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GEN Z WEIGHS IN



Mira Halker, left, and her friends gasp and chatter during the University of Wisconsin-Madison hockey team's appearance in President Donald Trump's State of the Union address on Feb. 24. TAMIA FOWLKES/MILWAUKEE JOURNAL-SENTINEL

Emerging generation of voters want candidates who inspire. Whether they'll find them remains unclear

Tamia Fowlkes

Milwaukee Journal Sentinel
USA TODAY NETWORK - WISCONSIN

Tariffs. Iran. Charlie Kirk. Olympics. Biden. Bingo.

It's 9 p.m. on a Tuesday at the University of Wisconsin-Madison's Memorial Union, and Mira Halker just hit a perfect diagonal on her State of the Union bingo card.

There's no prize, other than the satisfaction of predicting the talking points in President Donald Trump's nearly two-hour speech and a handful of cheese curds provided by the Wisconsin Union Directorate's Society and Politics Committee, a nonpartisan student group.

But Halker, 20, and dozens of students are squeezed around tables with bingo cards in hand, laser-focused on the large projector ahead.

They want to see if the president provides tangible solutions to their concerns about cost of living, artificial intelligence, climate and immigration - and, in the meantime, stand ready to scoff, cheer or high-five as they inch closer to bingo.

Gen Z, the group born between 1997

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Ty Schanhofer, left, chair of the College Democrats at University of Wisconsin-Madison, and Benjamin Rothove, executive director of the College Republicans of UW-Madison, before a Q&A discussion about U.S. foreign policy at Memorial Union on March 5. JOVANNY HERNANDEZ/MILWAUKEE JOURNAL SENTINEL

AI-powered 'assistant' texts voters about Supreme Court race

Mary Spicuzza

Milwaukee Journal Sentinel
USA TODAY NETWORK - WISCONSIN

Liberal Justice-elect Chris Taylor had a lot of things going for her in her crushing, 20-point victory in last week's Wisconsin Supreme Court race - including more money, more advertising airtime, and more third-party spending on her behalf.

A new tool also entered the chat on Taylor's behalf - a "virtual assistant" powered by artificial intelligence that was texting voters and offering to answer their questions about the race.

The AI-powered assistant, which was available to voters 24/7, was funded by a Pennsylvania-based group named Defend Our Courts and created by Convos, a startup company that built the platform.

"I'm a virtual assistant built by Defend Our Courts to help Wisconsin voters learn about the April 7 Supreme Court election. Our Supreme Court is an important firewall against MAGA's attacks on our rights and freedoms," one March 20 text sent to a Milwaukee Journal Sentinel reporter read.

"Judge Chris Taylor has spent her career protecting things like voting rights, and reproductive freedom, and she needs your support. Which issue matters most to you right now? Reply and let's talk about why this election is so important."

Another text sent March 26 said, "I'm a virtual assistant talking to people in Milwaukee, created by Defend Our Courts to help voters learn more about what's at stake. What questions can I answer for you to secure your vote for Judge Taylor?"

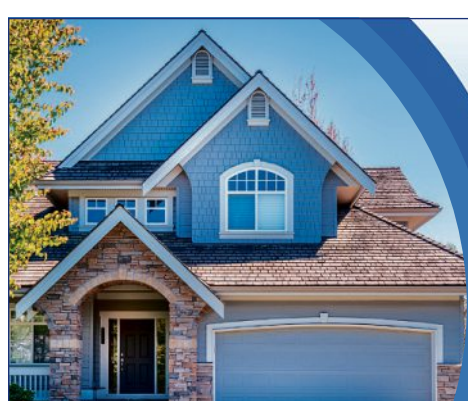
Asked if this was the first time an AI-powered virtual assistant was texting and fielding questions from voters in a Wisconsin election, Convos co-founder Tom Carroll said, "Oh, I would absolutely imagine so."

Joe Bachman, a co-founder of Defend Our Courts and managing partner of Polaris Strategy Group, said the group attempted to contact 1,172,587 Wisconsinites. Multiple rounds of texts were sent, but each round was different - and they changed based on what people were responding to, he said.

"We did have 21,316 meaningful conversations with voters from that group," Bachman said.

Defend Our Courts was able to "load information into kind of a closed system AI" using Convos' platform and infrastructure, so the group could avoid spreading misinformation, Carroll said.

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