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November 30, 2018

Pollster: migration widens Wisconsin's rural-urban divide

The geographical divergence of affiliations present throughout Wisconsin's modern political history is becoming more pronounced and tends to diminish rural influence on the outcome of statewide elections as the population shifts.



That was the take-away message from a presentation by Professor Charles Franklin at the Wisconsin Electric Cooperative Association's (WECA) November annual meeting in La Crosse, where Franklin analyzed the results of 2018 midterm elections.

Franklin heads the Marquette University Law School Poll, established as the most accurate predictor of Wisconsin election results largely by its practice of sampling voters who are virtually certain to cast ballots on

Election Day, as opposed to less selective polls that interview wider sample groups including many potential voters who are eligible but might not show up.

Franklin's graphic depictions of this year's voting trends reflect stunningly effective efforts by Democrats to energize turnout in their Dane and Milwaukee County strongholds, combined with a gradual shift of population from rural to urban areas; and urban areas intensifying their historical tendency to support Democrats while Republicans increase their dominance in rural communities.

Over the long term, those trends could point to formidable difficulty for Republican candidates seeking statewide office, and similarly formidable difficulty for Democrats seeking to gain enough state legislative seats to win control of either chamber.

Those dynamics were amply dis-

played in the Democrats' November 6 sweep of Wisconsin's statewide offices—Governor, Attorney General, and U.S. Senate—while Republicans retained their near-veto-proof majority (64–35) in the Assembly and increased their numerical advantage by one seat, to 19–14, in the state Senate.

Franklin explained that while population shifts have made rural areas “redder,” they contain too few people to give Republicans a winning margin in statewide races when Dane and Milwaukee County Democrats are

(continued on next page)

Safety-conscious co-ops cut costs

A two-thirds reduction of losses spanning the past 11 years has propelled a downward trend in insurance rates for Wisconsin's electric cooperatives, while enabling substantial refunds on premium payments, attendees learned at the recent WECA annual meeting in La Crosse.

Account Executive Keith Johnson of the Federated Rural Electric Insurance Exchange reported that since the 2006 inception of its Group Retention Program, the organization's repayments from its loss fund to Wisconsin co-ops have totaled more than \$3.5 million.

Alongside the reduction of losses, the state's cooperatives have also experienced a reduction in premium rates, trending downward since 2014, Johnson reported.

Run-of-the-mill slip-and-fall accidents continue to be the most common—and hence the costliest—cause of expenses drawing on the loss fund, he added.

Group Retention Program dividend checks would be arriving soon at individual cooperatives, Johnson said.



Youth programming supported

Two checks totaling \$22,000 were presented to Wisconsin Electric Cooperative Association President and CEO Steve Freese at the November annual meeting in La Crosse, to help finance the organization's major youth programming initiatives.

Dan Cawood, vice president for portfolio management with the National Rural Utilities Cooperative Finance Corporation (CFC), noted the organization's 50 years of support for rural electric cooperatives and related support from the National Cooperative Services Corporation (NCSC) since its inception in 1981.

The contributions from the two cooperative financial institutions are to assist in covering costs of WECA's annual Youth Leadership Congress at UW-River Falls and of Wisconsin co-ops' sponsorships for participants in the National Rural Electric Cooperative Association's annual Youth Tour in Washington, D.C.

Appeals to youth involvement urged

An energetic program of outreach to young people is a key component of electric cooperative leadership planning for the future and one that can “pay dividends in the long run,” said Pierce Pepin Cooperative Services Board Chairman Roger Wiff at the recent WECA annual meeting.

Wiff was part of a panel presentation on “Creating a Culture for Youth Cooperative Leaders.” He suggested that the extent to which Federated Youth Foundation funds can be used to support youth programming may be underappreciated, and urged co-ops to take advantage of the opportunity.

Moderator Joe McDonald of Vernon Electric connected youth programs with the cooperative principle of commitment to community, saying such programs “foster member engagement and there is no better engagement than helping a member’s child.”

A feature of every Vernon Electric annual meeting is the awarding of scholarships for the continuing education of nearly two dozen students from high schools in the co-op’s service area.

Oakdale Electric has awarded scholarships totaling more than \$421,000 since 1988, and communications and public relations specialist Deana Protz noted that the cooperative

Pollster (continued from front page)

highly motivated. Moreover, migration is tending to enlarge the existing Democratic minority in medium-sized cities such as those in the Fox Valley metro area, leading to slimmer Republican majorities in those counties that have not infrequently decided recent statewide elections.

The ongoing self-segregation of Wisconsin’s populace by party—replicating the strong nationwide trend—doesn’t yet point to widespread Democratic success in legislative races, but appears to have already diminished the prospects for Republicans running statewide.

sponsors several Youth Leadership Congress participants every year. Multiple media platforms are used to promote participation in the annual event by area students, she said.

Migration of young people—especially recent college graduates—from rural communities to urban environments was repeatedly identified as a problem during various annual meeting presentations, and recruitment of rural youth for co-op careers was pegged as a priority. Wiff noted that Pierce Pepin’s scholarship program includes a \$1,000 award set aside specifically to assist in the education of aspiring electrical lineworkers.

UW-Oshkosh student, former WECA Youth Board member, and Glenn English Scholarship winner Tessa Otto stressed the importance of co-ops actively courting rural youth for cooperative employment.

It’s “essential,” Otto said, that electric cooperatives build their presence at career fairs and recruit future employees from among the member families they serve.

Nick named to Evers transition team

Dairyland Power Cooperative CEO Barbara Nick has been appointed to the transition team of Governor-Elect Tony Evers.

Individual areas of specialization were not announced in the mid-November release, but the 20-member personnel advisory council has the assignment of facilitating recruitment of candidates to staff the administration that will take office in January.

Other council members with familiar names—owing to past government service—include Frank Busalacchi, state transportation secretary throughout the Doyle administration; Sean Dilweg, Doyle administration state insurance commissioner; and Roberta Gassman, secretary of the Department of Workforce Development through part of the Doyle administration and later a deputy assistant secretary in the Obama administration’s labor department.

Retail dereg dwindles, promoters persist

Only 13 states retain active retail choice programs for residential electricity consumers, the U.S. Energy Information Administration (EIA) reported this month, noting a retreat from retail deregulation adopted in one form or another by nearly half the states at the close of the 20th century.

In Pennsylvania and Ohio, states generally regarded to have been examples of retail choice at its most successful in the late 1990s, between 30 and 50 percent of all consumers (not limited to residential) continue to participate in retail choice, the EIA indicated. Residential participation in Ohio, however, has declined in recent years, the agency said.

In Illinois, where 57 percent of residential consumers were served by alternative suppliers in 2014, participation had dropped to 35 percent just three years later, the EIA noted.

In Wisconsin, which deeply studied retail deregulation in the 1990s before dropping the idea after California’s elaborate restructuring program collapsed amid market manipulations, a 2017 effort to revive the issue met a cold reception from the Public Service Commission and gained no traction in the Legislature.

This week, however, the American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC) was pondering a resolution promoting retail choice. Set for introduction today, the free-market policy organization’s draft resolution says that “all electric utilities in the United States, both public and privately owned, should be restricted to the transmission and distribution grid, so that robust competition and consumer choice can emerge in the retail services and wholesale electricity markets.”

This, the resolution said, would facilitate “a transition to a modern, 21st century grid.”

The draft asserted that retail choice “would lower energy bills and enhance consumer value” and also claimed that in states that have retained traditional regulation, the results are “precluding consumer benefits from competition in the wholesale sector.”

A 2017 Illinois Commerce Commission study found retail choice customers ended up paying more than those who kept their incumbent utility.

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Prepared weekly and distributed since 1956 to provide timely information on matters pertaining to Wisconsin’s non-profit, consumer-owned rural electric cooperatives.

Wisconsin Electric Cooperative Association

222 W. Washington Ave., Suite 680
Madison, WI 53703