Trust in Elections and the Threat of Political Violence: The Summary of Five Wisconsin Listening Sessions

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The Whitburn Center conducts practical applied research focused on evaluating and improving governance, professional management, and public policy in Wisconsin and beyond.

Philosophy and Values

Our vision is to build local government, nonprofit, and community capacity to promote the common good. We will bring people together across ideological divides to discover nonpartisan solutions. The Whitburn Center will share innovative, research-based knowledge, equipping our partners to address their most pressing needs, while utilizing equitable, efficient, and effective strategies.

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Executive Summary

The Issue

In a functioning democracy it is essential that citizens have confidence in the electoral process, the ability to engage in public and private debate without fear of violence, and the willingness to engage in civil discourse with individuals across the ideological spectrum. However, there is evidence that civility, trust, and engagement are in decline in ways that threaten democratic institutions. In this project we ask three questions: 1) How serious of a threat do leaders believe political violence and election distrust are in Wisconsin? 2) What do they view as the causes? And 3) How can violence be mitigated and public support for fair, safe, and secure elections be improved in Wisconsin?

The Method

We conducted five invite-only listening sessions of community leaders across Wisconsin. Sessions were held in Oshkosh, Milwaukee, Madison, Eau Claire and Green Bay between June 18 and August 7, 2024. We sought individuals in leadership positions that would have a firm grasp on the political and social issues facing their communities. The listening sessions were two hour moderated discussions that began with a list of semi-structured questions, which allowed participants to steer the conversation in different directions based on the topics of greatest interest to each group.

The Findings

Content analysis of session transcripts revealed six major themes related to political violence, trust, and democratic engagement:

1. Personal experience with threats of violence, and expectation of more to come throughout the political sphere.
2. A broad desire for civil discourse, but disagreement about what that means
3. The presence of a link between political violence and broader cultural decline
4. A lack of trusted information sources coinciding with the rise of social media
5. A general trust in elections, but more skepticism about elections outside of one's region
6. Concern that people are tuning out of politics and public life due to increasing violence and vitriol

The Lesson

The causes of the current political and cultural moment are too complex for easy solutions. Such efforts must include the personal, the legal, the institutional, and the cultural to be effective and sustainable. Based on the feedback from these listening sessions, we propose six immediate steps, however, to increase public trust in elections and reduce the risk of political violence.

Introduction

In a functioning democracy it is essential that citizens have confidence in the electoral process, the ability to engage in public and private debate without fear of violence, and the willingness to engage in civil discourse with individuals across the ideological spectrum. However, there is evidence that civility, trust, and engagement are in decline in ways that threaten democratic institutions. A 2024 article in the *Appleton Post-Crescent*, for example, details that fewer people are running for local office in Wisconsin.[1] Cited reasons include declining civility and the specter of political violence.

Indeed, real and potential threats against local school board members, state legislators, and election clerks have become part of the political landscape.[2] A 2024 poll out of Georgetown University revealed broad dissatisfaction with the state of democracy in the United States (U.S.), with 81 percent of respondents across ideological lines expressing concern that U.S. democracy is under threat.[3] The shootings of Gabby Giffords and Steve Scalise, the January 6th attack on the U.S. Capitol, and the attempt on former President Trump's life at a Pennsylvania rally all illustrate the threat of violence in our collective political discourse.

As a purple swing-state Wisconsin plays a significant role in national politics, especially in years in which there is a presidential election. In the aftermath of the 2020 elections, for instance, there were accusations of voter fraud spurring various investigations. However, both the Wisconsin Legislative Audit Bureau and the Wisconsin Institute for Law and Liberty found no evidence that widespread fraud occurred or impacted the electoral results.[4] Nonetheless, a 2021 Marquette University poll found that 71 percent of Republicans in Wisconsin did not have confidence in the state's 2020 election results.[5] Sixty percent of Wisconsin residents report they have stopped talking politics with people with whom they disagree.[6] Most concerning, there are non-trivial percentages of Wisconsin residents who state they condone the use of political violence.[7]

There are plenty of potential explanations for the stress being placed on U.S. democracy and its institutions. The rise of social media, the decline in traditional media, the isolation brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic, the election denialism spurred by Donald Trump and the MAGA movement, easy access to guns, the mental health crisis, racism, rising partisanship, growing secularism, and more have been cited as causes of declining trust and civility. The complex causes of the current political moment suggest that solutions too will be complex. Hence, in this project, generously supported by The Carter Center and Herb Kohl Philanthropies, we set out to understand what community leaders across Wisconsin think about the state of political discourse and civic engagement in Wisconsin. We were guided by the research question:

> How can public support for fair, safe, and secure elections, and democratic engagement for all, be improved in Wisconsin?

The project has three broad goals:

1) Define the threats to democracy in Wisconsin.
2) Identify barriers to civil democratic discourse in Wisconsin, including the threat of identity-based violence.
3) Empower Wisconsin residents and communities to restore trust in democratic processes and institutions through civic engagement.

The report proceeds as follows. We first explain the process by which we conducted five moderated listening sessions across the state. Next, we analyze the listening sessions through a content analysis of transcripts using thematic coding to identify major themes across all five conversations. Finally, based on the feedback from the sessions, we offer conclusions on how best to improve democratic engagement, increase trust in elections, and lower the risk of political and identity-based violence in Wisconsin.

Listening Sessions

We conducted five invite-only listening sessions of community leaders across Wisconsin. Sessions were held in Oshkosh, Milwaukee, Madison, Eau Claire and Green Bay between June 18th and August 7th, 2024.[8] Locations were chosen to ensure representation across media markets, major metro areas, and areas where there has been legal and political turmoil around the administration of elections. Participants were invited by the research team based on a grass tops strategy. Specifically, we sought individuals in leadership positions that would have a firm grasp on the political and social issues facing their communities. Leaders were identified through local contacts with connections to the Whitburn Center for Governance and Policy Research, the University of Wisconsin Oshkosh Master of Public Administration (MPA) program, and the Wisconsin Alliance for Civic Trust.

The listening sessions themselves were moderated discussions in which an experienced moderator asked semi-structured questions. The discussion was allowed to flow in various directions based on participant comments. Each session was two hours long. Participants were not compensated, but were guaranteed anonymity so that they could speak freely. A total of 32 individuals participated in the listening sessions, including:

- Current and former members of the Wisconsin state legislature
- State and local political candidates
- Current and former district attorneys and law enforcement officials
- Municipal managers
- Local elected officials from county government, municipal government, and school boards
- Local newspaper journalists
- Nonprofit professionals and board members
- Researchers and leaders from various public policy think tanks
- Current and former leaders of local chapters of the Republican and Democratic party
- Non-partisan voting advocacy organizations

- Private developers
- Election clerks

Our listening session strategy has strengths and weaknesses. Focusing on grass tops provided elite opinions on the state of local politics and engagement, however it is likely that a random sample of community residents would yield different results. Anonymity allowed everyone to speak freely but does prevent direct attribution of participant quotes. A total of 56.3 percent of participants were male, and 84.4 percent were white. Though we sought to achieve an ideological balance, representatives of organizations most vocal in election denialism, for the most part, declined to participate. Thus, our results should be taken as a snapshot of opinions from local leaders, as opposed to a representative sample of the views of the general public.

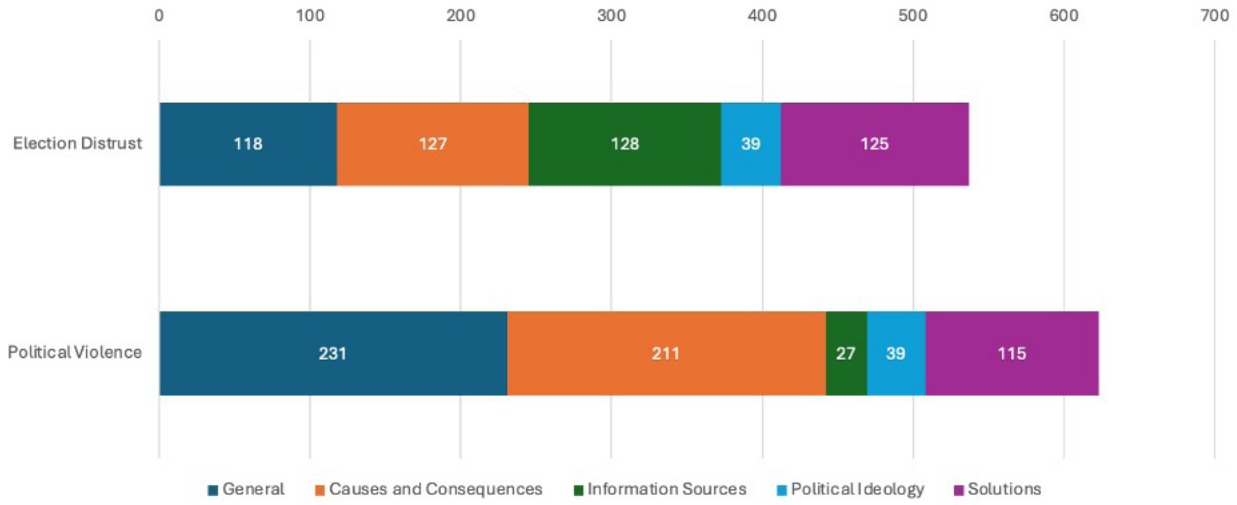
Analysis

Thematic Coding results

Thematic coding of session transcripts was utilized to identify common themes based on the main topics of conversation across the five listening sessions. First, the research team collectively developed a codebook that included codes, definitions, general keywords, and examples of comments that fall under each code after the third listening session (See Appendix). The codes were divided into two main categories based on the original goals of the project: 1) Election Distrust, and 2) Political Violence.

Two coders conducted the analysis. To ensure the codes were applied consistently across all listening session transcripts, an intercoder agreement approach was taken in which the two coders individually coded a single transcript until 87 percent agreement was reached on how to code statements. This is a common method to promote validity of qualitative research results. Percent agreement above 75-80 percent is considered suitable.

Chart One: Coded Mentions



Overall, this demonstrates that participants spent a greater amount of time talking about various facets of political violence in America (54%, 623 total codes) compared to matters of election distrust (46%, 537 total codes). Looking more specifically at the five codes in each category, participants spent the greatest amount of time talking about the general existence of political violence (233 codes) closely followed by causes and consequences of that violence (211 codes). These two topics made up 38% of the conversations.

Chart One provides the total number of participant comments on each of the codes in the two main categories. The axis also includes the approximate percentage of comments centered on each topic. It's important to note that there was often overlap between discussions about election distrust and political violence, which is to be expected since the two are closely associated.

Several other codes came close after (See Table One). The third most discussed topic centered on how information sources impact election distrust (128 codes), followed by the causes and consequences of election distrust (127 codes), and solutions to election distrust (125 codes). Notably, all three focused on Election Distrust, making up about 33% of the discussions. Table One provides more specific subtopics within these top five areas that were discussed across the sessions.

Table One: Codes and Subtopics

Category and Code	**Example Subtopics**
1. Political Violence: General (231 codes)	fear, civil war, trump, yard signs, black lives matter, shooting, guns, door knocking, death threats, riots, cities burning, messaging, culture, self-protection, communication, distrust, rhetoric, 2024 election, stunned, constitutional rights, worried, prepared, high potential, automobiles and crowds, history of slavery, accepting defeat, bomb threats, law enforcement, new reality, no consequences, January 6, martyrs, storm the capital, protests, unrest, bloodbath, tension, personal, weird, disruptive, annoying, lack of shame, calling names, evil, negative ads, mad, election officials, volunteers, mistakes, flooding email inbox, challenges of running, Gabby Giffords, angry, lack of civility, call for accountability, afraid of change, hate mail, school board, city council, peaceful transfer of power, AR-15, claw hammer, assassination, mass shootings, feeling unheard, insurrection, security, handgun, threaten families, white men, normalized, social media, school shooting, inner city violence, acrimony, new or old issue

2. Political Violence: Causes and Conse-quences (211 codes)	culture, instant gratification, civil dialogue, family conflict, women in danger, deportation, Trump, immigrants, cat ladies, shooting, control the narrative, radicalized, conspiratorial, paranoia, disre-spect for authority, rural rage, police brutality, depopulation, aging population, protests, public schools, suppress power, layoffs, money in politics, 24/7 news, political divide, men-tal health, tribal-ism, LGBTQ+, social media, binary thinking, gun culture, no conse-quences, debate, quick to judge, apocalyptic rhetoric, social ca-pi-tal, complacency, local becoming nationalized, dissociation of hu-man life, COVID, violent games, respect life, yard signs, armed offic-ers, death threats, exodus of public servants, Trump, Project 2025, Jim Crow, civil war, immunity, Supreme Court, January 6, peaceful transfer of power, substandard politicians running, families at risk, lack institutional trust, scared, irrational, voter sup-pression, boy-cotting businesses
3. Election Distrust: Information Sources (128 codes)	media, newspapers, partisan, drama, 24 hour news cycle, entertainment, national and local news, confirmation bias, tribalism, evidence, expertise, lost faith, covid, twitter, Facebook, YouTube, fringe, reports, fact check, negative ads, money, increased websites, pink slime outlets, lack of education, Ground-News, local papers, internet, not taking time, skimming headlines, mistakes, facts, fair, impartial, editorials, propaganda, skew results, election commission releases, different feeds, algorithms, polling, talking points, Wisconsin County Association, primary sources, city council meetings, debates, think tanks
4. Election Distrust: Causes and Conse-quences (127 codes)	Trump, COVID, money in politics, modern media, leaders spreading false-hoods, misinformation, lack evidence, false messaging, geotarget, AI, Voter ID, suppression, not conceding defeat, lack of civics education, political power, hacking, inaccurate polling, paper vs. electric ballots, errors, poverty, homeless-ness, training poll workers, trust local clerks, register unaffiliated to be selected as poll worker, rejected absentee ballots, billionaires, conspiracy theories, silos
5. Election Distrust: Solutions (125 codes)	dark money pledge, multiple information sources, listen to the middle, purple party, bipartisanship, civics education, term limits, education on technology, campaign finance reform, ranked choice voting in Minnesota, reduce social media, electronic voting for fast results, multi-member districts, humility, education on electoral process, policy solutions, engaged in process, reward positive messages, authenticity, early voting, clerk messaging, pay poll workers, explain chain of custody, work with media to educate, long term, own mis-takes, de-escalation, relationship-building, humanize each other, meet face-to-face, training on misinformation, education on process, provide time off for voting or volunteering, be a poll worker, make it easy to vote, diversity of representatives, listen to other perspectives, seek common ground, get to know local election workers, train poll workers and observers, sign up additional poll workers, look for the good in people, social capital and bonding relationships, educate young people

Discussion of Major Themes

As the coding demonstrates, several common themes emerged in the listening sessions. In the sections below we explain major themes and provide sample quotations illustrating the tone of the conversations.

1. Personal experience with threats of violence, and the expectation of more political violence

We asked participants if they were worried about political violence related to the fall 2024 elections. Participants, almost universally, expected more political violence. Below are some of the very blunt reactions shared with the moderator:

- "Yes. I absolutely do [think there will be political violence]. I am worried sh**less about it."
- "Absolutely scared."
- "You know, we can talk about like these individual threats of political violence that might happen, but I think the broader disruption to the political system, the disruption to the peaceful transfer of power" is the risk.
- "Yes. And I'm nervous and scared. Obviously, if you could have the losing candidate for the presidential race accept that loss, you could minimize it. But I don't even know if that is enough, given how radicalized some people are out there."

The attempt on former President Trump's life occurred after the first two listening sessions. In the remaining three sessions we asked if individuals were surprised by it. As one respondent put it, "it didn't really elicit that much shock because now we've had decades of violence in this country, mass shootings and certainly high profile people have been targeted many times. So it's not... I hate to say we're jaded now, but I feel like stuff like this doesn't generate that much shock anymore." We note most conversation was focused on the existence of political violence in the U.S. Participants had much less to share regarding solutions to the problem of political violence.

2. The desire for civil discourse, but disagreement about what that means

In each session the moderator asked participants if they supported civil discourse. Most initially responded yes. However, when asked to define civil discourse and civility, there was widespread disagreement about what civility means in practice. For example, one respondent defined civility as tolerance of other viewpoints, spurring a strong rebuttal from another participant, who shared, "I don't really like the word tolerance because it means something political now. It never used to, but now it does. It's a way to shut the conversation down."
Indeed, in multiple listening sessions people vocalized concern that legitimate political debate was being shut down under the guise of civility. As one individual put it, we all support civility, but it has "got to be a two-way street." In other words, there was concern that the very concept of civility has become a political buzzword. Other illustrative comments on civility are below:

- "We are too quick to judge each other, which is what is happening because then that is when people stop listening to each other. And that's when the shouting begins. And that's when the hurt feelings start and the angriness and the bitterness and we get into the violence eventually."

- Civility is "[b]eing able to agree to disagree and still be friends at the end of the discussion"
- "Respecting the other person's viewpoint. Even though you disagree with a person, doesn't mean that that person has to automatically become your enemy."
- "Not being insulting as you exchange your views. Listening. The art of listening well. And processing what you've just heard and applying it to what you believe and then responding."

There were notable responses from non-white participants who expressed a desire for civility, but also expressed their belief that historically disadvantaged populations often do not have the luxury of civility. Example responses include:

- "If I come to an engagement with you from the point of view that I am hungry and no one listens, I can't afford the apartment or the home that I have, I feel threatened in my neighborhood, I have a personal sense of urgency, and I don't feel that anyone up until now has listened...it's hard for me to be polite."
- "[S]ometimes you reach a point where you're going to make some noise. You're going to speak above the people who are being polite and civil because you don't think they really get it."
- "[W]hen you are scrambling to pay your rent, when you're scrambling to buy food, when you're scrambling to meet your prescription costs so that you can stay alive or stay healthy, when you don't know if you're gonna be able to buy the school supplies for your kid, keep a roof over their head, etcetera, it's hard to be civil, right?"

3. The presence of a link between political violence and broader cultural decline

Though we initially asked no specific questions about social capital and cultural decline, both concepts came up often in discussions of political violence during our first three sessions. Hence, in the final two we did ask participants a direct question about the link between social capital and political violence. In general, there was consensus that decades of mass shootings and exposure to violence in the U.S. is linked to the risk of political violence. As one participant shard, "In the state where I live, a young man named Kyle somebody with a machine gun came and... Yeah. You know, he comes to, in his opinion, defend somebody's business, and he kills somebody. And his mother had been the one that brought him to the event."

Another participant stated, in reference to Trump's attempted assassin, "You think about this shooter, he was 20 years old. A child. Where did that decision to take another person's life come, from a 20-year-old. Whether it's social media, the role models that he's seeing the violent games that are being played." Other representative comments included:

- "Idealistically, I want everybody to be well informed and vote, but I would be just as happy if fewer people voted, fewer people cared about elections besides weirdos. Because it's not... It creates an unhealthy culture when politics is life, what you're trying to accomplish. And it becomes your identity."

- "[W]hen you don't respect life, you don't respect people."
- "I mean, it is a cultural problem that we don't actually respect each other for who people are."
- "I feel like there's been a decrease in how we respect each other and the culture of respect for years now, at least from 2016 on. And it's just been a slow slide toward increased violent rhetoric. We don't see each other as humans or even we see each other as enemies more so."
- "What we're losing is the bridging social capital or connections with folks that are either different ideologically, maybe come from a different religious affiliation, those are the sort of connections we're losing in society today."

Collectively, comments about cultural decline referred to the decline in bridging social capital, i.e., many people are no longer participating in civic life in ways that expose them to individuals with different views and experiences. Particular concern about younger individuals growing up exposed to regular violence, but not exposed to diverse viewpoints, was voiced in all sessions.

4. A lack of trusted information sources coinciding with the rise of social media

In all five sessions participants were asked where they received their news. While many referred to specific major networks they trusted as well as social media personalities, the conversations quickly pivoted to the decline in trusted new sources. As one participant put it:

- "When I was younger or whatever, we all had to watch the same four TV stations and so we saw the same ads. And it wasn't like it's so micro targeted now that I feel like we're split into these little segments. And there isn't the crossover that there used to be of these kind of larger institutions and beliefs that are all bringing us together in some way, shape or form and in large groups."

Our panels included several experienced journalists who spoke about the dual challenges of presenting unbiased news in an era of hyper polarization and remaining a trusted source when resources for local news outlets are dwindling. To paraphrase one participant, the decline in local media means people are exposed primarily to national stories, leading to the nationalization of local governing bodies and local political discourse. The impact of social media was also frequently cited as a reason individuals are not exposed to views with which they disagree. Additional representative comments are below:

- "There are proactive disinformation forces out there trying openly to tear down our faith in [elections] and I think that is a real challenge."
- "Like It seems ABC, CBS, NBC, CNBC down the line, when something breaks, probably the White House administration says, "Okay, here's the talking points. You can watch every single one of those programs and almost verbatim through using the same language." That doesn't happen organically. That's systematic. It's all BS."
- "Civility is tainted by social media. I think the reason we have so much division is because it feels like anyone who has a different opinion than us is an outsider because it seems like everybody believes the same way we do because when we log on to these platforms, that's what we're shown. It's just an echo chamber, essentially of the same ideas."

5. A general trust in elections from participants, but concerns about growing distrust in elections among others

For the most part participants voiced their personal trust in the administration of elections in Wisconsin, as well as their trust in reported election results. However, we note again that voices most associated with election denialism declined to participate in our listening sessions. Those who did participate spent a significant amount of time discussing their concerns about growing distrust in election results in their community. One participant referenced a debate about election integrity in their community, sharing: "There's a group that of course trusts the process. And I have another group that completely thought this past mayoral election was rigged." Referring to vote tallying in a recent local mayoral election, the same individual shared "We had people around us yelling and screaming and calling us all names and everything, where we had to get the police to say, hey, step back, let them do the count."

Several participants also expressed their faith in local election results while expressing skepticism of the results and process outside of their community. When asked directly whether they trusted election results, one participant stated: "Certainly not in Milwaukee." When pressed as to what it would take to have faith in elections, multiple participants shared they needed to personally witness the administration of the election to have faith. Several shared stories of overcoming concerns about election integrity by serving as a poll worker, or meeting with a local election clerk to fully understand the process.

Another participant spoke of voter suppression, stating "there's documented evidence of [suppression] happening in recent elections, of course, of suppression tactics, especially targeted at communities of color." There was also broad agreement that mistakes can be made during the administration of election that should be addressed, but do not constitute fraud. Several individuals expressed a desire for a more nuanced discussion on how to improve elections without being accused of election denialism. One shared:

- "I think there's always opportunity to improve the electoral process and make people have faith in elections."

6. Concern that potential candidates are tuning out of politics and public life

The last major theme in the listening sessions was a general concern about a decline in civic and democratic engagement in Wisconsin. Several current and former elected officials shared experiences of them and their families being threatened, and/or being the subject of political attacks premised on misinformation on social media and political mailers. Participants across ideologies expressed concern that serious people will no longer want to engage in public service. Representative responses are below:

- "I would never run for office. One, I mean, thankfully there are people that do, but if you sit back and watch the dirt and what they do to people and what they do to their families and how they invade their lives, not on any of the issues that they're representing us on. Why would I put my family through that?"

• "We're missing out on a lot of good people that could run for office."
• "So a lot of us regular people have been watching the way some of our leaders behave, and we've just decided we don't have the energy to try to converse with you because we just don't believe in you anymore."
• "I think [politics] is a sewer. But all people do is swim in the sewer. So whether you want to be a conspiracy theorist or you want to fuel your anger at something, like there are too many ways for people to get radicalized and paranoid and conspiratorial."

Several participants also cited the COVID-19 disruption as a contributing factor for individuals tuning out of civic life. As one succinctly put it: "COVID really killed us as a society." Participants specifically mentioned the isolation people experienced during COVID, the prevalence of misinformation, and the heightened atmosphere of fear that magnified existing stress points in Wisconsin's society and culture. There was general agreement that COVID accelerated negative trends of disengagement.

Conclusion and Next Steps

The listening sessions summarized in this report highlight a multitude of challenges facing democracy, and society, in Wisconsin. Community leaders across the state are concerned about more political violence, rising incivility, disengagement, election distrust, misinformation, and more. The results do, however, provide guidance on how to answer our initial research question:

How can public support for fair, safe, and secure elections, and democratic engagement for all, be improved in Wisconsin?

Future work providing more in-depth strategies is needed, but there are immediate steps that can be taken to increase civic trust in Wisconsin:

1) Community leaders can attend de-escalation trainings provided by the Wisconsin Alliance for Civic Trust, and others, to help them better engage in difficult political conversations.[9]
2) Individuals can serve as election volunteers, and municipal clerks and their associations can take pro-active steps to educate skeptics on the nuts and bolts of election administration.
3) Legislation to improve election administration based on the recommendations from the Wisconsin Legislative Audit Bureau could be adopted.[10]
4) Non-partisan election trainings conducted by neutral parties could educate more on the role played by elected officials.
5) Increased civic education in K-12 education could give the next generation tools to fight misinformation.
6) Local-based efforts to create space for social capital building in a non-political atmosphere can strengthen bonds between Wisconsin residents. Examples include neighborhood associations, school-based public engagement events, and more.

As mentioned in the introduction, the causes of the current political and cultural moment are too complex for easy solutions. The offered suggestions are just a small part of what must be a sustained deliberate effort to reengage civic life in Wisconsin in ways that lower the collective temperature in Wisconsin politics. Such efforts must include the personal, the legal, the institutional, and the cultural to be effective and sustainable.

Endnotes

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8 We note that the attempt on Donald Trump's life occurred after the Oshkosh and Milwaukee sessions but prior to the rest.

9 The Wisconsin Alliance for Civic Trust is holding trainings in Milwaukee (October 8th) and Green Bay (October 15th). Details on these sessions, and other similar resources are available at: https://wisact.org/resources/

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