

Words To Win By

Episode 1: Winning in Wisconsin 2020

Transcript

Anat Shenker-Osorio:

Welcome to season two of Words to Win by. I'm Anat Shenker-Osorio and I develop and test political messaging and then help candidates, organizers, and activists around the world say what they're for in order to win progressive victories. At this moment, as all eyes turn to what Democrats need to do in 2022, we're taking a deep dive into one of the most critical and instructive wins we had in 2020 Wisconsin.

News Clip:

Joe Biden is the apparent winner in the state of Wisconsin, an important prize in the Democrats, uh, blue walls, the First of that wall, the crumble for Donald Trump.

Anat Shenker-Osorio:

Throughout the presidential election, we knew we had to rebuild the Blue Wall, Michigan, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin. I'd been helping grassroots and labor groups across the Midwest and working closely with leaders inside the party and organizations specifically in Wisconsin, a state that helped usher Trump to the White House in 2016. It's also a place very close to my heart because I grew up there and so I know it's always been at the tipping point. And as political pundits had observed all election long, our path to the White House required flipping Wisconsin.

Theme Song:

People say to me, you gotta be crazy. How can you sing in times like these? Don't you read the news? Don't you know the score? How can you sing? And so many others, three by way they reply, I say a Fool, such as I who sees this song is Somewhere to begin.

Anat Shenker-Osorio:

Wisconsin's back and forth at the ballot box is reflected in its tale of Two Ideologies. Someone who knows this rich history of Wisconsin politics Inside and Out is the chair of the Wisconsin Democratic Party, and my former high school classmate, Ben Wickler,

Ben Wikler:

Wisconsin, has this extraordinary tradition of progressive politics. They go back to the mid 19th century Wisconsin had riots to to stop federal marshals from, you know, recapturing slaves who escaped on the Underground Railroad to Wisconsin. Um, and the, the lawsuits that erupted out of those led to Wisconsin becoming the first state to declare the Fugitive Slave Act unconstitutional, and then sending a huge force of folks to help go fight the Civil War. Our civil War monuments in Wisconsin are to the people who won the Civil War. It's the first state that ratified the 19th Amendment to the Constitution. It's the state, uh, that produced scholars who wrote the New Deal program, the fact that created Medicare and Medicaid. It's, it's a state that

passed some of the first laws against violence against women. It's, it's a state across all these social movements. Um, and, and the birthplace of public sector unionization was in Wisconsin. And that's a story often we progressives tell ourselves.

Anat Shenker-Osorio:

And right alongside that rich history of progressivism, Wisconsin helped catalyze right wing efforts to use race to divide us.

Ben Wikler:

I think often, especially white progressives in Wisconsin forget to tell another part of the story, which is that it's a state that has sundown towns. There were communities where you could not be a black person after dark, massive white flight and massive residential segregation and, and Milwaukee in the surrounding area that then has shaped politics that have, you know, echoed to this day. It's the state that produced Joe McCarthy, who, you know, is one of the worst figures in American political history. It's always been a state of contested politics between, at its best, a really bright vision of what it means to be a progressive and a multiracial democracy. And people who've tried to use race to rip people apart and to suppress a, a, an idea of a common public good that really should be at the heart of how government works. Uh, that's the, the, the state that brings us to the present moment. Um, and that fight will never end here.

Anat Shenker-Osorio:

Wisconsin had its next great swing when Donald Trump was elected in 2016 with only a 0.7% margin in the state.

Ben Wikler:

So Wisconsin is the most evenly divided state in America. We are the only state that's had four out of the last six presidential elections come down to less than one percentage point. Over and over and over, it comes down to a hairline. But that the striking thing, the stunning thing is that that's true at the same time as turnout has gone way up and way down. So it's not like there's a group of voters and there's one person in the middle who moves to one side or the other and determines the election. It's actually like there's a whole bunch of people who decide whether to vote, whether to show up, whether to get involved.

Anat Shenker-Osorio:

The pivotal Wisconsin vote hinges on who is voting. And let's face it, Democrats have struggled with turnout and while a credible threat, and if ever there was one for our base, it's Trump is motivating to some people. We still have to give others something to vote for. Voting at its core is an act of hope. It's a belief that participating in the political process as opposed to just doing all you can for your family or immediate neighborhood, that voting can actually improve your life. It can make some meaningful difference for the people you love. That's often a hard sell. Especially for our base because folks who have never felt represented by the people elected to govern for us who have never seen that government deliver for their families, they're understandably skeptical of casting their ballots. Here's Devin Anderson, the membership and coalition manager of the African American Round Table, a group that promotes racial equity for

the lives of black people in Milwaukee. Devin has seen the effect of this lack of faith in the political process firsthand.

Devin Anderson:

They don't feel like the process works. I think that's like, that's the one you – I hear the most and I think that's the one that's hardest to answer, especially as a black person. One of the ways I think about it and talk about it is this is gonna take a lot of different things to build the world. We want to see, yes, it's gonna take more than just voting. I've never told anybody, if you vote tomorrow, the world will be better by Monday. That's not the conversation. Instead the conversation is how do we, how do we build enough power to make sure the candidates are speaking to our issues?

Anat Shenker-Osorio:

And while our side is struggling to give people that positive vision and make real, that voting is integral to achieving it, the other side is loud and clear about what they believe. They understand that politics isn't about policy preferences, it's about identity and the absolute quickest way to construct an US is by creating a them.

Ben Wikler:

But I didn't really have a realization until later on just how effectively republicans weaponized racism in Wisconsin specifically to win elections. And um, I was living outside of Wisconsin in 2010 when Scott Walker and Ron Johnson and the kind of tea party wave took hold. But the reality is, as I've learned over time, this goes back many, many years, including Tommy Thompson, who was the kind of governor for life for a lot of my years growing up. Um, he made his national reputation as Mr. Welfare reform and demonized welfare recipients and, and slashed benefits to families and then became the HHS Secretary for George W. Bush back of his kind of reputation as a, as a cutter of benefits that became a kind of coded dog whistle.

Tommy Thompson Ad:

Tommy Thompson believes Wisconsin's greatness is found in her people, young and old parents, grandparents, and students who through hard work and determination will build our future, not with more government and higher taxes, but with jobs opportunity and the chance to prosper here at home. That's Tommy Thompson's message, jobs ahead of spending opportunity ahead of taxes the people ahead of government. Tommy Thompson, solid consistent leadership, Tommy Thompson for governor.

Anat Shenker-Osorio:

This kind of dog whistle narrative has been central to Wisconsin politics. Here's just one example from an ad from Wisconsin Congressman Glenn Groman

Glenn Grothman Ad:

Washington isn't being responsible. We have an out of control welfare system that pays people not to work. Presidents of both parties stood by while dangerous people and drugs streamed across our borders we're 19 trillion in debt and politicians keep dreaming

up new ways to spend money, But Glenn Groman is fighting Back. I'm Glenn Groman and I'm running for Congress. I wanna get America back on track, change welfare to encourage work, vote for me on November 8th. I'm Glenn Groman and I approve this message.

Anat Shenker-Osorio:

There he is. Check in all of the boxes. Impugning welfare, making you fear immigrants and promising to be that hero for us. and by us we're meant to understand he means the white people in northern Wisconsin, he intends to represent, see the right talks about race all the time. That's why race neutral isn't really a thing. As Ian Haney Lopez showed in his book, Dog Whistle Politics, the right uses racially coded speech to connect government and the economy. We are meant to loathe the government and resent it because it is taking away from hardworking people who are coded as white and giving it away to propagate people who are coded as black and brown. Someone who knows a lot about this and what to do about it is Shaunu Kazinski, the director of progress North Shaunu, has seen this narrative of racial resentment take hold in the rural northwest region of Wisconsin where she lives.

Shaunu Kazinski:

For a long time, folks ignored rural and small town locations, which you know, if you look at a map of Wisconsin, the whole top part of the state is pretty rural and small town. And I think that where I've lived and I saw such a big shift, um, because people felt historically like ignored in Madison, ignored in DC. Um, and so then when you had GOP candidates coming in and speaking directly to the needs of rural and small town folks, whether they actually followed through on what some of those needs and promises were, you saw a shift, uh, I think, in who then people in those locations were showing up to support at the polls.

Anat Shenker-Osorio:

The GOP reaches the audience, Shaunu describes and casts themselves as their champions by creating another in Wisconsin. There's a very simple and straightforward route to creating this us them dynamic. You simply just say the word Milwaukee.

Milwaukee montage : [\(11:15\)](#)

Then Milwaukee, which is like many urban uh, school districts across America, uh, has been continuously challenged in the city of Milwaukee. Presidents of Milwaukee, Milwaukee.

Anat Shenker-Osorio:

Milwaukee is by far the most diverse part of an otherwise white state. Nearly 70% of all black Wisconsinites live in Milwaukee County. Let's hear more from Devin.

Devin Anderson:

There's a lot of rhetoric, you know, a lot of blame on Milwaukee and I think like right when state politicians and electeds like use that language, they're really dog whistling for something else. They're really speaking about people of color. Black people in particular like Milwaukee has a

crime problem. I think they're like signaling, right? Because Milwaukee is home to, to such a high percentage of the black population in the state. They're signaling, like when you say Milwaukee, we really mean those people, those black people over there.

Anat Shenker-Osorio:

And it goes beyond rhetoric. It has real world consequences. Here's Ben,

Ben Wikler:

The way that this is kind of echoed across the state is that they have, uh, gone after teachers and teachers unions as a, as a way of smashing organized labor, which politically benefits Republicans statewide to reduce worker power cuz organized workers tend to wind up supporting a party that supports working people. Um, but they've done that by demonizing supposedly, you know, lazy teachers, which is like a contradiction in terms and going after public schools in Milwaukee specifically, which they've starved of resources and then they say, look, these schools are failing, it's the teacher's union fault. And then they've ramped up school choice, which for individual parents, I understand, you know, often they're facing schools that are woefully underfunded so they wind up, you know, wanting to be able to go to private institutions or other kinds of institutions. But as a systemic thing, it's resulted in just the constant starvation of Milwaukee's public schools, um, in a way that creates this doom loop republicans like to perpetuate where they break government and then they say government doesn't work. So you know, we shouldn't fund government and it's always layered in with this division between the voter that they're appealing to and the supposed recipients of government. Lars, which has this sometimes explicitly spoken very often just under the surface deep kind of racialized cast to it.

Anat Shenker-Osorio:

And for a long time, both in Wisconsin and outside of it, Democrats have responded to these attacks by sticking to economic issues and taking very careful pains to try avoiding mentions of race altogether.

Devin Anderson:

I think the Democrat's response too often is to shrink, right? Is instead of pushing, like instead of pushing forward a bold agenda, it is to try to, it's to try to run away from the things the other side is saying about them.

Anat Shenker-Osorio:

Shrink. Indeed. You can actually see both inside Wisconsin and outside attempts Democrats have made to simply not talk about what used to be called "identity politics", what a functional country would call "human rights" and more recently has morphed into being called "cultural issues". This hope that if we simply just don't touch on hard topics like the fact that police are indiscriminately killing black people, or the fact that people who come here from other places seeking to make a better life for their families are being kept in limbo for generations. If we simply don't talk about these things and we try to push forward our economic issues, somehow we will be palatable and popular to everyone. But the fact is that for our base, if we're not

attending to issues of racial justice and of gender, they're left cold. These are the things that matter to them. And if we're going to be making a case for why voting matters, why they need to be participating in this political process, they need to feel that their issues are being aired and their voices are being heard. Here's Ben.

Ben Wikler:

And so you'd have these kind of progressive, kind of populous campaigns squarely centered on economic issues that pretended there wasn't this kind of racial pin popping the progressive bubble. The predictable result was that Republicans would say Democrats are trying to give handouts to people who aren't working in one way or another, and they would take this thing that was really popular Democrats were saying and turn it into something that would actually hurt Democrats because it would seem as though the, the Democrat wasn't talking about your kids' schools, you white voters somewhere in Wisconsin. They're talking about their schools. They're not talking about good roads in your community. They're talking about giving it to someone else over there and who the we is in politics is almost like the core question. And unless you actually say to the person you're talking to, you are part of the we, all of us, unless you actually say that, it's very easy for, for the right to try to make it seem as though, uh, you're just trying to take from the voter in their living room and head it off to somebody else far away in the state.

Ben Wikler:

So Wisconsin has always really deeply struggled with, on the one hand a party that makes demonization of people of color a kind of core way to, to win a largely white electorate and a democratic party that sometimes gets scared and runs away from those conversations and gets, you know, clonked over the head when whenever it does that.

Anat Shenker-Osorio:

It would be really great, if voters only heard from our side if they made their determination about Democrats based on what Democrats actually said. But unfortunately that is not the real world. Politics isn't a game of solitaire and our voters are hearing relentlessly from the other side that is using this racially coded speech to impugn government to say terrible things about whichever candidates we're running. And so if we're not providing a rebuttal, if we have nothing to say about these issues, that they will never stop bringing up. The only thing our voters are hearing is what the other side is saying. Fortunately, there is an answer and it's an answer successfully implemented and deployed not just in Wisconsin but across the Midwest. And we call it the race class narrative.

Ben Wikler:

When I arrived at the Democratic Party of Wisconsin, I, I found tremendous hunger from local party leaders and activists across the state for ideas about how to communicate for talking points that they could use, you know, day to day on social media posts and talking to their local newspaper and not a big toolkit about how to talk about race in a way that would counter what the other side was doing. When I arrived, there was actually a very frosty relationship between the state party and the Association of County party chairs, the County Chairs Association. Um,

that kind of shifted over the course of my first six months and we co-planned the County Chairs Association retreat with a big training forum that the Democratic Party of Wisconsin would host. And in the spring of 2020 we brought in this amazing expert. So we brought you in Anat Shenker-Osorio to speak to all of our county party chairs.

Ben Wikler:

And I remember so vividly when you, um, started talking about how the other side would always use coded references to race in order to get white people to flee democratic policies. And every chin began to nod. People were so familiar with this from local county politics across the state of Wisconsin because it's a playbook that people had experienced over and over and over. Most county chairs in Wisconsin live in red counties because our democratic population is concentrated in urban areas. So Milwaukee County is where a ton of Democrats live. Madison's in Dane County where a ton of Democrats live. Um, and there are not a lot of bright blue counties outside of that. We have 72 counties and most of them are reliably voting Republican overall. So people see the way Republican messaging works over and over and over and frankly, uh, you know, a lot of Democrats live in places where they are talking to fellow Democrats most of the time and they don't experience ads cuz Republicans don't buy ads in Dane County. They buy them in the rest of the state. So it was a light bulb moment for me seeing how responsive people were to the, the kind of core idea of the race class narrative, which is that you actually have to have an effective counter for the rights communication strategy that you can't just say something everyone agrees with, but which gets blasted to smithereens as soon as the right comes in with their, with their own message.

Anat Shenker-Osorio:

For those of you who listen to the first season, the race class narrative may be ringing some bells. You heard all about it in our Greater Than Fear episode about Minnesota. The race class narrative is the framework we developed with Ian Haney Lopez and Heather McGee, and we implemented it in 2020 across the Midwest through an organization now called We Make the Future. A Race Class narrative script follows a very particular order. It starts with a shared value that names or conveys race. It then goes to a problem statement that calls out the villains and explains how they're using deliberate division in order to further their economic agenda. And finally it gives us a closing sentence, making an affirmative case for cross racial democracy. Here's what that sounds like from our dial tested research in Wisconsin.

Dial tested research :

Wisconsin's strength comes from our ability to bring together hardworking people from different places and of different races to share our traditions and forge of better future. For this to be a place of freedom for all, we cannot let the greedy few and the politicians they pay for divide us against each other based on what someone looks like, where they come from or how much money they have. It's time to stand up for each other and come together. It is time for us to pick leaders who reflect the very best of every kind of Wisconsinite. Together we can make this a place where freedom is for everyone, no exceptions.

Anat Shenker-Osorio:

We did this new round of research at the start of 2020 across seven states, including Wisconsin, and once we figured out what would work in each state, we began implementing it. The overarching brand and organization created for this in-state is called All in Wisconsin. It's a collaboration of dozens of organization from the Dairy Farmer's Union to the African American Roundtable, from labor to grassroots to faith-based, bringing people together to understand and utilize the race class narrative approach and make it real for people on the ground in every way possible from doors when the pandemic allows it, to phones, to texting to the ads that we run, to the speeches we give. We also created and ran digital ads through our broader Midwest implementation hub using these best practices of mobilization and elements of the race class narrative approach. One of these ads was called Count On Us, created with Root Story Films.

Count On Us :

We We want our communities to be healthy and vibrant, And so we marched together To demand justice While a handful of politicians try to make us fear each other, We're onto them and we count on us, us And so we turn Up and we turn out as voters to make this a place where liberty and justice are for all, For all, for All Para Todos. Vote

Anat Shenker-Osorio:

As you can hear in that ad it's following the three part structure. But whatever it is you're saying, of course, it's not just the message, it's the messenger and the mode of delivery, how you are actually getting that word out into the world. Here again is Ben

Ben Wikler:

And my experience from a message perspective actually starts with a messenger, which is that having someone who you know gets it and who you know, you kind of trust communicate with you about why they're involved and why you should get involved, that can cut through the noise. It doesn't feel like someone's selling you a bit of a, a bill of goods. It's called relational organizing. It's people organizing through their own social networks. It is by far the most powerful form of political communication. It's not something you can buy and add on TV and get relational organizing. It has to be that people actually carry the message themselves. But here's the thing, nobody's gonna convey a message that they don't themselves believe in. You can't do relational organizing unless you find the message that people actually want to carry and repeat. And that, you know, so often when, when politicians reach for the message that everyone kind of agrees with, it's a, it's a message that nobody is inspired by and no one wants to tell their friends. And what we now know from all this research that was done, especially over the last five years, is that the messages that that actual people, actual voters tell each other are the ones that spread the most and that have the biggest impact.

Anat Shenker-Osorio:

And one powerful way folks in Wisconsin got this across was through deep canvassing. Here's Shaunu.

Shaunu:

A typical canvas. You'll go up, knock on someone's door or you know, make a phone call to them and pretty much right out of the gate you're asking them who they're supporting, do they plan to vote in the upcoming election? And there isn't much room for a real conversation about connection building with a person. And so in a deep canvas script, it's more oriented towards you sharing your personal experiences and why you support a particular thing or candidate and then asking them to share their own experiences. And so there's more opportunity to build real connection. I remember when I was first trained to go out door knocking, it was actually like you wanted to only be there for five minutes. If you were trained to get in, get out, get in, get out with deep canvassing, you, it's not unusual to spend 20 to 30 minutes with someone. I think the importance of deep canvassing too, and, and the reason why it's become such a successful, I think, tool and is being lifted up more and more is that you have the opportunity to really like try to build relationship with folks and move them along a path of understanding where they at the door might not fully agree with you, but then it's been shown in data and research that then, you know, a week later they might have actually moved their, their thinking.

Anat Shenker-Osorio:

And so it's through this exposure to what we would call cognitive dissonance that we can help people come to their own conclusion rather than just force our conclusion upon them. What this does is not just make the mind change more likely, it makes it more profound and more durable. Interestingly, this approach of intentionally creating cognitive dissonance is part and parcel of the race class narrative script itself. It's why we begin with a shared value that holds up what our listeners want to believe about themselves, the way they want the world to work. And then we introduce the problem second, as something that gets in the way of the way you wanna be living your life of the world. You wanna think that you live in. Often this open-ended story sharing proved enough to move people. And then as the very last step, the only tightly scripted portion of this conversation, the canvasser would seal the deal with a race class narrative in order to either cement the mind change they'd achieved or for those last holdouts, try one last time to change their minds by making it clear that the true source of their discontent, the true blockage to us having nice things is not the immigrant that they're taught to blame is not quote unquote Milwaukee, but rather politicians who are using this racially coded speech to obfuscate their true aims and impacts.

The national organizing group People's Action did this deep canvas across the United States and their affiliate that led this work in Wisconsin is called Citizen Action. They dialed over 330,000 people and contacted 33,000 and were able to recruit over 450 volunteers to do over a thousand shifts of this deep canvassing. And this was only one element of what citizen action and All In Wisconsin and the Democratic Party pulled off in this election.

Ben Wikler:

Trump got more votes in 2020 in every single county in Wisconsin than he did in 2016. But there was also tremendous energy among Democrats among a, a diverse coalition of Democrats. And we wound up getting more votes in every rural county in Wisconsin in 2020 than than Secretary Clinton had in 2016. If you take the 22 most red counties in the state, the added democratic voters in those counties added up to more than Biden's margin of victory. You can say the same

thing about, you know, increased turnout by voters of color in our state by, by the kind of supposed swing vote in suburbs, which actually were a lot of folks who'd been on the sidelines before. And, and Trump turnout was up, but democratic turnout was way up. I mean, people got engaged and they made this fight their own. Everyone across the state who was working to help elect Biden and Harris felt like they were part of something much bigger than themselves.

And that means that they were rejecting this narrative that, that we're all just out for ourselves, that that we're all alone here and that only people who look like you are are part of the circle of us. Um, we all knew we were part of something much bigger and that that carried us through to a victory that was so close. We won by 0.6 percentage points in Wisconsin, but it was enough and that the relief that swept over people after that victory. Um, and then the joy is something that I think powers us all through the bumpy roller coaster we're on today.

Anat Shenker-Osorio:

As we turn now to consider how we hold onto the House and Senate in the upcoming election. A massive challenge when history shows the incumbent party generally gets shellacked in the midterms. We are once again getting the same cautions, the same admonitions that we need to steer clear of, quote, cultural issues. This is a perennial debate in democratic politics. Are we doing turnout or are we doing persuasion? Ironically, this itself is racially coded speech to more politely inquire if we're going to pay attention and drive turnout among our reliably democratic, but more reluctant voters who are overwhelmingly black, indigenous young and new Americans. Or are we gonna censor ourselves in a purported bid to woo back the white working class? The question itself betrays a lack of understanding of politics and messaging. Turn out is persuasion. If no one hears your message, it cannot persuade them. And with today's absolute cacophony of political noise, we need our base to be singing our tune. If the congregation is gonna hear the joyful sound.

The lessons from Wisconsin show us that once again, not talking about race and racism is not an option because if we remain silent on these topics, they don't simply go away. Our opposition is still going to be trafficking in the language of racial resentment whenever and however they can. We need to find ways to tell our truths, both because this is what gives us a chance of persuading folks on the fence. And because this is what drives out our base. Let us not forget that we had unprecedented turnout across the country in both 2018 and 2020. Biden won by 1.5% with 2016 voters, but he had a 12 point margin with folks who newly turned out in 2020. We have to understand harness and recreate the turnout. We achieved the last two times to have any hope at winning in 2022.

Ben Wikler:

We felt the experience of winning because of our values instead of in spite of them. And that's the thing I'm most proud of.

Anat Shenker-Osorio:

Words to Win by is a Wonder Media Network production. The show is produced by Grace Lynch, Britany Martinez and Sundus Hassan Nooli with editorial support from Ale Tejada,

Carmen Borca-Carrillo, Liz Brown, Anthony Torres, and Jillian Marcells. Our executive producers are Jenny Kaplan and me, Anat Shenker-Osorio. Our theme music is written by T.R. Richie, produced and arranged by Dan Leon. To find out more about the race, class, narrative and implementation of it, check out [We make the future.us](http://www.wemakefuture.us). If your words don't spread, they don't work, so please let others know and rate and review the show. Wherever you listen to your podcasts.

Theme Song:

A song is somewhere to begin to search for something worth believing in. If changes are to come, there are things that must be done and a song is somewhere to.