

A Week to Remember – Understanding the U. S. heartland

Report on a week-long stay in Madison, Wisconsin with the Beyond Washington program of the German U. S. Embassy and Cultural Vistas

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Arriving in Madison, Wisconsin on a sunny Sunday afternoon, the lively vibes of the neat and friendly city were immediately noticeable. The visibly queer-friendly and walkable city is led by a Democratic major, who welcomed us to City Hall later in the week

Our multi-partisan group of 18 Bundestag MP staffers stayed in a hotel located in the middle of Madison on the isthmus between Lake Mendota and Lake Monona near the State Capitol, which would be our second home for the following week full of high-ranking meetings, diverse insights into U.S. politics and culture and interesting encounters. That first summer evening was perfect for sampling one of the countless local beers on the riverside university campus.

After an initial briefing with our program manager from the International Institute of Wisconsin the next morning, we headed to the State Capitol for the first time – an impressive building that we would become increasingly familiar with as the week progressed. It consists of the Senate (upper house) and the Assembly (lower house), both governed by a Republican majority, while Wisconsin Governor Tony Evers is a representative of the Democratic Party.

Wisconsin is a swing state that attracts a lot of political attention and is under scrutiny, especially in an election year like this. We visited Wisconsin just three weeks after President Biden's announcement that he was withdrawing from the presidential race, just before the Democratic National Convention in Chicago, where Kamala Harris was to be confirmed as the presidential candidate along with her running mate Tim Walz - events that overshadowed the attack on the Republican candidate Trump, which had happened just a few days before. Some of our hosts, most of whom have been observing and participating in U. S. politics for many years, said this was the most eventful month in U. S. history they had ever experienced.

In conversations with several NGOs and nonpartisan initiatives, including Common Cause, Wisconsin Democracy Campaign, and Keep Our Republic, we learned about highly contested threats to democracy such as gerrymandering, non-transparent financial influences, and barriers for minorities to participate in the elections.

To get a different look at Wisconsin and learn more about the rural perspective of the state of six million people, most of whom live in rural areas, we visited a dairy farm. The (female) head of the farm told us about the challenges of a medium-sized agricultural business and how they try to diversify their economic approach, e.g. in investing in solar panels for autonomous energy production.

Later, we met with Wisconsin Force, the local branch of the NRA, that was speaking on behalf of the gun enthusiasts of Wisconsin. The sweeping resentment of all governmental institutions, including the police force, came as a surprise to me. The principle of a nation, founded on the distrust of government, is not easy for the European mind to understand.

On the contrary, our excursion to the Wisconsin Army National Guard provided insights into how government institutions, particularly at the state level, can be intertwined with civil society and how Army and Air Force members actually contribute to secure elections, not while on duty, but

as active members of their neighborhoods. Like most of our encounters, this meeting strengthened mutual understanding and the transatlantic friendship.

One of the most special agenda items were dinner invites by local families on Friday night. We drove to different locations in cross-party groups of four to five people. My group spent a lovely evening at the home of Mary and James with their three daughters, a family of bike enthusiasts who moved from Austin, Texas to Wisconsin a couple of years ago and could tell us firsthand about the wide range of American culture. Seemingly effortlessly, they served best and mostly vegan food of the week.

Looking back, I am more than grateful to have been part of the 2024 Beyond Washington program. The trip brought experiences that I would not have been able to have otherwise. It deepened my understanding of the American heartland and its politics and culture. The impressions will remain and are the basis for greater interest and future knowledge of the USA. I'm thanking everyone that contributed to making this week so special!