



THE  
“INDEPENDENT”  
WOMEN’S  
VOICE  
& FORUM

A PIVOTAL  
ROLE in 2016 in  
WISCONSIN?  
WHAT ROLE  
THERE in 2020?

**A Report** by Lisa Graves and Evan Vorpahl

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

**The Independent Women’s Forum (IWF)**, a 501(c)(3), and the Independent Women’s Voice (I WV), its (c)(4), claim to have played a pivotal role in the 2016 election of Donald Trump by targeting independent women in Wisconsin. IWF/V is positioned to play a significant role there, and elsewhere, in 2020.

IWF and IWV have jointly spent millions in recent years to influence the outcome of federal and state elections. Wisconsin is a key state where they have focused their resources.

Due to gaps in reporting requirements and changes in the law, the activities of IWF/V are not well known to outsiders. What Heather Higgins—IWF/V’s strategic leader and lead fundraiser—tells potential donors and allies, however, is that IWF/V’s activities have often been decisive in elections, including in Wisconsin in 2016 specifically.

IWF/V’s specialty is using its “independent” brand name to target people who register as “independent” voters, particularly women. Its primary tactic is to use its (c)(3) to reach out to targets in a state with relatively detailed messaging about a particular issue, repeatedly and in multiple formats, and then layer in its (c)(4) activity to connect electoral candidates to that issue right before the election.

IWF/V has devised a process of using quizzes shortly before an election to convey distorted information to voters, without tying it to a political party or a candidate (or a request for money), until the election is imminent.

The quizzes it produces to influence elections have focused on IWF/V’s claims and disinformation about the Affordable Care Act, the U.S. Supreme Court, paid leave, climate policy, and immigration.

It is difficult to assess independently the actual effectiveness of IWF/V’s efforts to influence the outcome of the presidential and U.S. Senate races in Wisconsin in 2016, but a “confidential” document obtained by True North Research provides one professor’s assessment of IWF/V’s success.

That evaluation, procured by IWF/V, takes the position that IWF/V was exceptionally successful in Wisconsin in moving independent voters to support Donald Trump and Ron Johnson, in 2016, by double-digit percentages.

This special report from the new Wisconsin-based national watchdog True North Research examines IWF/V’s astounding claims of success in Wisconsin in 2016 and in other elections, as IWF/V plots its strategy to influence election outcomes in the upcoming 2020 races.

Lisa Graves

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### Background for Assessing IWF/V's Claims It Played a Pivotal Role for Donald Trump and Ron Johnson in Wisconsin in 2016

The popular vote in Wisconsin in 2016 was more than 1.4M for Donald Trump and 1.38M for Hillary Clinton, a difference of 22,748 votes—and a margin of less than 1% of the total votes cast. (Third party candidates received more than 188K votes cast, or 6.3%, including the 31K cast for the Green Party.)

Voting rights expert Ari Berman [credited](#) Priorities USA's assessment that the 2016 turnout in the state was [suppressed](#) by approximately 200K votes. A narrower analysis [concluded](#) that the votes of at least 16K Americans in two of the most populous Wisconsin counties were

***IWV's Claim: Without its "educational messaging, both Trump and Johnson would otherwise have lost WI by over 100,000 votes each."***

suppressed by Voter ID restrictions the GOP adopted after Obama's win in 2008.

The turnout in Wisconsin in 2016 was the lowest it has been since 2000.

Further complicating the assessment of who to credit with aiding Trump's victory in the state is the documented [targeting](#) of Wisconsin and Michigan by Russian troll farms working to help Trump.

Additionally, late in the campaign Brad Parscale, who was then Trump's digital political guru, [re-allocated](#) key resources for his planned ad buys on social media away from targeting Virginia and Ohio to targeting Wisconsin and Michigan.

Also, there's the Charles Koch factor, as investigative reporter Lee Fang recently

[noted](#): "In Wisconsin alone, Americans for Prosperity staff, equipped with state-of-the-art voter contact technology, made 1.5 million phone calls and knocked on nearly 30,000 doors.... Koch groups spent \$4.3 million in Wisconsin, eclipsing the \$3 million spent by the Clinton campaign, with television ads that sought to simultaneously tear down Democrat Russ Feingold and Clinton, a pattern repeated in other crucial swing states."

That's all part of the publicly known story about the 2016 election in Wisconsin. Here's the part that is less well known: IWF/V, whose electoral influence operations are helmed by GOP strategist and donor Heather Higgins, claims to have played a pivotal role in Wisconsin

through how she targeted independent women here. Although IWF/V is known in some DC circles as the group that got its start defending Clarence Thomas against evidence of sexual harassment and as opponents of equal pay, it has stealthily been playing a below-the-radar role in elections, with an impact it claims has been decisive.

### Who Did IWF/V Target in Wisconsin in 2016 and What Was Its Claimed Effect?

Here is a snapshot of IWV's ["success story"](#) about the role it says it played in delivering Wisconsin for Trump in 2016:

*"Had IWV's educational messaging not occurred, Trump would have received an estimated 215,840 fewer votes in Wisconsin, the state completely written off by all the political professionals."  
— Heather R. Higgins*



IWV added: “In Wisconsin, all registered independents and Republican-leaning women—save a randomly selected 40,000 from this population, which served as a control group— received multiple choice and ‘true or false’ quizzes, consisting of questions on the Affordable Care Act and the Supreme Court. These were delivered via postcards, phone calls, or digital outreach during the final weeks of the 2016 election.

“There were 3,619,996 registered voters in Wisconsin. IWV had a target universe of 880,980 households, or approximately 1.54 million registered voters.

“Calculations indicate that Trump received 1.28 million votes from this target population. If the quiz messaging had not occurred, Prof. Daron Shaw of U.T. Austin calculates Trump would have

received an estimated 215,840 fewer votes in Wisconsin and similar numbers apply to Sen. Ron Johnson. Without IWV's educational messaging, both Trump and Johnson would otherwise have lost WI by over 100,000 votes each.”

If IWV's boast were accurate, that is an enormous effect. Even if it were overstated tenfold, it is still a substantial enough effect that its absence could have changed the results in a presidential race that was split by only about 22K votes.

IWF has also claimed: “In a world where a +2pt move is considered a big deal, IWV ideas and tactics regularly get moves of +6 points to +14 points and more. Indeed in WI in '16, we moved Trump +28pts, and Sen. Johnson +31 pts. Those exposed to quiz information preferred Ron Johnson over Russ Feingold by 52 points compared to a 21-point margin within the control group. IWV looks for high ROI opportunities where we can have a decisive impact on policy and political outcomes.”

### **What Did IWF/V Actually Do During the Election in Wisconsin in 2016?**

A memo obtained by True North Research about IWF/V's activities in Wisconsin in the last presidential election, reveals [details](#) about its activities in the state.<sup>1</sup>

According to that material, eleven days before the election, IWF began its program of “quiz calls” and other outreach targeting almost all of the state's independent and GOP-leaning women, without mentioning electoral

sometimes issues press releases about its polling results.

<sup>1</sup> Other polling data is also publicly findable, in addition to a [partial archive](#) of polling from 2010-2014. IWV

candidates or political parties.

Starting on October 29 and then every two days for a week, IWF targeted Wisconsin voters with quizzes about the effect of the Affordable Care Act (ACA) on their lives and other Americans.

Halfway through that week, IWF layered in two mailings about the ACA to these 880K households in Wisconsin.

On the seventh day, IWF hit those households with a postcard tying the fight over the U.S. Supreme Court to the election. Two days later—which was then three days before the election—IWF layered in another set of quiz calls about the ACA. Then two days later—on election eve—IWF hit Wisconsin voters with a quiz about the ACA, tying it to the election the next day.

IWF/V also describes these efforts as including digital outreach, but no trace of digital ads purchased in this timeframe on these issues can be found in Facebook’s ad transparency database or other common databases for digital ads.

### **How Effective Was the IWF/V Campaign Targeting Independent Women in Wisconsin?**

According to the assessment commissioned by IWF/V—prepared by University of Texas professor Daron Shaw who operates Shaw & Company Research—IWF/V’s quizzes and outreach were pivotal. He found:

“[E]ven relatively modest quiz messaging can have an impact on people, especially with respect to their knowledge of issue and policy arguments. However, to persuade people about the salience of

the issue, or to move broader attitudes on the issue, it seems that multiple ‘touches’ and different modes of outreach are necessary, as we saw in the Wisconsin test.”

He drew two other conclusions of note about how the IWF/V quizzes and issue education created double-digit moves in voting preference or the favorability of a candidate, in his view.

First, he found that the Wisconsin quizzes on the ACA and the Supreme Court had a greater effect in motivating women to vote for Trump: “In Wisconsin, our models tell us that exposure to the [quiz call + mailing] treatment made men 11 points more likely to support Trump over Clinton; the same exposure made women 17 points more likely to support Trump.”

Second, he found that the quizzes made independents almost 16% more likely to vote for Trump (and almost 18% more likely to vote for his ticket’s down-ballot candidate, U.S. Senator Ron Johnson).

Shaw’s assessment also benefited from being able to compare the results of the quizzes in Wisconsin to two other states that had larger media markets or more intensive campaigning, New York and Pennsylvania, respectively. Shaw’s opinion was that IWF/V was less successful in those markets because they had more “noise” and so it was harder to breakthrough with voters using the quiz method in the last few weeks before the election. He recommended that in noisier markets IWF/V’s tactic could be more effective earlier in the cycle, such as in August, for example.

### **What Was the Content of the IWF/V**

## Campaign to Independent Women?

Although the quizzes and mailers were not attached to the Shaw report, IWF/V does have a series of quizzes available on its websites and these are likely similar to the [quizzes](#) that were used, perhaps in shorter form, for its outreach in Wisconsin in 2016 on repealing the ACA.

Here are additional links to a more detailed [guide](#) and [video primers](#) IWF/V created. IWF/V also created a Tumblr site called “[a bridge to better](#)” before the 2016 election attacking the ACA. That site continues to add new content designed to advance Trump’s claims about the ACA.

IWF/V had previously created related sites in its multi-year attack on the ACA, such as: [brokenACApromises.org](#) to gather stories on rate hikes, [mycancellation.com](#) for people to take a photo to share of any insurance cancellations, and [savingourhealth.org](#), which featured people dressed in hospital scrubs making prepared statements against the ACA.

In 2016, IWV also launched a campaign with the group “American Majority” called the “[repeal pledge](#).” It was [touted](#) by the *Wall Street Journal* as modeled on the Grover Norquist/Koch tax pledge. After the election, IWV [congratulated](#) 68 legislative candidates who had signed the pledge and won their races in the 2016 election, including Senator [Ron Johnson](#). In 2015, IWF/V’s Higgins also told CPAC’s audience that women were more affected by the ACA because they see their doctors more often, and so if a woman’s employer or a state exchange limited the physicians available in its

network under the ACA then that harmed women more. Elsewhere, Higgins was described as leading the national “Repeal and Reform Coalition” on the ACA.

IWV’s Wisconsin outreach also included contact with voters about the U.S. Supreme Court. Here are the [quizzes](#) IWF/V created to defend Senator Mitch McConnell’s blocking of the confirmation of President Obama’s nominee, Judge Merrick Garland, to the U.S. Supreme Court and to oppose Democratic claims about the importance of balance on the Court. IWV also includes a [module on the ACA in its court quizzes](#).

In Wisconsin and elsewhere, a (c)(4) group called Majority Forward, which was tied to a Super PAC called Senate Majority PAC, spent substantial sums on digital and TV ads calling on Ron Johnson and other senators to “[do your job](#)” and to stop obstructing a vote on Judge Garland’s nomination to replace Justice Antonin Scalia. Unlike the IWF/V outreach, that Democratically-aligned ad blitz did not tie the Court to any public policy issues for voters. The Majority Forward TV ads did not discuss the way people’s rights were at stake in the vote, but information since then helps underscore [what was at stake](#).

IWF/V has also developed [quizzes on paid leave and family leave](#) under its so-called “workplace reform” project, which also includes material attacking equal pay, opposing raising the minimum wage, and more. It also has a quiz in its energy policy materials critical of the [Clean Power Plan](#), which tried to mitigate climate change.

Notably, IWV’s [most recent quiz focuses on immigration](#). That content has been amplified in IWF/V outreach in recent

months that pushes scare-tactic messages equating immigrants with the spread of infectious disease, as an indirect way to help urge women to support Trump's controversial immigration policies.

### How Much Did IWF/V's Wisconsin Election Program in 2016 Cost?

IWF/V has provided no public figures for how much it spent on its program in Wisconsin in 2016, and a review of potential sources for that information has not gleaned any new data. However, tax filings from IWF/V show that the groups combined to spend more than \$3.7M on "active engagement" of citizens across the states—including nearly half a million IWFV spent on polling.

IWF's 2016 tax filings show it spent \$4.3M in 2016 on what it described a single program objective: "Engage more individuals in the civic process." It reported spending \$2.5M on what it called "Active engagement/market evaluation." IWF also told the IRS it spent only \$34K on what it listed as "direct mail" separate from that engagement, although that may be referring to fundraising mailings. It also claimed it spent nothing on grassroots lobbying to influence public opinion and reported no direct lobbying either. It also indicated it had no contractors paid \$100K or more.

For IWFV, Higgins raised \$5.1M that year, which was five times more than in 2015. She told the IRS that IWFV spent only \$2.7M in 2016, leaving it a substantial reserve to help in the 2017 fights that were to come. IWFV also reported it had a single program: "Engage more individuals in legislative advocacy." However, IWFV told the IRS it spent no money on

grassroots lobbying or direct lobbying. It did disclose spending \$698K on "[a]ctive engagement" and \$478K on polling. It also noted spending more than \$12K on 527-type expenditures, but that there are no responsive records detailing that in the IRS database.

IWFV was also required to disclose three contractors it paid more than \$100K in 2016. The largest recipient was New Troy Strategies in Alexandria, VA, which received more than \$561K for "mailing and communications services." It was created by [Mary Cheney](#), a daughter of Dick and Lynne Cheney.

IWFV paid another group called the Victory Media Group (VMG) \$155K for communications. There is no disclosure of which states VMG worked on with IWFV during the 2016 election.

IWFV's third contractor in the 2016 race was a family-owned firm called Ashdown Forest, the firm Higgins pays herself through, which received her compensation of \$308,500, which included a bonus of \$165K.

### Other Ways to Gauge How Much IWF/V Spent on Its 2016 Wisconsin Program

There are three other significant data sources that may shed some light on how much IWF/V may have spent on its two-week program in Wisconsin in 2016, though they were in different markets and of different durations. First, there's the total amount IWF/V announced it spent on the 2018 mid-terms. Second, there is a more detailed case study from its spending in South Carolina. And, third, there are other spending disclosures it made that may also provide some

illumination. Also, IWV spending on “independent expenditures” has been disclosed in some races.

### IWV Spending on the 2018 Mid-Term Elections

IWV’s role, if any, in Wisconsin in 2018 is unknown, but it did issue this [release](#) on November 7 of that year:

“With a combined \$1.8M in spending, IWF focused on policy education and IWV focused on persuasion in 21 states where there were deeply contested midterm races. Using mailers, phone calls, and text messages, IWF educated misinformed constituents about the real healthcare positions advanced by the GOP, and not those propagated by the left. IWV in turn linked candidates with those healthcare positions, ultimately leaving the choice of who to support up to voters.

“Our message testing materials, which countered the left’s claims and addressed misperceptions about healthcare, pre-existing conditions, and ‘Medicare-for-All,’ significantly improved policy understanding and, without any mention of any candidate or party, as a corollary, moved non-conservative GOP females +9 points in tests on the ballot test.”

IWV did not reveal the list of those 21 target states, and it only issued solo releases involving the races where its efforts prevailed. That is, if IWF/V played any role in trying to aid state Sen. Leah Vukmir in her unsuccessful challenge against U.S. Senator Tammy Baldwin, there is no evidence of that. Perhaps IWF/V excluded it because polling did not show it to be “deeply contested,” *i.e.* winnable. In other cycles, IWV has touted

its role in snatching victory from the jaws of defeat, as with the next example.

### IWV Spending in the 2014 Special Election in South Carolina

After the 2014 mid-terms, VMG won three [political consulting awards](#), called “Pollies,” for its work for IWV under the category called “automatic push-button interactive,” which is part of the annual awards the political consulting industry reserves for voter outreach that is described as about “candidates by phone.” IWV crowed about its activities as [sweeping](#) that category with wins for three interactive campaigns, called “Taxpayer Funding and Obamacare,” “Spending and Debt,” and “Labor Love.”

Those awards to VMC and another firm IWV hired called “Antietam Communications” were in support of [Mark Sanford’s win](#) in 2014 over Elizabeth Colbert Busch in the South Carolina special election. Higgins described IWV’s role in Sanford’s win as decisive, [asserting](#):

“IWV takes pride in working to create factual messages, using non-traditional delivery methods, and winning races that others believe are hopeless. Through innovative, non-advocacy interactive calls, we made voters aware of relevant facts on issues they care about, like ObamaCare repeal, and why turning out to vote is so important.”

Higgins told the *National Review* she was especially concerned that if Busch had won in 2014 it would have been a moral victory for “liberals” like Stephen Colbert. In spite of Sanford’s controversial history, such as his notorious extramarital affair



while he was Governor, IWV threw-in to help him win over a well-regarded woman running for Congress. Here's how IWV described its tactics and its impact:

"Before going on air, IWV spent four days communicating ... with 10,000 likely voters in Republican and independent households. IWV's subsequent survey showed that, among IWV's targets, [Colbert Busch's](#) favorable/unfavorable rating slid to 40 percent favorable, 39 unfavorable, versus 44/36 among a control group...

"Among IWV's control group, Sanford lagged Colbert Busch 45 percent to her 48. But voters who learned that Sanford signed IWV's Obamacare-repeal pledge—and that Colbert-Busch refused to do so—preferred Sanford 63 percent to 30. This 36-point pro-Sanford swing gave IWV its chief issue....

"Obamacare's dangers and the joys of its repeal then appeared in both TV commercials that IWV aired as well as one of two newspaper ads, a live phone call, and one of three non-advocacy 'quiz calls' in which voters tested their knowledge about facts relevant to the candidates' positions."

For this 2014 campaign, "IWV [spent about \\$250,000](#) in the last week of the campaign. Of that, \$160,000 went to broadcast and cable television and print advertising, and live GOTV calls. Additionally—taking special care with South Carolina's rather restrictive laws on auto-dialed phone calls—we supplemented that with innovative, non-advocacy, factual, interactive quiz calls...."

It is difficult to compare apples to apples

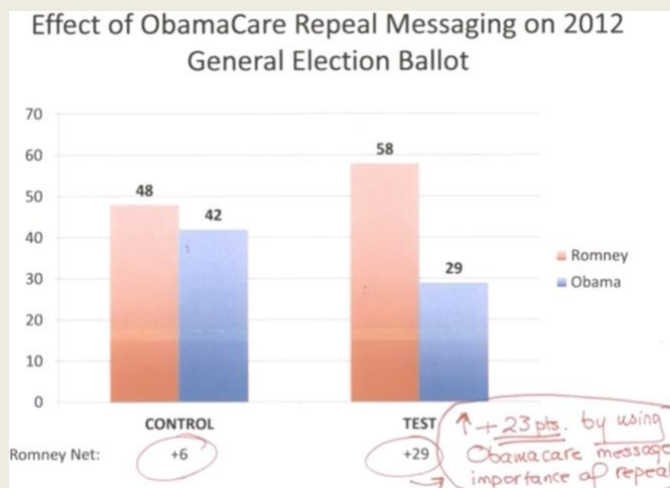
in IWV's engagement in a South Carolina special election versus IWF/V's role in the general election in Wisconsin in 2016, but that example provides some useful data.

### Other Disclosed IWV Independent Expenditures, including in 2012

In 2011-2012, IWV [reported](#) spending more than \$989K on independent expenditures (IE) federally.

This includes more than \$150K it reported to the FEC that it spent against the re-election of President Barack Obama.

Those expenditures were for ads targeting women in key states, calling on them to break-up with their "[boyfriend](#)," Obama, for supposedly [letting them down](#). IWV also created ads called [guilty](#), [spending](#), [talk America](#), [stolen dreams](#), [gas prices](#), [gas](#), and [American Dream](#). (It has made no such attack ads on Trump.)



IWV [boasted](#) that its boyfriend series of videos were part of a \$7.1M ad buy it touted as "the largest single all-digital advocacy online video buy in history," which was coordinated by a group calling itself "Let Freedom Ring."

IWV also spent a substantial amount of its efforts on messaging calling for the repeal

of the ACA, which included but was not limited to numerous videos on [health care](#) issues. It also includes some of the ACA repeal material noted in the earlier discussion above, which was modified for the 2016 election. IWV also ran a [political ad contest](#) to attack the ACA and call for the repeal of “[ObamaCare](#).” In addition, IWF spent substantial efforts on its site, in its publications, and in its outreach to the media and on social media about its criticisms of the ACA and the need to repeal that signature program of President Obama, though those expenditures were not “independent expenditures.”

In 2015, IWF/V’s Heather Higgins also [extolled](#) the effect of IWV’s efforts in 2012—even though Obama won—showing the chart above at CPAC. That chart includes IWF/V’s annotation of a 23-point gain based on its messaging.

In 2012, IWV also spent more than \$250K using its “independent” brand to aid GOP Senate candidates who were called out as being part of the “war on women,” even while IWF spokespeople were on TV shows claiming there was no war on women. Here are [three examples](#):

- It spent \$67,242 to aid Missouri U.S. Senate candidate Todd Akin with calls and independent voter outreach in November 2012, *after* Akin claimed on August 19, 2012, that rape victims couldn’t get pregnant because “if it’s legitimate rape, the female body has ways to try to shut that whole thing down.”
- It spent \$176,991 on a “Romney wants Mourdock” ad *after* Indiana

U.S. Senate candidate Richard Mourdock asserted that when a woman is raped, she carries a “gift from God” and that such a pregnancy ‘is something that God intended to happen.’”

- Joe Walsh, a GOP Rep. from Illinois, claimed in the 2012 race against Tammy Duckworth that abortions to save a mother’s life are never medically necessary. Two weeks later, [IWV] spent more than \$5,000 on calls and outreach to independent voters in his district.

It is also worth noting that [most of the publicly disclosed major donors of IWV’s independent expenditure efforts are men](#). However, IWV has not made public disclosures of any independent expenditure spending or donors in recent years. The known disclosures come from early races, such as when IWV backed Scott Brown over Elizabeth Warren.

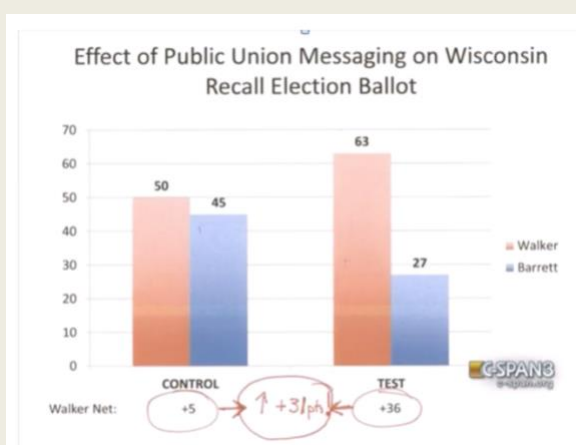
### **[IWV’s Other Election-Focused Activities in Wisconsin: the 2012 Recall Vote on Scott Walker](#)**

Unlike for the federal races discussed above, the amount IWV spent in Wisconsin to aid Governor Scott Walker during the efforts to recall him is not known and has not been disclosed. However, IWV has publicly [boasted](#) about playing a crucial role in that recall vote. Here’s how IWV described its activities:

“IWV’s research showed that the core belief among Independents who opposed Gov. Walker’s reforms was that public employees are underpaid and are making a sacrifice to hold those jobs.

“Through our educational program, we changed this foundational belief into an understanding that unionized public employees are overcompensated relative to the private sector.

“Changing this belief changed behavior: support for Scott Walker increased by +31 points among 10,000 likely voters who received our message over a comparable control group, even though we made no reference to Walker, his reforms, or the recall.”



Higgins used the chart above in her speech at CPAC in 2015 where she [boasted](#) of IWV’s role in the recall.

Elsewhere, IWV [described](#) how it helped thwart efforts to recall Governor Walker this way:

“[W]hile Walker’s campaign and outside groups focused on the money that he was saving the state, yielding a five-point spread over his opponent, independents to whom IWV did an education campaign about the unfairness of public sector compensation, which never mentioned Walker, his reforms, or the recall, then favored Walker by 36 points.

“IWV targeted voters in three ways: it

utilized interactive phone calls, postcards with questionnaires, and targeted online advertising. Walker won the recall election, though his Democrat opponent, Tom Barrett, secured the women’s vote.”

Months before IWV launched this campaign, Higgins [wrote](#) a piece for Tucker Carlson’s [Daily Caller](#) outlet about the need to aid Walker to prevent a recall election of the governor and to pivot in the rhetoric being used about his controversial effort to undermine public employee unions in the state. She said IWV had retained Kellyanne Conway’s firm, the Polling Company, to conduct a survey of 400 frequent voters “to assess if the traditional red-state messaging being used was backfiring with critical independents in traditionally blue-state Wisconsin” and test other messages.

Here is an excerpt from Higgins analysis of Conway’s survey:

“An astonishing 95% of the survey respondents described themselves as paying close attention to the issue, 71% saying “very” closely. Respondents strongly identified with one or the other side of the budget conflict, and this identification fell along ideological lines. Independents now largely lock arms with the union members and protestors...

“Gov. Walker is now viewed unfavorably by a 53% majority, and with vehemence... The real winner? Government employee unions in Wisconsin, scoring 55% favorable and only 40% unfavorable. The numbers about recalling legislators should also worry Republicans...

“We tested whether three pro-Walker/anti-union ads that ran in

Wisconsin reinforced this polarization. These ads focused more on personalities and political sides than on facts and issues...

“Our research revealed that Wisconsin voters lacked important, basic facts about the current situation, such as the five-fold disparity in health care contributions between Wisconsin state employees and the national average...

“Wisconsin voters revealed basic misunderstandings on numerous issues, including how much government union members and taxpayers have been contributing to union pensions, what the fiscal situation in Wisconsin is... Building an understanding of these fundamental policy issues is key to building support for reform...

“The current instinct in Republican and conservative circles is to use partisan, sledgehammer ads and talk to the converted. This is a limited strategy overall, but in an until-recently blue state like Wisconsin, it’s no way to win. There is still a chance to turn this debate around — the question is: Will Republican supporters be willing to use a new playbook?”

Based on that research, IWV then created a website called “[isthatreallyfair.org](http://isthatreallyfair.org).” It also created [a quiz](#) that it deployed as part of its efforts to prevent Walker from being successfully recalled.

As noted above, the amount IWV spent in Wisconsin around the recall is not

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<sup>2</sup> IWV was previously [registered](#) in Wisconsin as an “independent expenditure committee” but reported no income and no expenditures for the five years it was registered (2011-2016). The Federal Election Commission also has no data on independent

known.<sup>2</sup>

It’s also notable that Higgins, herself an heir to the Richardson pharmaceutical empire (which is famous for Vicks VapoRub and infamous for distributing thalidomide), has deep ties to billionaire funders, like Charles Koch and Wisconsin’s Diane Hendricks, a major donor to IWF and Republican candidates.

IWV and IWF [lauded](#) Hendricks, the owner of the Hendricks Holding Company (HHC), as its 2017 “Outstanding Woman in Business.” Then-outgoing Speaker of the House Paul Ryan (R-Janesville) introduced [Hendricks](#), whom Ryan credited with launching his political career to go to Congress back in 1997. HHC, which owns the billion-dollar roofing firm ABC Supply and more than a dozen other companies, was listed as one of the top three donors of that gala and 2018’s gala, according to materials obtained by True North Research.

At the 2017 gala, which was also funded by the Kochs’ Americans for Prosperity Foundation, IWV/F also honored Conway, as its “Woman of Valor.”

Conway, the first woman to run a successful presidential campaign—who has been widely criticized for her shocking assertions and for the Trumpian neologism “alternative facts”—is IWV’s former pollster and a long-time IWF board member. She is on leave from the groups while she is at the White House.

### Another Consideration regarding

expenditures in federal races by IWV in the [2015-2016](#), [2017-2018](#), or [2019-2020](#) cycles, so far.

## IWF/V's "Independent Branding"

IWF/V specifically targets potential voters who are women who identify as independent. It then uses its branding with the word "independent" to push polls in the form of quizzes and more.

The "independent" brand name of IWF/V likely confuses many women who receive their communications and outreach into believing the groups are actually independent, although they are not.

Just last year, IWF/V advertised for a Director of Engagement, with [this pitch](#): "Do you identify yourself as a conservative but hate the way conservatives message? We have the job for you."

IWF's marketing also deemphasizes its right-wing bent, as with its recent tagline is "all issues are women's issues."

The President of IWF's board and IWF/V's CEO, Heather Higgins, has told major donors that "[b]eing branded as neutral, but actually having people who know *know* that you're actually conservative puts us in a unique position." Higgins also [told](#) CPAC's audience "IWF's mission is to expand our base."

Much of IWF/V's recent ad content features stock images of racially diverse younger women and mothers looking strong, happy, and independent.

IWF/V has also recently unveiled an expansive social media campaign touting its efforts to "champion" women, by highlighting women it argues "champion women" too.

IWF also been working to [lift up former](#)

[Governor Nikki Haley](#) to become the first woman president of the U.S. With the recent rumors of Vice President Pence being on the outs with the White House, it is not outside the realm of possibility that Trump could swap in Haley, his former UN Ambassador, at or before the 2020 RNC convention in North Carolina—as showmanship and to shore up his standing with women voters. This potential may increase if his chances of re-election weaken or if Democrats nominate a woman for president.

## Conclusion

Whether IWF/V's boasts about its pivotal role in Wisconsin in 2016 and other elections are fully accurate, it is clear that IWF/V is investing substantial sums in voter outreach in Wisconsin and other states. In 2020, it will likely continue if not expand its focus on moving women who identify as "independent" toward GOP candidates, no matter how extreme or unfit those candidates may actually.

That is part of IWF/V's role in the right-wing infrastructure, to be a distaff and provide a woman's face to give cover to policies and politicians that in reality undermine women's opportunities and future.

Its role in federal and state elections has largely escaped scrutiny, despite its claims to have played a decisive role in Wisconsin since 2012 and more. This special report is designed to shed light on its claims and its tactics so that genuinely independent women and men can be more informed about this stealth group.

Learn more at [independentwomensforum.org](https://independentwomensforum.org).