



Wisconsin's Walker

An Interview with
The Honorable Scott Walker, Governor of Wisconsin

EDITORS' NOTE Scott Walker was elected to the Wisconsin State Assembly in 1993. In 2002, he became the first Republican ever elected Milwaukee County Executive. On January 3, 2011, Walker was inaugurated as the 45th Governor of Wisconsin. One of his first reforms, Act 10, helped eliminate the state's \$3.6 billion budget deficit without raising taxes or cutting health-care for the needy. It gave schools and local governments the tools to balance budgets without the massive layoffs seen in other states. So far, the reforms



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have saved some \$5 billion. Property taxes on a median-value home are lower now than they were in December 2010. Income taxes are lower than in 2010. Tuition on all University of Wisconsin campuses has been frozen for four years in a row. Total employment in Wisconsin is higher than it has ever been. Wisconsin's labor force participation rate is one of the best in the country. On June 5, 2012, Walker became the first Governor in American history to survive a recall election. He received more votes and a higher percentage of the vote than in his 2010 election. On November 4, 2014, Walker was re-elected to a second term. Working together with a reform-minded Legislature, he signed into law budget reform, \$4.7 billion worth of tax cuts, tuition freezes, university tenure and seniority reform, statewide school choice, defunding Planned Parenthood, photo ID to vote, Right to Work, concealed carry, Prevailing Wage reform, charter school expansion, Castle Doctrine, spending transparency, and welfare reform. Walker attended Marquette University in Milwaukee. While still in school, he worked for IBM before leaving in his senior year to work full-time in finance and development for the American Red Cross.

A key priority for your administration has been job creation and developing the workforce for the future. Will you discuss your efforts in this regard?

In 2010, when I was running, it was all about jobs. Now it's all about workforce. We went from 9.2 percent unemployment in 2010 to 3.2 percent unemployment in our state and that is one of the highest percentage changes in our history.

Chief Executive magazine ranks the best states every year, and we went from the bottom of the list to being in the top 10 for the first time ever. This is a result of a combination of lowering the cost of doing business through a lower tax burden, fewer

regulations, and fewer frivolous lawsuits but, in particular, our efforts to drive up the strength of our workforce. This was important not only to get people working but also because that's an increasingly important issue for employers that are here and those that wish to come here.

How challenging is it to make these necessary changes when new skills are needed for the workforce?

It's a combination of things. In addition to the lowest level of unemployment in 17 years, there were recently more than 102,000 job openings listed on our state website where employers can voluntarily list job openings.

There are jobs available but it's a matter of finding people with the skills to fill those jobs. We're putting more money into this than ever before. In our new budget that starts on July 1, I proposed that we focus on allowing students to earn early college credits. We have already funded academic and career plans to get students thinking about what they would be interested in as early as sixth grade. It gets more funding into classrooms to foster student success, but also supports early college credit programs and technical college university systems, which give students a career head start while they're still in high school.

In addition, we're putting more into customized worker training programs in fields from manufacturing to healthcare to IT and many other areas where there is high demand.

Why hasn't there been more success in reforming K-12 in the U.S.?

The reason we can put historic levels of effort into K-12 in Wisconsin right now is because of the reforms we enacted years ago that ensure those dollars are going directly into the classroom. Before those reforms, contracts were part of the process and funds often went to things other than primary classroom education. Because of the changes we made to Act 10, we can now hire and fire based on merit and utilize performance-based pay. This means we can put the best and brightest instructors in the classrooms.

That has empowered our schools and school boards and allowed the people they elect to run the schools to be much more engaged. We continue to be one of the top 10 states when it comes to ACT scores. We are transitioning to having all of our students take the ACT test. We have

one of the highest state graduation rates. Our schools are some of the best in the nation, but there is still more work to be done. Wisconsin is one of the states putting the most money into it, but this often didn't get results in the past because the bargaining process used a lot of those resources on educational bureaucracy. There is more work to be done, particularly in areas like the city of Milwaukee, but we have made tremendous strides over the past three years.

Looking towards the budget for the coming year, how important is infrastructure investment?

That is at the top of our list for priorities along with workforce. This past year, I addressed each of our 72 counties. I had a diverse group of people at every session, many of whom addressed workforce for employers, a part of which is K-12 and higher education. In just about every part of the state, I also heard about the need for high-speed Internet connection via broadband, so we initially raised that budget from \$500,000 to \$1.5 million, and now we're up to \$52 million that we're putting into broadband access grants. The state is providing match funds so, particularly in rural parts of the state, they can have the money they need to expand the fiber network for high-speed Internet connections. Without our help, the return on investment isn't there in these sparsely populated areas.

In terms of education, particularly for business in this day and age, we know that we can't be competitive unless we have access to high-speed Internet connections. Conversely, if we do have it, we can have access to the entire world.

Millennials, in particular, don't want to have to drive hours to get on a body of water to go fishing or canoeing and might prefer to ride a bike to and from their work. Those are tremendous advantages we have, particularly in rural parts of Wisconsin. High-speed Internet is the key to making this possible.

Wisconsin is a business-friendly state with a strong public/private partnership. How critical is the public/private partnership, and what do you see as the strengths of Wisconsin from a business standpoint?

Partnerships are key. Haribo announced this year that they're making a \$242 million investment in their first North American manufacturing site in Wisconsin, because we have a good business climate, the government is stable, and we're covering liabilities. We're one of only a few states that has a fully funded system.

We've improved our tax and regulatory climate and gotten rid of frivolous and out-of-control lawsuits. We have proven the strength of our workforce and transportation. Even being located in the middle of the country has been an incredibly plausible asset for us. We're pleased about where all of this puts us, and it makes us very appealing.

Over the past three years, we have brought in 8,000 new jobs in one county alone bordering Illinois, not too far from Chicago. Since we have all these good things going for us, businesses are realizing they can be successful in this region.

It's an exciting time to be involved in Wisconsin. It's not just because of the assets I've mentioned or the state government; it's also because of the public/private partnership between businesses and the governments in the seven counties in southeastern Wisconsin.

We work hand-in-hand with groups that come to our state and to our business alliance; everyone works together. This is the same all over Wisconsin.

In all different parts of Wisconsin, this is part of the key to our success in not only attracting new employers but in helping those that are here grow. Part of our appeal is that we're not just going to entice people to come here – we want to help them grow here.

Our most important asset is clearly our great workforce. We have that Midwestern work ethic. We have people who work hard every day and take pride in their work, and that is why we continue to prosper.

Looking around the country, there is a belief that governors get things done, but there is clearly polarization and partisanship taking place in Washington. What do you tell young people about the atmosphere in Washington today?

The good news is, the states are the places to get things done. Our founders felt so strongly about this that they actually added the Bill of Rights. Rights are inherently left to the states and, more so, to the people.

In terms of where we stand with Washington today, while I would like to see them do more, it has been clear with this administration that they would like to restore the rights of the states and get



Vice President Mike Pence and Governor Scott Walker participate in a healthcare roundtable at Direct Supply in Milwaukee (above); Governor Walker visits with students at Galesville Elementary School to promote his \$649 million increase for K-12 education in the state budget (below)

the leaders more focused on the issues facing the states. That is positive because states are more effective and efficient. We've shown that time and again in Wisconsin.

I often tell foreign leaders that the good news in the United States is that, no matter what is happening in Washington, trade and commerce are overwhelmingly driven by governors and mayors, rather than the members of Congress. Congress may have some impact, but the bottom line is that the more governors take the lead, the better off our country will be.

When it comes to the higher calling of public service, with all the scrutiny today with the 24-hour media cycles, do you worry that the next generation of leaders won't be attracted to public service? How important is it that we engage people early on to make sure that future leadership is there?

It's incredibly important and part of the reason why we're learning about American history and the values on which this country was founded. It's why my eyes were opened in high school, not only in my classes, which I loved, but I had the honor of going to a program the American Legion puts on called

Boys State and Boys Nation. Every year, I would come back and speak at Boys State and Girls State, a program held during the summer of kids' senior years which gives them a chance to learn and experience leadership. They run for city, county, and state office in both of those programs. Even for those who don't go into anything related to government or politics, they learn how important our civic responsibilities are. Even if these kids don't work in the public sector, they support candidates and know who to contact. That is incredibly important.

The good thing I see in young people today, not only through Boys and Girls State but also in other programs and when I visit high schools, is that they are engaged. Regardless of all of the cynicism in the national press, many of our young people are looking beyond traditional news sources and really have a good handle on what is going on.

The challenge, not only in politics but overall, is how we're going to make sure going forward that the people we turn to are legitimate. Sometimes there are people, particularly when it comes to social sites like Facebook, who will post information, and oftentimes they post it because it fits their particular opinion. However, many times it might not be fact-checked or based on credible information to begin with.

There needs to be some common agreement on standards. The next generation is going to have to deal with this. It's not up to government to be involved in editing or censoring opinions or news. I don't feel the government is doing that, but the upcoming generation will have to figure out how to hold online media sources in particular accountable. ●

