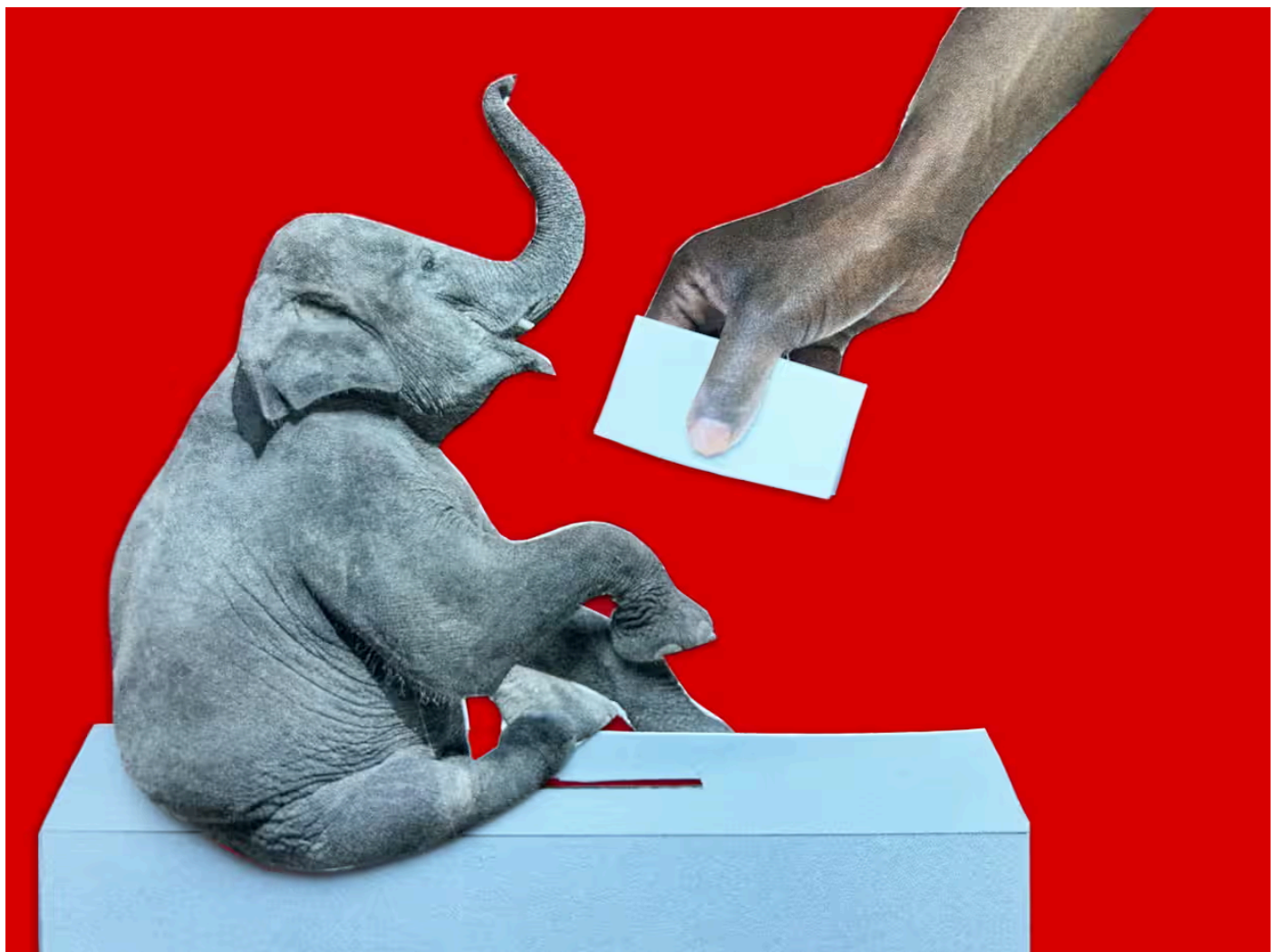


**Milwaukee**

# Republicans to descend on Milwaukee – where they've been trying to dilute Black voting power

The decision to hold the convention in the city is a 'slap in the face' for Black voters who have come under attack by the party's voter ID measure and move to limit early voting



📷 Nearly 223,000 Black people live in Milwaukee – roughly 60% of Wisconsin's entire Black population. Illustration: Guardian Design



**Sam Levine**

Thu 11 Jul 2024 09.00 EDT

Shortly after the 2022 midterm elections, Robert Spindell [sent out an email](#) to his fellow Republicans explaining why he was pleased with the results even though Tony Evers, a Democrat, had just won a second term.

Spindell, one of three [Republicans](#) on the body that oversees elections in Wisconsin, said “we can be especially proud of the City of Milwaukee (80.2% Dem vote) casting 37,000 less votes than cast in the 2018 election with the major reduction happening in the overwhelming Black and Hispanic areas.”

The comment sparked outrage and calls for Spindell to resign. Spindell, who also served as a fake elector in 2020, has refused, [saying](#), “The last thing I want to do is suppress votes.”

While it was astonishing to see a top Republican official boasting of lower voter turnout with such bluntness, it wasn't surprising to anyone to see Republicans celebrating fewer votes in Milwaukee, Wisconsin's most populous city.

Nearly [223,000 Black people live in Milwaukee](#) - roughly 60% of Wisconsin's [entire Black population](#). That means that Black voters in the city can have an outsized effect on election outcomes in the state - they have long been a bastion of Democratic votes and are crucial for any Democrat who wants to win the state ([More than one out of every 10 votes](#) Joe Biden received in Wisconsin in 2020 came from the [city of Milwaukee](#)). Activists have long understood attacks on the city to be code for attacks on Black voters.

Now Republicans are set to descend on the city they have long attacked to formally nominate [Donald Trump](#) to a second term at the Republican national convention in July.

“They're not coming here because they love the city of Milwaukee at all,” said Angela Lang, the executive director of Black Leaders Organizing Communities, [a non-profit in the city](#). The decision to hold the GOP convention in Milwaukee, a city Lang said Republicans often “say racist dog whistles about” was a “slap in the face”.

**▲▲ They're not coming here because they love the city of Milwaukee at all**  
**Angela Lang**

Republicans have not shied away from using coded language to attack the city. In 2013, as Republicans debated a measure to curtail early voting, state senator Scott Fitzgerald said “the question of where this is coming from and why are we doing this and why are we trying to disenfranchise people, I mean, I say it’s because the people I represent in the 13th district continue to ask me, [‘What is going on in Milwaukee?’](#)”

Donald Trump, for his part, has directly insulted Milwaukee, reportedly telling fellow Republicans in June it was a [“horrible city”](#).

Both Democrats and Republicans have touted the economic benefits the event will bring to the city. And Reince Priebus, the former RNC chair who led the effort to bring the convention to Milwaukee, said having the event in the city would bring around \$200m in economic benefits and would focus Republican attention on Wisconsin, a critical battleground state. The convention, Priebus [said in 2023](#), “can turn a purple state where only 20,000 people will decide who those electoral votes will go to”.

“They have no shame,” said Greg Lewis, a minister in [Milwaukee](#) who leads the Souls to the Polls, a non-profit that works to educate churchgoers and get them to vote. Historically, the program has been remarkably successful in mobilizing Black voters.

“Even though they have totally tried to abolish folks in our community from expressing themselves with their vote, they still want you to support a system or an organization or a party that is totally against them expressing their power,” Lewis said.

In 2018, Robin Vos, the Republican who serves as the powerful speaker of the Wisconsin assembly, [said](#) his party would have done better in statewide elections “if you took Madison and Milwaukee out of the state election formula”.

Republicans have also used their impenetrable, gerrymandered majorities in the state legislature to attack Milwaukee and its Black residents, including passing a sweeping voter ID measure and moving to limit early voting in the city. Non-white voters are more than four times more likely to lack a current ID than their white counterparts. [One study](#) by researchers at the University of Wisconsin-Madison found that voter ID in Wisconsin discouraged up to 23,000 people in Milwaukee and Dane counties from voting in the 2016 election.

In 2016, US district judge James Peterson **struck down** a Republican-enacted law trying to limit the amount of early voting in the state. He noted that the practice was especially popular among Latino and Black voters. Milwaukee at the time allowed for more early voting than other places in the state.

“The legislature’s ultimate objective was political: Republicans sought to maintain control of the state government. But the methods that the legislature chose to achieve that result involved suppressing the votes of Milwaukee’s residents, who are disproportionately African American and Latino,” he wrote. An appeals court **has since** overturned Peterson’s ruling.

Turnout in the city in 2016 **dropped by 41,000 votes** compared with 2012, nearly double Donald Trump’s margin of victory in the state. When Trump defeated Hillary Clinton in Wisconsin in 2016, turnout in Black wards in the city was around 58%, according to a Journal Sentinel analysis. In 2020, it fell to 51%. Black turnout has lagged after white turnout in the city in the last presidential and gubernatorial elections, **according to data analyzed** by John Johnson, a researcher at Marquette University.

“They’re going to places with large concentrations of Black people - that is the most hope we have at building Black political power in the state,” Lang said, referring to Republican efforts to restrict voting rights.

### Sign up to **The Stakes – US Election Edition**

 Free newsletter

The Guardian guides you through the chaos of a hugely consequential presidential election

**Enter your email address**

Sign up

**Privacy Notice:** Newsletters may contain info about charities, online ads, and content funded by outside parties. For more information see our [Privacy Policy](#). We use Google reCaptcha to protect our website and the Google [Privacy Policy](#) and [Terms of Service](#) apply.

In 2020, Donald Trump and his campaign waged an aggressive, **ultimately unsuccessful**, legal effort to get votes in Milwaukee and Madison thrown out as part of his effort to overturn Joe Biden’s victory in Wisconsin. He did not request a recount in any other county in the state.

LaTonya Johnson, a Democrat who represents Milwaukee in the state senate, said it was no secret why Republicans were targeting the city. She said she had pleaded with her colleagues in the legislature to support legislation to curb gun violence in the city but had been rebuffed.

“Republicans always make it seem like the bulk of - if they feel that there’s fraud - in the system that is coming from the city of Milwaukee, right? And the question is why? Because Milwaukee is majority minority,” she said in an interview.

For the last few months, Lewis and Souls to the Polls have been calling for the executive director of the Wisconsin Republican party, Andrew Iverson, [to resign](#). The Milwaukee Journal Sentinel [published text messages](#) earlier this year that showed Iverson trying to sabotage Souls to the Polls operations on election day in 2020. The text messages showed Iverson, then the head of Trump victory, a joint effort of the Trump campaign and the Republican National Committee, asking a Trump campaign staffer if he could get Trump supporters to use Souls to the Polls on election day.

“I’m excited about this. Wreak havoc,” he said in one text message published by the [Journal Sentinel](#). Iverson, who did not respond to an interview request, has denied wrongdoing, saying he was joking. Another Republican staffer told the Journal Sentinel that he took the messages to overwhelm Souls to the Polls.

Beyond voting, Republicans have also attacked Milwaukee in other ways. As the city faced serious fiscal issues last year, lawmakers approved a measure allowing Milwaukee officials to raise taxes, but also imposed new restrictions on the city.

The bill contained provisions that gave the city less control over the city’s fire and police commission and said it could not spend revenue on diversity initiatives, and limited how much could be spent on non-profits and the arts. The city was also blocked from using state funding on a local streetcar project.

Lang said she and her staff planned to leave the city during the convention, but would have some virtual programming. “I have serious safety concerns,” she said.

Attendees of the convention will be allowed to carry guns within the “soft” security perimeter around the Fiserv forum, the arena where the convention will be held, but not within a tighter “hard” security perimeter closer to the arena. The city could not ban the carrying of firearms because of a state law that prohibits localities from restricting them.

“The same type of people who write manifestos, and shoot up grocery stores with people that look like me, they find home in the Republican party, and

now we're rolling out the red carpet to them in a predominantly Black and brown city that is largely Democratic, and I think that is a recipe for disaster," Lang said.

Still, Lang said she planned to use the convention as an opportunity to educate voters about the meaning of their vote.

"If people are like, 'I don't really believe in politics or it's so dysfunctional, I have no faith in it right now,' well, there's one party in particular that is happy when you don't vote," she said.

---

---

---

## Most viewed







