

DEMOCRACY DISPATCH PODCAST

Episode 17: How Wisconsin Organized Voters to Combat Attacks on Democracy (w/ Seth Hoffmeister of Wisconsin Conservation Voters)

INTRO

Welcome to the Democracy Dispatch podcast. I'm Justin Marsh, Political Outreach Director at Vermont Conservation Voters. This is your weekly scoop on legislative action as we work to push forward environmental policies for Vermont. Each Monday, we will take a look back at the week prior, preview the week ahead, and speak with legislators and advocates on topics affecting our air, water, open space, and quality of life.

On today's episode, Lauren chats with Representative Seth Bongartz for our deep dive conversation with an update on the critical housing policy. Later, I was able to catch up with Wisconsin Conservation Voters' Deputy Director Seth Hoffmeister last week at the 2023 Conservation Voters Movement Conference in Minneapolis/St. Paul, Minnesota. Seth shares about the incredible field organizing his organization led Wisconsin to block Republican super majorities in their legislature. Seth shares about the incredible field organizing that his organization helped lead. for Wisconsin to block Republican supermajorities in their legislature. Despite being a majority Democratic state electing Democratic governor Tony Evers for a second term in 2022, the state is plagued with the worst gerrymandering in the country. He talks about the undemocratic district maps that strengthen Republican control and hopes for reversing the movement thanks to last month's Supreme Court election giving the court liberal control for the first time since 2008. Last week was an incredible opportunity for networking with other Conservation Voters organizations from across the country. I was able to participate on a panel about democracy policy efforts and protections in the state house with folks from New York and Montana. Molly Bell, the political director in Montana spoke about Missoula Representative Zooey Zephyr, a trans woman being censured. And I was able to share more positive experiences happening in Vermont with friend of the podcast and trans legislator Representative Taylor Small of Winooski. Progress on ranked choice voting and expansion of the Voters Right Act on the horizon was a positive glimmer and example for attendees in the room looking to make similar initiatives in their states. Sitting in on climate energy conversations and strategies for engaging in local elections and learning more about the New England Offshore Wind Coalition were just some. of the highlights. And of course any opportunity to rep Vermont is a fun one for me. And yes, I have met Bernie Sanders and yes, somehow we keep electing a Republican governor who doesn't support key climate policies. And yes, town meeting day is really weird, but also kind of cool.

But now let's bring Lauren Hierl, executive director of Vermont Conservation Voters into the fold to help me find out what I've missed. This is for the session shakedown segment where we recap the week prior and look to the coming week of the session.

SESSION SHAKEDOWN

JUSTIN MARSH: All right, Lauren, I am so out of the loop. What did I miss in the state house last week? What was the hot action?

LAUREN HIERL: So the biggest issue was the veto of the Affordable Heat Act by the governor as anticipated. So that happened on Thursday. And so coming up this week, the House and Senate are gonna both vote on whether to override that veto. And so to do that, you need a two thirds vote in support of the legislation. So we're gonna be working hard to try to line up those votes and get this bill into law. So that's gonna be one of the highest profile things going on, but we're also going to see action on the housing bill. So that bill is gonna be up on the House floor first, and the House did make some changes to it. So then if, assuming they pass that, it goes back to the Senate or goes to conference where they would work out any last differences. but we're considering that a must pass bill. So, you know, that will get worked out and passed almost certainly by the end of this week. Also looking for action on the 30 by 30 biodiversity bill. That's gonna have to move pretty quickly through both first the Senate floor and then back over to the House to see if they can agree with the changes the Senate made and get that to the governor. But we're kind of in the moment where you start running up where things might very well run out of time. So there's a few issues we've been following that are almost certainly not going to make it all the way through the process, like the bill to ban PFAS and other toxic chemicals from cosmetics and other products, and like the expansion of the bottle bill. Both unfortunately do not seem to have enough time left to get them through the process.

JM: Okay, yeah, I mean, House leadership was eyeing a May 12th wrap up of the session. Do you still think that's the target?

LH: Yeah, people are still anticipating that either Friday or Saturday of this week, it's not unusual that a session ends on a Saturday if they need a little bit of extra time to get through to the finish line. But yeah, so far they seem to be kind of working full steam ahead to try to get out at the end of this week.

JM: Okay, and you mentioned the S5 veto override being a really key action for this upcoming week. Is there anything else that we have our eyes set on for this week?

LH: The veto override is going to be the big one. And then just really making sure that the housing bill gets finished in a way that is maintaining really the smart growth principles. That's the kind of bill that is complicated and could go a lot of different directions. But making sure that it's both addressing the housing crisis and thoughtfully planned development. So that's going to be, I think, probably the most high profile other issue that we're gonna be really watching this week.

JM: All right. Well, it should be an interesting next week or so. You caught up with Representative Seth Bongartz for the latest on that housing policy. So let's hear that conversation now.

DEEP DIVE

LAUREN HIERL: I am here with Representative Seth Bongartz of Manchester. And Representative Bongartz was one of our early guests and had shared with us some of the work that had been going on all summer and fall on housing and how the legislature could really take action to address this critical issue that's affecting every Vermont community. So I'm really excited to be back with him. Thank you so much for being here. and it's a really busy time and so grateful for you making the time to chat with us. And really just wanted to start by getting an update on now that the bill has been through many committees and your committee, House Environment and Energy has been working on it and voted it out. What are the key provisions that you think are gonna make the biggest difference for addressing housing in Vermont?

SETH BONGARTZ: Well, the five, I think there's five sort of foundational pieces to it. There's a lot of other pieces as well, but the five foundational pieces are in, increasing density of housing in downtowns. That's obviously a key objective here. One is, and one of the ways to do that is by reducing parking, so that's one of the key pillars. Another key pillar is height, allowing, if a project has affordable housing and an affordable housing element in it, is granted a 40% density bonus. And one of the ways that that bonus can be realized at the... at the developer's discretion is to go up. And going up is one of the most efficient ways to build. It's also efficient from a land use perspective. So density, five units per acre, and errors with sewer and water. There's some caveats to that, but I won't go into those. One parking space per unit, and errors with sewer and water. Being able to go up the extra story. And then the fourth, I call key pillar of the bill. is one that says that anywhere you can build a single family home, you can build a duplex. Incredibly efficient. One foundation, one driveway, one set of services, and you get two houses. No more environmental impact, no more use of land effective, really. And you get housing for two. And that's a provision that adheres statewide, whether you have municipal sewer and water or not. So it's one of the provisions that really is of particular importance to areas. more rural areas than what. And the other provision that I think is one of the pillars is the by-right provision. And the by-right provision really says that if the zoning ordinances relates to housing, says that you can do A, B, and C, what happens now frequently is that when it comes in for a housing project, neighbors come in, object to it. And what this and then they get whittled down at the zoning hearing because the zoning board is could have caught in this place Between the applicant what the zoning ordinance actually says they can do and the neighbors been unhappy So we go to the middle and instead of getting you know, I'm gonna give them project 20 units of housing you end up getting 10 And what this what this would say is that if your ordinance says you get 20 you get 20 It cannot be negotiated away at the zoning board level. So what it really means is make sure your zoning ordinance says what you mean So, you know, there's other key provisions. There's a lot of other provisions in the bill, but there's a lot of other things, but I think those are the five foundational pieces for the bill.

LH: That is a great overview. Thank you so much. So it seems really exciting and some really meaningful change that's gonna really be critical in addressing this issue.

SB: Yeah, and I should just to go back to what I think we probably talked about when we did the first interview is that, you know, the underlying premise for this also is not, you know, obviously

work or think about our work in the context of the work that the Senate did and you know try to try to keep it all in it try to try to make the bill try to improve it in a way that the Senate will look at to go okay that's good and concur that's what we're hoping. Great and there's been really strong votes through the committee so far so that's promising. Yeah really strong really strong votes.

LH: Yeah. So that's exciting. Well, thank you so much. Really grateful. I know that you have been working on this, not only throughout this session, but well before, and have a career of dedication to a lot of these issues. So really grateful for your time. And I'm gonna now turn it over to Justin, who is interviewing Seth Hoffmeister of Wisconsin Conservation Voters.

MAIN INTERVIEW

JUSTIN MARSH: Seth Hoffmeister leads the Wisconsin Conservation Voters political program. His work involves directing strategy and resources toward critical elections at the local and state level in the Badger State. He started with WCV as an organizer in 2016 and now serves as deputy director. Welcome Seth.

SETH HOFFMEISTER: Hi Justin, how are you today?

JM: Lovely. It's been great this past week. We were at the CVM conference. We get to hear all about Wisconsin's incredible initiatives around field organizing and elections. It's also been infuriating to learn about the gerrymandering that has occurred there. In 2018, Wisconsin elected Democrat Tony Evers as Governor, and then in 2020, Wisconsin went for Biden. And in 2022, Evers was reelected by an even larger margin, which is signaling that the majority of Wisconsin voters are more liberal. But you wouldn't think that by looking at the makeup of your general assembly. How did Wisconsin get to the situation it's currently in? Just set the scene for us Vermonters who may not be as tuned into Wisconsin politics. What's going on there?

SH: Yeah, absolutely. So Wisconsin, a hundred years ago was this bastion of progressivism. You know, we were, you know, one of the first states to invest in, you know, workers' rights in conservation. movement. Fast forward about a hundred years and Scott Walker enters the stage. We saw a complete Republican sweep, trifecta, kind of the inverse of what we're seeing in Michigan and Minnesota where we had our Republicans take over our executive mansion, our assembly, and our state Senate, and our Supreme Court. So in 2010, you know, really the first election with post Citizens United, where we have all this outside campaign money coming in, they were completely able to gut, you know, a century of progressive traditions. And one of the most impactful and longest lasting and hard to reverse things that they did was putting in place gerrymandered maps. So really for the last 2030, Even 40 years, Wisconsin has become more and more of a swing state. So when we look at the electoral makeup right now, we're really 50-50. For decades up until 2010, we were able to really have like a strong compromise. Our

Democrats and Republicans were able to get along. Conservation was a really nonpartisan issue. But in the last decade, Republicans have really tilted the scales towards control. And it's made the top of the ticket be, you know, our 50-50 races where we elect typically Democrats, but by very narrow margins, that's been juxtaposed by 64% control of Republican seats in our legislature. We had been gearing up for the last decade to try and get fairer maps, not even fair maps, but fairer maps under our current system. And the US Supreme Court kind of threw a monkey wrench in that and going into 2022, we ended up with a set of maps that were even more gerrymandered than the last decade. So like you said, we've been electing Democrats to statewide office. Evers won by more than three points. Last election, the progressive judge won by 11 points this last election, but we still have nearly two thirds control of Republican seats in our legislature. And yeah, it has been called some of the most extreme partisan gerrymandering in the country, but luckily it's on its way out. Hopefully.

JM: Yeah, and for folks who want a little bit more info just on to what gerrymandering even is we do have a slide deck that Will be putting on our Instagram that goes into this and then both broadly and in Wisconsin I think this is a great reminder to Vermonters how quickly shifts can really happen in the dynamics of power at the local level We shouldn't think of ourselves as immune from these movements only 25 years ago Vermont conservatives were rallying around Take Back Vermont, which was Vermont's movement for same-sex marriage and marriage equality. And as a queer kid in Vermont in the 90s, it's certainly not lost on me. Curious how you feel, Seth, witnessing Wisconsin's political evolution and being a player in that.

SH: I mean, great question. The thing that I've been really astounded by and inspired by in just the last few months is how far we've been able to come in the last decade. When I was in college and we had that Republican trifecta under Governor Walker, we saw some of the most important Wisconsin values just getting stripped away. We were really a petri dish for the policies that later became hallmarks for the Trump administration. It was some dark days, whether it was higher education or environmental rights or workers' rights or anywhere in between. We were really backsliding fast. But over those last 10, 12 years. grassroots organizations, activists, community leaders, statewide groups and national groups like LCB have really proved that if things get dark, if the fascists gain ground, you can win back. You can win back some ground. I mean, every election in the last 12 years has been the most important election of our life. Things got even more serious when Wisconsin went for Trump in 2016 and we realized that we needed to get our act together and it didn't need to be this way. Over the last several election cycles, it has been incredible to see all sorts of folks come out and try and advocate for our shared values and for the Wisconsin we love and for really making this place one that is rooted in. justice and all of the things that Wisconsinites hold dear. So we have a long way to go and we still really are a swing state. It was really inspiring to see Wisconsin turn out for Judge Janet Protasiewicz by 11 points and to elect Tony Evers and to prevent a super majority veto override in our state legislature, but we also in 2022 elected Senator Ron Johnson by just 0.6 points. Perhaps the, and this is a really competitive claim, but perhaps the most ridiculous US Senator, perhaps the one who is most steeped in conspiracy theories, Ron Johnson. So we are trending in the right direction, but every win that we have is really hard

fought. But I think at the end of the day, when you do as a state set your mind to something, you can create a movement to reverse just some really, really dark things.

JM: Yeah, and you mentioned the election of Janet Protasiewicz to the Supreme Court just over a month ago. That gave the court liberal majority for the first time in over 15 years. So why is that? I mean, you say all of these elections have been the most critical, but that one seemed particularly critical, especially with the topic of these maps too. So can you explain why so?

SH: Yeah, absolutely. I mean, definitely right up there with the US Senate race and the gubernatorial race, the most important election that we've had in Wisconsin in the last year. But I would argue that US Supreme Court race is the most important election in the nation in 2023. And that is for a lot of reasons here at home. When it comes to conservation issues, the state Supreme Court will inevitably rule on corporate polluters. The person that we beat, Daniel Kelly, he was on the Supreme Court for a short amount of time, and he consistently sided with folks that gave him money. So when you're talking about like Enbridge, an oil pipeline company who was polluting sometimes on or near native lands or really any bodies of water and land throughout Wisconsin, we know that Dan Kelly supporters receive money from families who profit off of that company and he has sided with them. So we can't have somebody bought and paid for on our Supreme Court. When it comes to our democracy though, it is really life and death. After the 2020 election and Trump and his team were trying all these frivolous lawsuits around the country to try and undo our electoral points. They tried that in Wisconsin and they came closer here than they did anywhere else. By just one point, one vote, four to three, they rejected a Trump lawsuit that would have thrown out our electoral points. Wisconsin is the tipping point state when it comes to electing presidents. We unfortunately played a big role in electing Trump in 2016 and we're just one Supreme Court vote away from undoing all of the things that Biden went on to later do. So that is just huge. We saw insurrectionists coming to Wisconsin to campaign on behalf of Daniel Kelly. We saw election conspiracy theorists energized and ready to go. They recognized the importance, too. They ended up just saying the quiet part out loud in that we need to elect Dan Kelly because we need to be ready for 2024 so we don't reelect Biden. They are just hell bent on undermining our democracy and undermining our votes and stomping out our voices. And luckily that extreme point of view just doesn't cut it for folks here in Wisconsin. And I think that played a big part in our 11 point victory. But, you know, really the... biggest issue in the last election for voters all across the state, and we saw the same thing nationally in November, was the impact of the repeal of Roe v. Wade. When our extreme United States Supreme Court revoked Roe v. Wade, it put into place in Wisconsin an archaic 1849 abortion ban. We literally now have a law on the books from 1849 governing women's bodies and outlawing abortion in nearly all instances. That was an extreme motivation for voters, both in November and in April. It's very likely now that that law will go before our state Supreme Court and be challenged. And now that we have Majority that governs with common sense and fairness and equality. Um, we can hopefully make sure that our medical decisions aren't being governed by folks that have been dead for, you know, two centuries.

JM: Yeah, and so and then they also now have the power to correct some of the gerrymandering as well essentially, but that's a that's a timely process I would assume or

SH: So it's a little bit uncertain as to how long it will take, but the Thursday after the election, a lawsuit was filed challenging the constitutionality of our legislative and congressional maps. So the state Supreme Court will start hearing cases in like early August, the new term once Janet is sworn in. And they kind of set up the dominoes and now they're gonna get knocked down. It remains to be a little bit of a question mark as to how long it will take, but it is possible that we could get new maps by November 2024. So for statewide office in November, whether it's state level office, assembly, state senate, whatnot, you can start collecting signatures on April 15th and you have to file them to get on the ballot by June 1st. So it is possible that we could get new maps by then. It would be a really tight timeline. And I think things moving through the legal system are always a little bit, there's never an exact science to it, but we are really hoping that we can have fair maps for our next election.

JM: Yeah, so you would not need to wait for the 2030 census to have those maps redrawn, in that case.

SH: Correct. I mean, if we're not able to get them by 2024, you know, perhaps 2026, assuming the lawsuit is, you know, the Supreme Court sides with the lawsuit, because there is, you know, there is absolutely no way we can have another decade of these maps. They're extremely unfair. And we are just two seats away in our 99-person state assembly from a supermajority. We have a super majority in the state senate, so we are hanging on for dear life here.

JM: Yeah, what was the, so what did Wisconsin conservation voters, how did they play a role in these elections and what strategies did you implement for such a robust field operation?

SH: Yeah, so coming out of November, you know, we were really happy to have had the largest independent Canvas program in the state. We knocked on almost 400,000 doors going into November. We had one of the biggest paid media mail programs for the governor, the attorney general, key state legislative seats. And, you know, are really grateful to have become one of the biggest electoral groups in a very important swing state in the country. So even before November was complete, back in September and really for about a year prior to that, we're looking at November and April basically as one big long election cycle. And we're starting to get our plans together and to figure out that we were going to go from November and have to like stand up a, you know, a presidential level program in half the time in a lot colder weather. The big curve ball being winter in Wisconsin and the unpredictability of things like canvassing in that weather. So we, you know, knowing that our program in the field was going so fantastic and that Uh, and that the key to winning, winning elections is just being able to talk to voters at the doors. We put together kind of a, uh, aggressive proposal to do a very big door program, uh, for the spring. And we knew we had a short amount of time to raise a lot of money to be able to stand that up. Um, but because we started early and because we had a very clear plan and because we were already running a program of that magnitude, we were able to get through our February primary and hit our first door just two days after that primary in late February. And over the course of five weeks, we hit 155,000 doors and we had three offices throughout the state in key places where we... knew we needed to either persuade voters or get people to turn

out. So, Madison or Dane County, that's always where a lot of the progressive votes come from. So just ensuring turnout there was high was a number one priority. And then we knew that if we could persuade folks and turn out our people in the Milwaukee suburbs, that that would really be the ball game. And we work really closely with all of our other elect... partners here in Wisconsin. So we knew that things like mail and digital and other tactics would be covered and because this operation is a bigger one, we're not able to knock in smaller municipalities, but we knew that partners were really covering the map when it comes to canvassing. And luckily completely out of our control, but it went our way. The weather wasn't that bad for knocking doors in Wisconsin. We had a couple of snow storms and ice storms that delayed us, but we ended up making up for it at the end of the day.

JM: So impressive. What advice would you give to grassroots organizers here in Vermont to make effective shifts in our elections?

SH: Yeah. I mean, you know, I think back to the story of Wisconsin over the last like 12 years and, and when things feel the most dark, uh, and when things, uh, you know, feel like, you know, you can't do anything about, you know, these, these big forces that are doing terrible things. Like you can, um, and, and whether it's, uh, you know, a small grassroots activist, uh, group in a neighborhood or, or one of the biggest organizations nationally like LCB. There's just so much to be done at every level of government. And I think there are more folks out there who want good things for our community, who want clean water, want climate justice, who want to live in a fair and equitable society. And really it just takes showing up to, whether it's a town hall meeting or a GOTV canvas weekend. Um, the impact that we're able to have in our, um, own backyards really, um, really snowballs and, and in just a few cycles, uh, you can build some, some really big and powerful things. And when you start to build that momentum, um, it's just been astounding to, to feel that shift here from, from the darkest days to, you know, finally having the light at the end of the tunnel. So, yeah, I mean. I think the advice is the difference that we can make is huge, even if it feels small.

JM: Well, before you go, I know that you closed out the CVM conference with some karaoke. We have to know what's your go-to karaoke song.

SH: Hahaha. So I actually didn't end up singing karaoke at the last place we were at. I was just shouting over the music in the back, so my throat got pretty gnarled. But I am always a big fan of Garth Brooks' *Friends in the Low Places*. That is my go-to when I do karaoke.

JM: That's a good, that's a good, nice equalizer, a nice 90s throwback as well.

SH: What about you?

JM: Oh, *Hollaback Girl* always

SH: Excellent.

JM: gets the crowd going. It's a hard one to keep the energy up, but it's a challenge, but it's a fun one.

SH: Well, next CVM, we'll both do some karaoke.

JM: Yeah, I need to I need to stay out later. That was my I must have aged three decades on my trip to Minnesota. It was just there was no going out too late for me. But yeah, I'm glad that you were able to have the party vibes in my absence. But thank you so much. You are our first non Vermont guest on this podcast. So you have the distinct honors of that and it was a pleasure meeting you, of course, and the whole crew from Wisconsin. I had the pleasure of chatting with a few of them after my panel and talked about ring choice voting and things like that. So it was lovely and congrats on your recent wins and thanks for being on the podcast.

SH: Yeah, thank you so much for having me. And yeah, looking forward to next CVM or next political director meeting. And yeah, really, really great meeting you. And thanks for all the great work you and all the listeners are doing in Vermont.

JM: Thanks so much, Seth.

SH: Take care.

STAT OF THE WEEK & OUTRO

Now it's time for our stat of the week. 188 million. That is the number of people in the United States that may be threatened by gerrymandering in the next 10 years according to a 2021 report by RepresentUs. To determine the risk of rigged maps under current law, the report reads each state's laws across five key threats building to a single cumulative score. based on the answers to these five questions. Threat one, can politicians control how election maps are drawn? Yes. Threat two, can election maps be drawn in secret? Because Vermont doesn't have public hearings, yes. Can election maps be rigged for partisan gain? Yes. And are the legal standards weak? They also found that this was moderate of a threat. And the last question is, are rigged election maps hard to challenge in court? And this ultimately lowers our threat to just high instead of extreme because it only takes five citizens to group together to challenge a map to the Vermont Supreme Court. Perhaps some of the best results nationwide for that question.

I want to thank our guests, Representative Seth Bongartz and Seth Hoffmeister of Wisconsin Conservation Voters, and of course, Lauren Hierl for assisting me.

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Next week could be our finale. It will all depend on if the session is wrapping up. We'll, of course, keep you in the loop and as the session winds down. Thanks for listening.