-mode (online and telephone)
Field dates	April 17 - May 4, 2026
Length	Approximately 20 minutes
Sample size	n=250 total; n=100 MAGA sub-sample
Audience	Wisconsin registered voters 18+, Strong/Lean Republican, populist-leaning
Qualification	Must agree with 3 of 6 populist statements

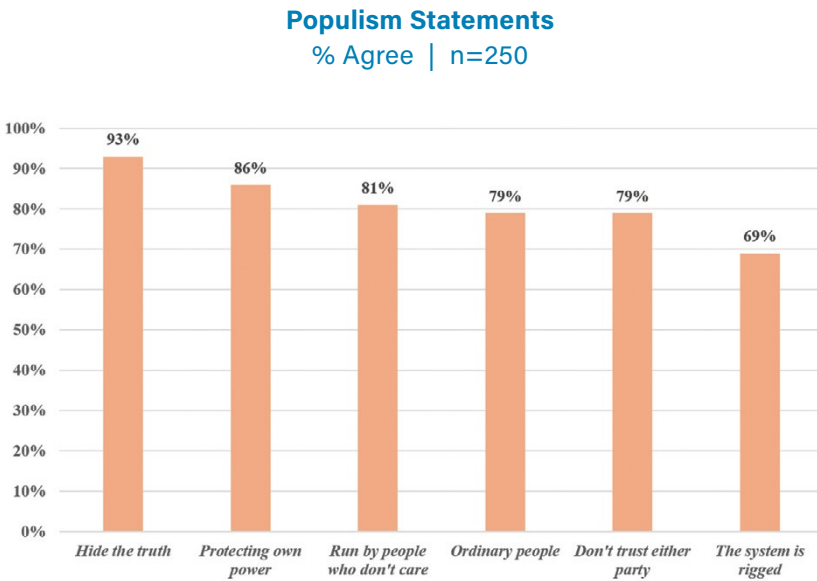
The quantitative phase validated and extended qualitative findings through structured message testing, word equity measurement, and representative survey questions across all key topic areas.

Who Is a “Populist-Leaning Conservative”?

To qualify for this research, participants had to identify as either strong or lean Republican and then had to agree with at least three of these six statements:

- People who run this country care more about protecting their own power than helping people like me.
- Politicians and experts hide the truth from ordinary people when making and promoting their actions and decisions.
- Most major institutions — like the government, big corporations, the media, and universities — are run by people who don’t really care about people like me and can’t be trusted to do what’s right.
- Ordinary people understand what is best for this country better than so-called experts do.
- I don’t trust politicians of either party — they are more loyal to people in their social class than to those who share their political views.
- The political system is rigged so that people like me don’t stand a fair chance.

Agreement with these statements runs extremely high in this population. This is the baseline level of skepticism that all messaging must navigate.



MAGA vs. Non-MAGA: Key Differences

40% of the survey sample self-identified as MAGA. This sub-group is demographically similar to the broader sample but holds meaningfully different attitudes on President Trump.

Measure	Finding
Trust in President Trump (a great deal)	60% MAGA vs. 36% total
View of 2020 election as unfair	70% MAGA vs. 48% total
Support for further empowering the President	72% MAGA vs. 61% total

There are other minor differences, including some key issue concerns. MAGA voters are more concerned about immigration, abortion and the integrity of elections although those concerns are still much smaller than economic issues. Despite wanting to further empower the President, MAGA voters have equal concerns as right-leaning populist voters generally about the executive power of Democratic Governor Evers.

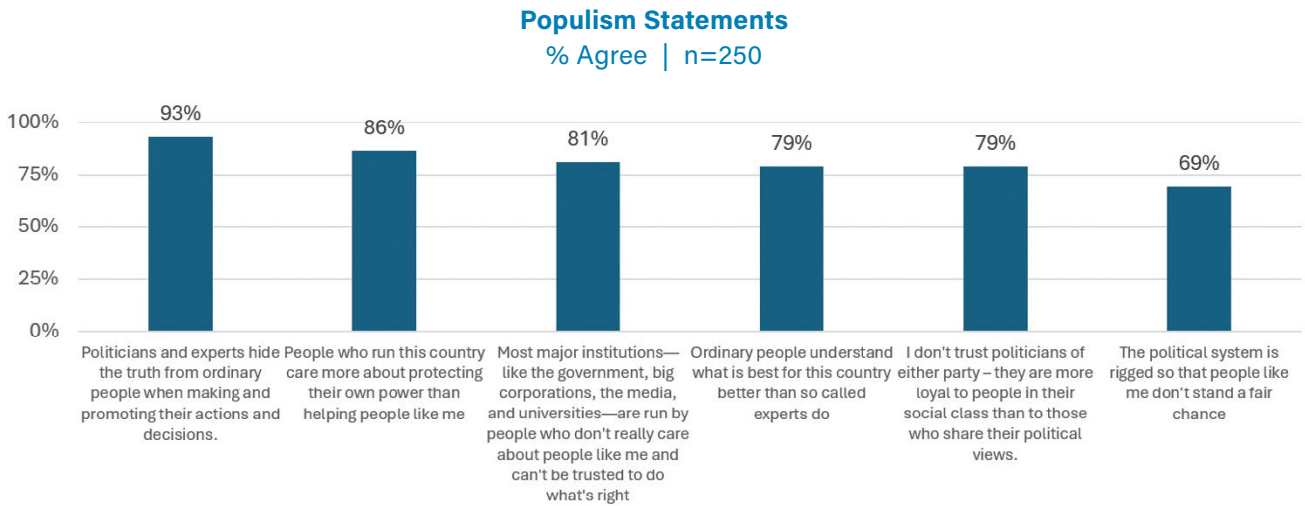
Measure	Finding
Top voting concern: Immigration	13% MAGA vs. 9% total
Top voting concern: Abortion	10% MAGA vs. 7% total
Top voting concern: Election Integrity	7% MAGA vs. 4% total
SAVE Act increases confidence in elections	92% MAGA vs. 85% total
Concern about WI Governor executive orders	70% MAGA — same as total

The most important practical implication: MAGA respondents are more motivated by specific candidates and issues, namely the President and the issues he highlights. Non-MAGA voters have slightly more drive from civic duty. Accountability, transparency, and checks-and-balances messaging will appeal to both.

DETAILED RESEARCH FINDINGS

What Wisconsin “Populist Leaning Conservatives” Care About Most

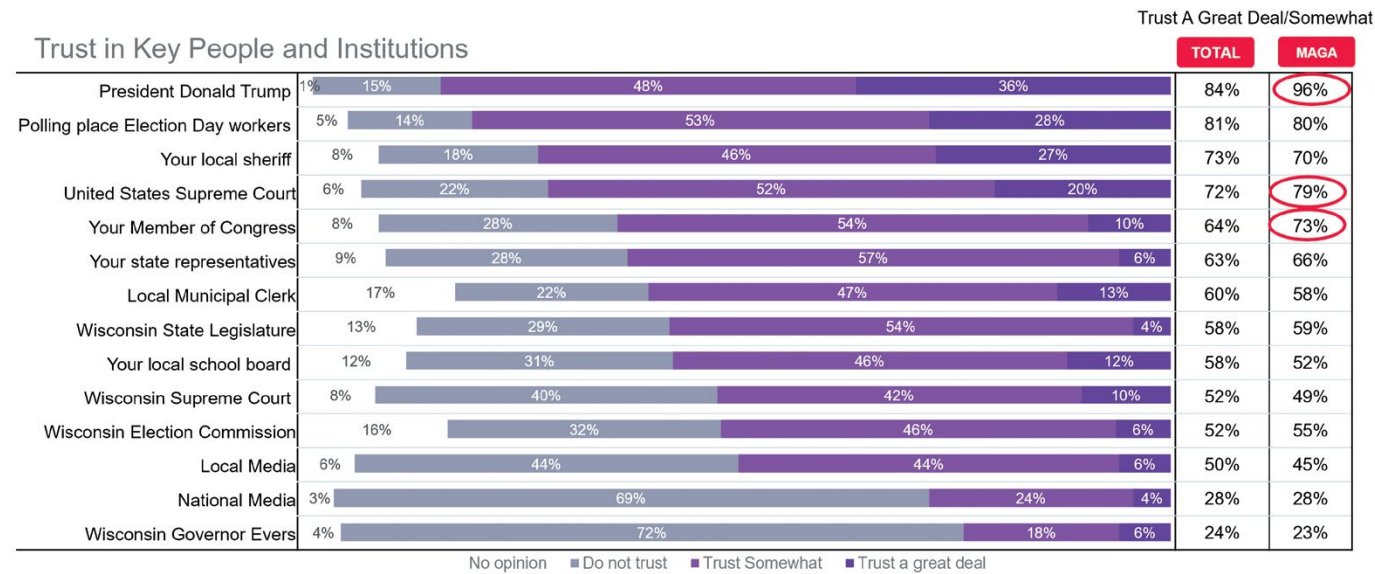
When we asked populist-leaning conservatives in Wisconsin what issues most drive their vote, cost of living and the economy dominated — by a wide margin — across both MAGA and non-MAGA segments. Immigration, healthcare, and taxes follow. Election integrity ranks 8th overall but climbs to 7% among MAGA respondents.



The practical implication is that any message that does not first demonstrate understanding of economic pain will struggle to land. This is not a segment of the population that can be engaged with institutional or procedural arguments first. Economic acknowledgment opens the door to highlighting classical conservative principles.

Trust in Institutions

Trust patterns are stark and consistent across both research phases. Local institutions are trusted most; media is trusted least. President Trump is trusted a great deal by 60% of MAGA respondents but only 36% of the full sample of populist-leaning conservatives, though large majorities still trust him at least "somewhat" among both groups.

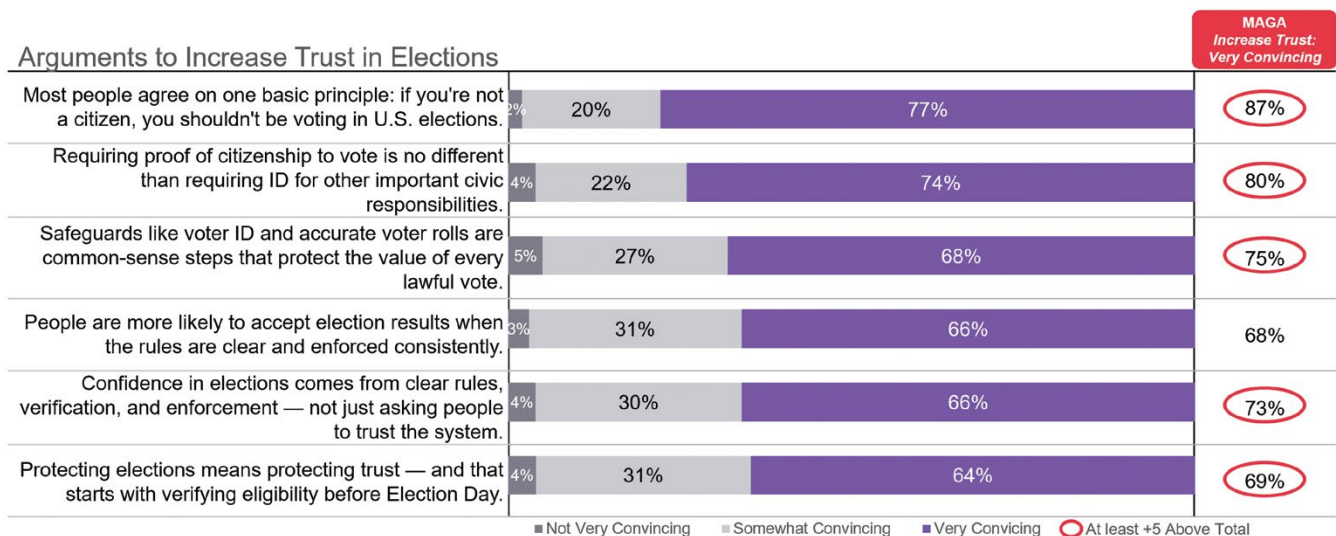


In the quantitative survey, participants explicitly distinguish between trusting their neighbors who run elections locally and trusting the national election system. It is more feasible to build trust through specific and visible safeguards at the local level, as national safeguards will likely never be seen up close by Wisconsin voters.

Elections and Election Trust

Perceptions of election fairness shifted dramatically between 2020 and 2024. This populist audience largely sees the 2024 election as being fair (83%) but have doubts about 2020, where 48% believed the election was unfair. Among MAGA respondents, 70% viewed the 2020 election as unfair; 82% view the 2024 election as fair. While right-leaning populists generally see 2024 as being legitimate, MAGA populists are driving feelings of unfairness about the 2020 results.

Building Trust In Elections:



What Drives Distrust in Elections

From the qualitative discussions, the key drivers of distrust were:

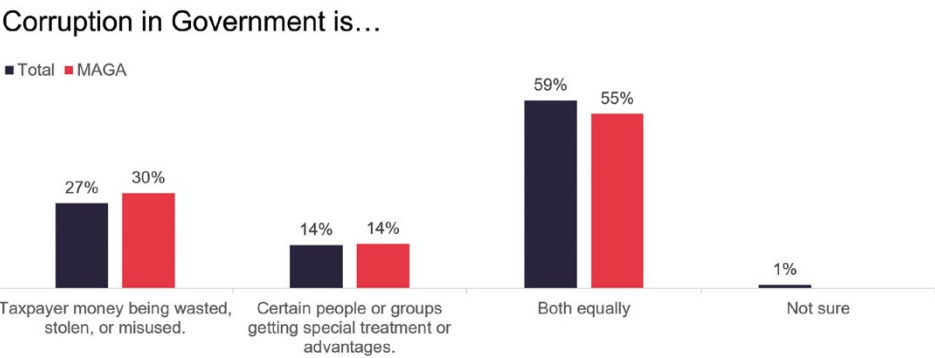
- Vote totals shifting overnight after Election Day — seen as suspicious even when there are legitimate explanations
- Mail-in ballots and absentee processing processes that aren't widely understood
- Media bias seen as shaping narratives rather than reporting facts
- A pervasive sense that politicians and officials are self-serving, making it hard to trust any system they oversee

In the qualitative phase, awareness of election safeguards beyond Voter ID was very low. When respondents heard about Wisconsin’s specific safeguards — WisVote, ballot chain of custody, public machine testing, post-election audits, public observation rights — most were unaware of them. For many, learning about these safeguards increased confidence; for the most deeply skeptical, awareness alone was not enough to move trust. The most effective approach, based on the research, is to use Voter ID as a gateway and then walk people through additional safeguards one by one — building the case through specific, visible proof rather than broad reassurances.

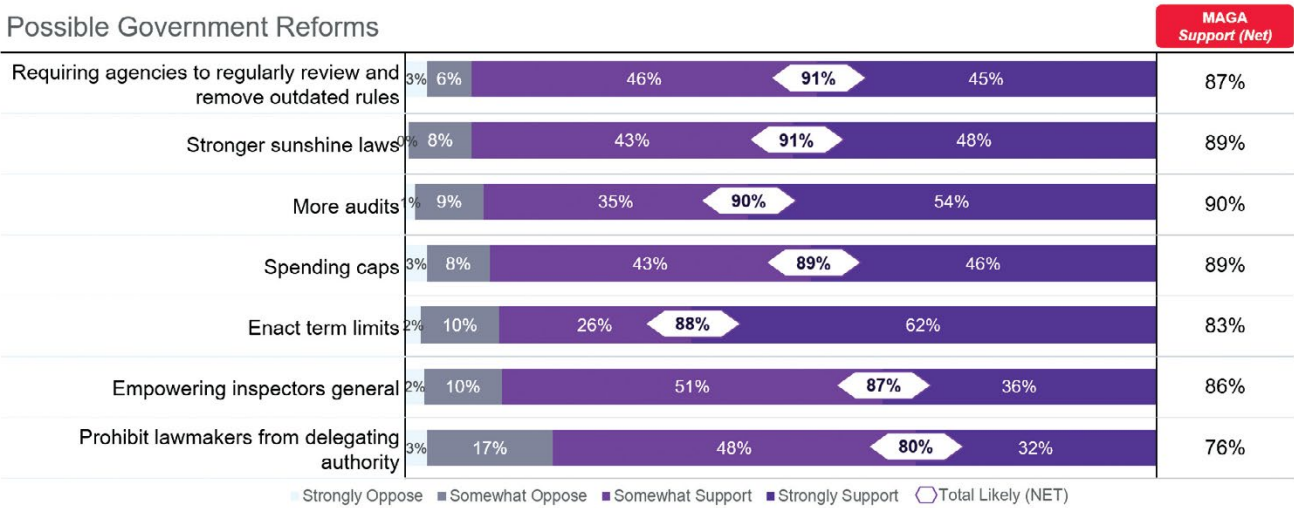
Accountability, Corruption, and Reform

Addressing corruption and lack of transparency is important to 98% of respondents, with 78% saying that it’s very important. It cuts across MAGA and non-MAGA, age groups, and regions.

Corruption is understood primarily through two lenses: taxpayer money being wasted or misused (27%), and certain people or groups getting special treatment (14%). A majority (59%) say it’s both of those equally. This means anti-corruption messaging should address both dimensions to reach the broadest audience.



Government reforms enjoy overwhelming support across the board:



Term limits and audits generate the most enthusiasm as top personal priorities. Transparency (sunshine laws) and constraining unelected agency power (prohibiting delegation) are also strong. With the possible exception of term limits, these reforms represent a natural connection point between populist frustration with elites and classical conservative principles of limited, accountable government.

Checks, Balances, and Executive Power

This is the most nuanced area of the research and arguably the most important for the strategic tension at the heart of this project.

61% of respondents support further empowering the President, including 72% of MAGA. At the same time, 67% say “real accountability requires checks and balances — not unilateral authority.” In separate split-sample questions, 70% of respondents asked about the Wisconsin governor expressed concern about executive-order power, compared with 62% of those asked about the president. Each question was asked of 125 respondents.

How to Navigate This Tension

These findings may sound contradictory. This audience supports their current allies having power AND believes in checks and balances as protection against future opponents. It reflects the reality that most voters make decisions about issues independently rather than strictly adhering to a specific political philosophy.

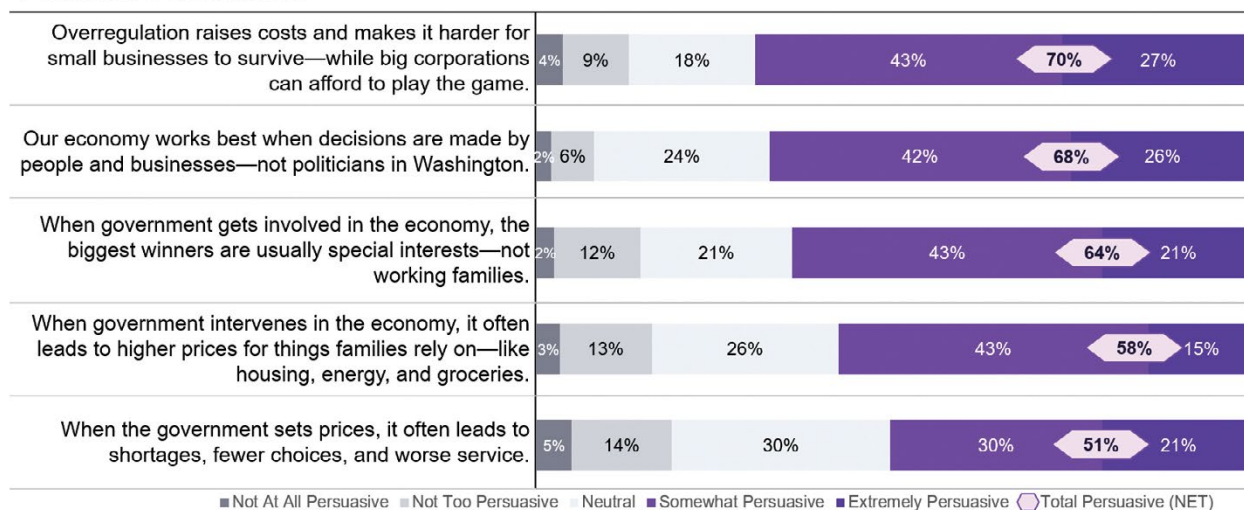
A potential entry point is the Wisconsin Governor, not the President. A strong majority, 70%, are concerned about Evers’ executive order power. That is a credible, felt concern that connects naturally to the broader principle: no politician — regardless of party — should be able to bypass the process. The goal is to build the principled case using examples that don’t require this audience to question their current political loyalties.

The strongest tested language: “Real accountability requires checks and balances — not unilateral authority.” (67% supportive, consistent across MAGA and non-MAGA.)

Economic Issues and Free Markets

Economic pain is real and primary for this audience. The research consistently shows that free market arguments land when they are grounded in tangible harm to real people instead of in abstract principles or historical appeals.

Persuasive statements



This audience is genuinely split on government intervention in prices. There is meaningful support for government caps on credit card interest rates (45%), prescription drugs (59%), and energy/utility rates (56%). This is an important populist divergence from what traditional free-market conservatives would tend to want. The most effective approach is not to deny economic pain or dismiss the impulse toward price controls, but to explain the downstream consequences — particularly for small businesses and local stores — in concrete terms.

Critical language note: respondents view “price setting” as more intrusive and negative than “price capping.” Always use “price setting” when describing government intervention in markets.

Federalism and Local Control

Local government is trusted most. Respondents prefer local control for law enforcement, housing, education, and land use. They prefer federal control for immigration, border security, national security, and increasingly, AI and social media regulation.

In the qualitative discussions, the most persuasive arguments for local control center on accountability and accessibility: local officials live with the consequences of their decisions, they are easier to reach, and they understand community-specific conditions. Top-down, one-size-fits-all federal approaches are seen as failing to account for local context.

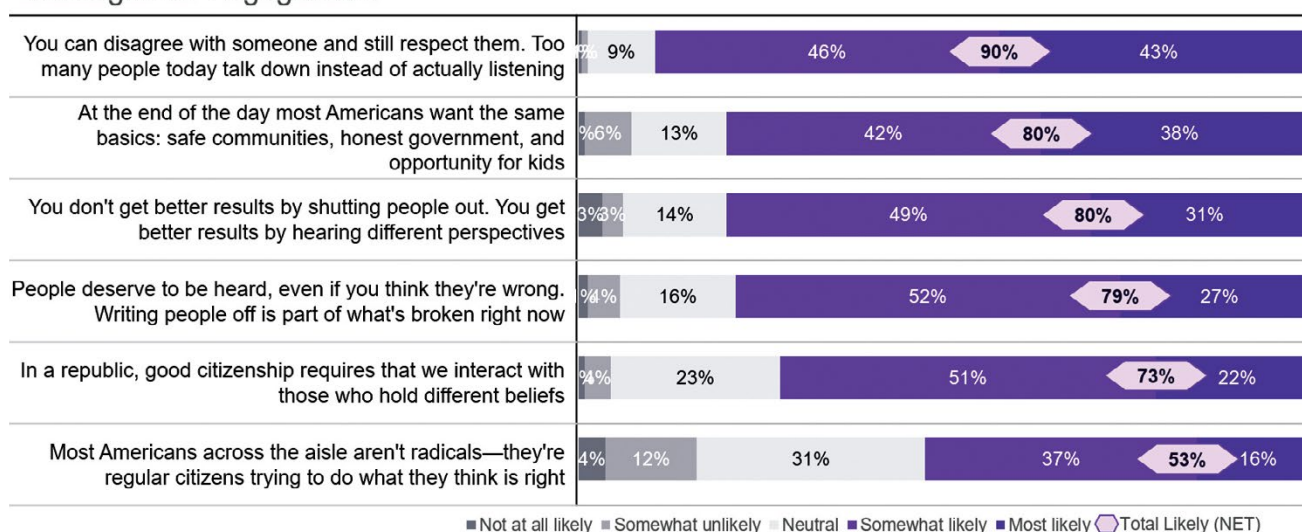
Civic Engagement and What Drives Participation

Half of this audience (50%) reports no civic participation in the past year beyond voting. MAGA respondents are somewhat more likely to sign petitions, contact representatives, and volunteer. Online engagement is higher than in-person, particularly among MAGA: 30% follow political candidates or organizations online.

The top motivations to vote are civic duty (33%), supporting or opposing a candidate (32%), and concern about a specific issue (25%). For MAGA, candidate support and issue-driven concern rank higher than civic duty. The practical implication: issue-based messaging is more likely to drive engagement for this segment than appeals to duty or process.

The most effective message for encouraging engagement with those you disagree with: “You can disagree with someone and still respect them. Too many people today talk down instead of actually listening.” (90% say this makes them more willing to engage; 95% MAGA.) In quantitative testing, messages claiming the other side “isn’t radical” fell flat – this segment isn’t ready to concede that point, so it’s not an effective way to open. Instead, messaging should focus on respect and listening without naming or characterizing the opposition.

Messages for Engagement



MESSAGING TOOLKIT

The following toolkit translates research findings into actionable guidance for communicators, policymakers, and organizations seeking to re-engage populist-leaning conservatives in Wisconsin with classical conservative principles. All recommendations are grounded directly in qualitative and quantitative research findings.

Overarching Messaging Position

A commitment to fair and consistent rules, our established systems and laws, and respect for diverse opinions is essential to Wisconsin's bright future.

Wisconsinites want the same basics — safe communities, honest government, and opportunity for their kids.

Messaging Strategy

- Frame classical conservative principles as the path to a better Wisconsin — not as abstract ideology. Appeal to shared optimism and a desire for concrete improvement.
- Lead with economic acknowledgment. Always validate the cost-of-living struggle before making any other argument. This is the price of entry.
- Do not engage on the terrain of socialist or anti-institution populism. Redirect to the benefits classical principles can and have delivered (individual autonomy, limits on concentration of power, freedom of economic choice), and highlight the specific harms of alternative approaches (corrupt bureaucracy, shortages, and limits on individual rights).
- Use plain language throughout. Short declarative sentences. No jargon. No academic framing. No economic theory that doesn't connect to someone's grocery bill or employer.
- Build from local to national. Start with what's trusted (local officials, local processes, neighbors) and build toward larger institutions. Never start from the top down.
- Show don't tell. Use procedural proof: specific steps, visible safeguards, and tangible outcomes. Avoid reassurances that ask people to simply trust without showing them why.

Message Construction Framework

Every effective message for this audience should include four elements, in this order:

Element	Description	Example
1. End-state/Vision	What are we driving toward and why does it matter? Frame this emotionally and concretely. What does Wisconsin look like when this works?	Wisconsin is a state that takes care of its people. There is growth and opportunity for all here.
2. Values/Principles	The classical conservative values that get us to that end-state. Keep these brief and connected to the end-state.	To maximize opportunity, we must make sure decisions are made by the people, not politicians, and that overregulation doesn't stifle small, local businesses.
3. Proof or process	What specific steps, safeguards, or reforms demonstrate that the principles are real? This is where credibility lives.	We can do that by cutting unnecessary red tape, empowering local decision-makers, and ensuring small businesses have the freedom and flexibility to grow, hire, and innovate.
4. Civility	An explicit acknowledgment that different views are welcome. This is not optional — it signals respect and distinguishes this approach from tribal politics.	Wisconsin's strength lies in the diversity of its people, businesses, and viewpoints, and that diversity will continue to drive growth if we allow it to thrive.

This order isn't a stylistic choice. Each step builds upon the previous one, and the research behind each is worth knowing — especially if you're adapting these messages or building your own.

Why lead with the end-state? This segment is economically anxious and institutionally skeptical. The research shows they engage with a vision of Wisconsin's future before they'll engage with policy arguments — open with principles or process and you've already lost them.

Why connect principles or values to that end-state? Values on their own didn't move this audience in testing. Arguments about real consequences consistently beat arguments from theory or tradition — even a Reagan quote fell flat because it wasn't tied to anything people could feel.

Why proof and process? This is where credibility lives for this audience. Specific, visible safeguards moved confidence far more than broad reassurance did. They want receipts, not promises.

Why end with civility? Ninety percent agreed you can disagree with someone and still respect them — but these voters feel constantly lectured and dismissed. Acknowledging that different views are welcome signals this isn't tribal politics, and from messengers they half-expect to manipulate them, that signal matters.

Below is an example message that marries each of these steps together:

Example Full Message

Wisconsin can thrive under the right conditions: clear and fair rules, decisions made close to home, respectful open debate, and practical solutions that let people build a good life.

Wisconsinites shouldn't be expected to just trust institutions — institutions must earn that confidence with transparency, accountability you can see enforced, and results that show up in everyday life.

That's why we support stronger audits of government spending, clear election safeguards you can observe yourself, and keeping major decisions in the hands of elected officials who answer to you — not unelected agencies.

We won't all agree on every issue — and that's fine. Disagreement is part of a healthy state. What matters is that everyone gets a fair say, and that the rules apply the same no matter who's in power.

The Five Messaging Pillars

Our research focused on five pillars rooted in classical conservative principles — trust in democratic institutions, rule of law, respect for opposing views, free markets, and federalism. The following table presents the five core messaging pillars in order of audience receptivity, based on research findings. Each pillar includes strategic guidance and specific language guidance.

Pillar	Strategic Guidance	Language to Use	Language to Avoid
Trust in Democratic Institutions	Use Voter ID as a gateway to explain other safeguards. Focus on concrete, visible processes — chain of custody, public machine testing, bipartisan observers, post-election audits. Confidence comes from verification, not just reassurance.	✓ Photo ID to vote ✓ Preventing illegal voting ✓ Citizenship verification ✓ Accurate vote counts ✓ Post-election audits ✓ Chain of custody ✓ Bipartisan election observers	✗ Rigged system ✗ Election was stolen ✗ Abstract reassurances to “just trust”

Pillar	Strategic Guidance	Language to Use	Language to Avoid
Rule of Law & Checks and Balances	Frame checks and balances as protection for when the other side is in power — not as opposition to current leadership. Concern about executive overreach is higher for Gov. Evers (70%) than the President (62%); use that as the entry point. Pressure governing bodies to act rather than bypass them.	✓ Real accountability requires checks and balances — not unilateral authority ✓ No one above the law ✓ Equal treatment under the law ✓ Checks and balances ✓ Due process ✓ Constitutional limits	✗ Language that appears to challenge Trump directly ✗ Abstract constitutional theory ✗ Frames that sound like they defend the status quo
Respect for Opposing Views	Don't name the other side. Lead with shared values — safe communities, honest government, opportunity for kids. Free speech as a universal protection resonates strongly. Avoid anything that sounds like lecturing.	✓ You can disagree and still respect them ✓ Americans want the same basics ✓ Free speech protects everyone ✓ Right to be heard ✓ Open dialogue ✓ Respect for different views	✗ Democrats / Governor Evers by name ✗ Most Americans across the aisle aren't radicals ✗ Anything that sounds like both-sidesing current events
Free Markets	Never lead with abstract free market theory — it doesn't land. Instead anchor in small businesses and working families. Always acknowledge economic pain first. Special interests as the winners of government intervention is highly persuasive.	✓ Overregulation raises costs and makes it harder for small businesses ✓ Government picking winners and losers (negative — use to describe the problem) ✓ Special interests (negative — use to describe the problem) ✓ Economic opportunity ✓ Decisions made by people and businesses — not politicians ✓ Wasting taxpayer money	✗ Leading with abstract free trade arguments ✗ Ronald Reagan quotes or historical appeals ✗ Ignoring or minimizing cost-of-living pain ✗ Price capping (use price setting instead)
Federalism & Local Control	Local trust is high and genuine — build on it. Frame federal overreach as unelected agencies making decisions that affect your community. Speed of accountability is a strong argument: local officials live with the consequences. Note that immigration and AI regulation are exceptions where this audience prefers federal control.	✓ Decisions made closer to home ✓ Local control ✓ Unelected agencies making decisions (negative — use to describe problem) ✓ Government overreach (negative — use to describe problem) ✓ Community accountability ✓ People you can actually reach	✗ One-size-fits-all federal approach framing (unless criticizing it) ✗ Assumption that all issues belong locally — immigration and AI are exceptions ✗ Top-down, abstract federalism arguments

Sample Messages by Pillar

The following sample messages are ready to adapt for Facebook posts, op-eds, speeches, and rapid-response situations. Each is grounded in specific research findings about what language resonates.

Pillar 1: Trust in Democratic Institutions

Social Media (Facebook/YouTube)

FACEBOOK POST

Did you know that in Wisconsin, ballots are tracked with chain-of-custody rules from the moment they're printed to the moment they're counted? Voting machines are tested publicly before every election. And after the votes are counted, a random sample is hand-counted to verify the results. Photo ID is just the beginning — the safeguards go much deeper. Confidence in our elections comes from being able to verify — and Wisconsin has the safeguards to back it up.

SHORT-FORM TALKING POINT

I want election results I can trust — and trust comes from verification, not just reassurance. Photo ID, bipartisan observers, paper ballots, public machine testing, and post-election audits: that's how you build confidence. That's how Wisconsin does it.

Responding to Election Skepticism

RESPONSE FRAME

I hear the frustration. When results shift overnight and you don't understand why, it's natural to be skeptical. Here's what actually happens: clerks can't start processing absentee ballots until Election Day, which causes results to come in hours later. It's not fraud — it's a policy choice and its one that we can change. Letting clerks pre-process ballots would mean faster, more final results on election night, so there's less room for doubt in the first place.

Pillar 2: Rule of Law & Checks and Balances

Social Media (Facebook/YouTube)

FACEBOOK POST

Every Wisconsin governor — regardless of party — has to play by the same rules. The legislature writes the laws; the governor carries them out. A governor shouldn't be able to use executive orders to make policy just because he doesn't like what the legislature decides. And that applies across the board: no politician, in either party or either branch, gets to go around the process when it doesn't go their way. No one is above the law. Real accountability means checks and balances — not unilateral authority.

SHORT-FORM TALKING POINT

The rules have to apply to everyone. No one above the law. That means when the other side wins, they play by the same rules we're demanding now. Checks and balances aren't a political tactic — they're protection.

Longer Format (Op-Ed / Speech)

SPEECH EXCERPT

Wisconsin conservatives know what it feels like when one person in power rewrites the rules. We watched a governor take a school funding provision passed by the legislature and — by crossing out a few digits with a veto pen — extend it for four hundred years. The courts said the law allows it. That's exactly the problem. The legislature writes the laws; one person shouldn't be able to rewrite them, no matter which party holds the office. No one is above the law — and real accountability requires checks and balances, not unilateral authority. We saw what that looks like when it works: when a governor tried to extend emergency powers past their legal limit, the courts stepped in and stopped it. That's not a burden on government — that's protection. Protection that's still there when the other side wins. Hold the principle, not just the party.

Pillar 3: Respect for Opposing Views

Social Media (Facebook/YouTube)

FACEBOOK POST

At the end of the day, most Wisconsinites want the same things: safe communities, honest government, and a chance for their kids to build a good life. That's not a partisan statement — it's the truth. You can disagree with someone about how to get there and still respect that they're trying. That's what civil disagreement looks like. And it's the only way we actually solve anything.

SHORT-FORM TALKING POINT

Free speech isn't just for views you agree with. It protects everyone's right to be heard — including yours. That's not a liberal idea or a conservative idea. It's the foundation of self-government.

Pillar 4: Free Markets

Social Media (Facebook/YouTube)

FACEBOOK POST

Grocery prices are too high. That's real, and it's hitting families hard. But when the government steps in to set prices, the first businesses to close are the small ones — the family grocery store, the local butcher, the corner shop that's been there for thirty years. Big corporations have lawyers and lobbyists to navigate the rules and investors to absorb short-term losses. Small businesses don't. The people who get hurt by government price-setting are the same people it was supposed to help.

SHORT-FORM TALKING POINT

Overregulation doesn't hurt the big corporations — they can afford to play the game. It hurts the small business owner who's already working 60 hours a week just to keep the lights on. When government gets involved in the economy, the winners are usually special interests. Not working families.

Responding to Price Control Arguments

RESPONSE FRAME

I understand why government price controls are appealing — prices have gotten out of control and people are hurting. But when the government sets prices for groceries or housing, it's the local store or the small landlord who can't make the numbers work and closes down. Then there's less supply, fewer choices, and often higher prices in the end. The answer isn't more government involvement in setting prices — it's tackling the factors that drive prices up in the first place. Because when price-setting fails, it's not the big corporations that pay for it. It's the family store down the street

Pillar 5: Federalism & Local Control

Social Media (Facebook/YouTube)

FACEBOOK POST

Your county sheriff knows your roads, your neighborhoods, and your community in a way that a federal bureaucrat in Washington never will. Your local school board answers to parents at the next board meeting — not to a department in D.C. Local government isn't perfect, but it's the level of government where you can actually show up, speak up, and hold someone accountable. That matters.

SHORT-FORM TALKING POINT

Decisions made closer to home are decisions made by people who have to live with the consequences. Unelected agencies in Washington making rules for Wisconsin communities they've never visited is exactly backwards. Local accountability means local control.

Tone of Voice

While this may seem counterintuitive, the tone to use with this audience is calm, principled, concrete, sympathetic, and respectful. The voice should be plainspoken and avoid jargon and technical terms.

Quality	What it Means in Practice
Calm	Don't build your case in grievance-driven language even when the audience responds to intensity. Describe what you oppose plainly, then move to what you're for. Anger should belong to the audience, not the messenger.
Principled	Ground every message in a clear value. This audience assumes political expediency and you must prove the opposite early.
Concrete	Abstract arguments lose this audience. Every principle needs a real-world example or consequence.
Sympathetic	Acknowledge economic pain genuinely before making any argument. Do not minimize or talk past it.
Respectful	Never talk down. Never moralize. Treat the audience as capable of thinking through evidence.
Short	Declarative sentences. Plain words. If you need a comma, consider a period instead.

Positive words and phrases outperform grievance language when building institutional trust. There is genuine optimism about Wisconsin's future in this audience — build on it. Avoid exaggeration or overpromising; unfulfilled promises deepen cynicism.

Why message calmly when this audience keeps voting for politicians that are generally perceived as more combative? Because our research found the fighting is part of the problem. Half of this segment does nothing civically beyond voting, and in our qualitative discussions, people kept pointing to the drama and negativity on both sides as the reason they stay out of it. They're tired of it.

The message that tested best for engagement was a simple one about respect. Ninety percent said "you can disagree with someone and still respect them" made them more willing to engage. These voters are angry, but they don't need a messenger to perform that anger for them. They need someone who takes them seriously.

That's also why positive language outperforms grievance language when the goal is building trust. There is genuine optimism in this audience about Wisconsin's future, and messages should build on it rather than feed the cynicism. Just don't overpromise. Unfulfilled promises are how the cynicism developed in the first place.

Responding to Opponents

When opponents frame issues using populist or anti-institution arguments, do not engage on their terms. Arguing against the grievance head-on reads as defending a system this audience already distrusts, and dismissing the concern outright is the fastest way to lose them. Instead, redirect. Validate the frustration, then move the conversation to ground where the research shows this audience responds. Use this three-step response structure:

Step	What to Do
Step 1: Acknowledge	Validate the concern or pain being raised. Show you heard it.
Step 2: Restate principles	Connect classical conservative values to that specific concern.
Step 3: Offer proof	Provide a concrete, observable example of the principle in action.

Example: Responding to “The system is rigged”

Acknowledge: “I understand why people feel that way. Too many politicians have used their positions to benefit themselves and their donors, and not enough has been done to stop it.”

Restate: “That’s exactly why we need stronger accountability — audits, term limits, sunshine laws that let you see what your government is actually doing.”

Proof: “Wisconsin law already requires post-election audits and public observation of the counting process. The question is whether we enforce those safeguards and add more — not whether we burn the whole thing down.”

Dos and Don'ts

The table below distills the guidance from this toolkit into a quick reference. Each line is grounded in the research findings covered earlier in this report.

Do	Don't
Use action-oriented, concrete terms.	Use technical jargon or detailed economic analysis.
Lead with economic pain before pivoting to principles.	Minimize or dismiss the cost-of-living struggle.
Use Voter ID as a gateway to explain other election safeguards.	Dismiss cynicism about elections outright.
Frame reform in accountability and transparency language.	Frame reform in grievance language (e.g., "rigged system").
Anchor economic arguments in small businesses and working families.	Lead with abstract free market theory.
Frame price controls as "price setting" — more intrusive and negative.	Use the phrase "price capping" — seen as more acceptable.
Highlight checks and balances as protection for when the other side has power.	Challenge current presidential authority directly.
Describe the top-down nature of federal overreach vs. local control.	Assume all issues should be local — immigration and AI (and others) are federal in this audience's view.
Engage non-voters through issue-driven outreach.	Lead with get-out-the-vote messaging before connecting on issues.
Emphasize shared values and stakes in outcomes.	Exacerbate "us vs. them" narratives.
Use procedural proof — steps taken, guardrails, visible outcomes.	Overpromise or use language that sounds hollow.
Keep sentences short, declarative, and jargon-free.	Moralize or lecture.

Word Equity: What Language to Use and Avoid

This analysis identifies the specific words and phrases most likely to convey the broader theme effectively. Respondents rated each word or phrase on a scale from -100% to +100%, where -100% represents the most negative possible reaction in this scoring system and +100% represents the most positive possible reaction.

Scores between -25% and +25% should be treated as neutral, weak, or mixed. In this range, a word or phrase may not create a strong reaction overall, or it may produce divided reactions that cancel each other out. Scores from +50% to +70% are considered strong positives, while scores above +70% are considered

very strong positives. Scores from -50% to -70% are considered strong negatives, while scores below -70% are considered very strong negatives.

This should be used as a vocabulary guide, not a banned-words list. A negative score does not necessarily mean a word should be avoided. It means the word carries a negative connotation with this audience. That can be useful when the goal is to attach negative feeling to the problem being criticized. Positive words should generally describe the solution, values, or outcomes being advanced, while negative words should generally describe the opposing policy, behavior, or record.

Word / Phrase	Total Score	MAGA Score
Photo ID to vote	90	94
Preventing illegal voting	82	92
Only citizens voting	81	83
Citizenship verification	80	90
Free speech	76	86
Accountability	74	77
No one above the law	73	78
Election integrity	73	70
Post-election audits	69	77
Checks and balances	61	80
Rule of law	60	70
Decisions made closer to home	60	70
Free markets	56	67
Local control	53	56
Unelected agencies making decisions	-47	-34
Rigged system	-46	-39
Government picking winners and losers	-33	-40
Wasting taxpayer money	-30	-27
Special interests	-18	-19
Government overreach	-17	-9
Too many regulations	-8	-8

Channel Guidelines

Social media usage is very high among right-of-center populist conservatives in Wisconsin. Facebook is the dominant platform. Word of mouth is also a primary news source, which means shareable assets and easily repeated messages are particularly valuable.

Platform	Usage and Notes
Facebook	82% total 83% MAGA — Primary platform. Longer posts with concrete stories and questions work well. Shareable.
YouTube	69% total 81% MAGA — Significantly higher MAGA usage. Video content explaining processes (how elections work, how government agencies operate) is well-suited here.
Instagram	41% total 45% MAGA — Younger skew. Short-form visual content.
X (Twitter)	32% total 38% MAGA — Higher engagement from politically active users. Good for rapid response and short-form statements.
TikTok	25% total 31% MAGA — Younger audience, higher MAGA engagement. Short explainer video format.
Word of mouth	Key channel — especially in rural areas. Messages should be simple enough to repeat accurately in conversation.

Social media should be treated as a high-reach distribution channel, not as the source of credibility. This audience uses Facebook, YouTube, and other platforms regularly, but the broader research shows deep skepticism toward media and information sources. Credibility is more likely to come from trusted messengers, concrete facts, and messages that are simple enough to share and repeat in conversation. That makes social media valuable for spreading content, while word of mouth, familiar voices, and clearly explained evidence are essential for persuasion.



ABOUT THE WISCONSIN INSTITUTE FOR LAW & LIBERTY

The Wisconsin Institute for Law & Liberty (WILL) is the premier conservative litigation and policy organization in Wisconsin — committed to defending the rule of law, individual liberty, and constitutional government. By integrating litigation, policy research, advocacy, and strategic communications, WILL promotes free-market principles and conservative values.

For more information about WILL or this research, visit will-law.org.



will-law.org
414-727-9455

330 East Kilbourn Ave. | Suite 725
Milwaukee, WI 53202

X f i l n
@WILawLiberty

WILL is funded by private donors and foundations. WILL does not accept government funds or contributions that could influence the litigation we choose to pursue or the outcomes of our research.

Will you consider becoming a partner in WILL's work today? Donate to WILL at:

will-law.org/donate

WILL is a tax-exempt, nonprofit, public charity as defined by Section 501(c)(3) of the Internal Revenue Code and gifts to WILL are tax deductible.