

A Few Thousand Protest Stay-at-Home Order at Wisconsin State Capitol

The protest was one of the nation’s largest gatherings to date to condemn lockdown orders enacted by state and local governments.



People protested Gov. Tony Evers’s extended stay-at-home order at the Capitol in Madison, Wis., on Friday. Credit...Lauren Justice for The New York Times

By [Reid J. Epstein](#) and Kay Nolan

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WASHINGTON — A crowd of a few thousand gathered at Wisconsin’s State Capitol on Friday, the latest demonstration by conservative activists against statewide stay-at-home orders meant to slow the spread of the coronavirus.

The protesters, bearing Trump campaign attire, Tea Party regalia and American flags, condemned Gov. Tony Evers, a Democrat, and his extension of “Safer at Home,” a declaration requiring Wisconsinites to practice social distancing and to close nonessential businesses through May 26.

It was one of the nation’s largest gatherings to date to condemn stay-at-home orders enacted by state and local governments. And while Wisconsin’s elected Republicans and party officials encouraged people to attend, none spoke and only a few were spotted in the crowd.

The Madison rally came as [conservative groups have been encouraging resistance](#) to stay-at-home orders across the country. It was promoted for days by Wisconsin’s conservative talk radio hosts and had thousands of R.S.V.P.s on a Facebook event page.

How much public opinion in Wisconsin and elsewhere shifts toward reopening businesses, churches and schools most likely has far more to do with the rate of new coronavirus cases than it does frustration with the lockdowns. Wisconsin’s state health department announced 304 new positive tests on Friday, the most since the pandemic began.

Those who protested on Friday said the broader set of facts mattered less than their personal experiences.

“You’re being told to sit down and shut up because your opinion does not matter and you have to listen to professionals,” Madison Elmer, one of the event’s organizers, told the crowd at the beginning of the event. “You know what, you shouldn’t ever stop questioning the professionals.”

The gathering revealed the lack of organization among the forces aligned against Wisconsin’s stay-at-home orders.

Several speakers bemoaned the police for refusing to allow portable toilets to be set up on the Capitol grounds, a casualty of Governor Evers’s rejecting organizers’ application for a rally permit. Men in Hawaiian shirts toting guns walked through the crowd serving as ad hoc security. And there was little recognition that the number of coronavirus cases in the state is increasing by the day.

Still, few in the crowd wore the protective face coverings public health officials have advised people to use outdoors during the coronavirus pandemic. People stood shoulder-to-shoulder on the grounds of the Capitol, with hundreds more circling downtown Madison streets in their cars. The police stayed at least six feet from protesters, but did not enforce social distancing rules.

A parade of speakers lamented that local stores and restaurants were closed by the state’s order, but retailers like Walmart were considered essential and remain open.

Both the audience and the speakers presented a cavalcade of grievances. One woman in the crowd shouted, “Open up the playgrounds, my kids want to play,” which brought cheers.

“Staying indoors and worrying about the epidemic is more dangerous than going outside,” said Dr. Timothy W. Allen, a family physician from Cudahy, a Milwaukee suburb. “According to the evidence, you’re more likely to die by staying at home. You need to look at all lives, not just Covid lives.”

Don Pridemore, a former state legislator who is running for a seat in the State Senate and attended the rally, circulated petitions Friday to begin a campaign to recall Mr. Evers, who was elected to a four-year term in 2018. Mr. Pridemore, 73, who lost a 2013 election to Mr. Evers to become the state’s

superintendent of public instruction, said he did not feel it was necessary to wear a protective mask or gloves.

“I was in Vietnam,” he said. “There were way more bugs there.”

Earlier, at least 20 vehicles had gathered in the parking lot in Delafield, about an hour outside of Madison. Drivers mounted American flags, yellow “Don’t Tread on Me” Gadsden flags, which are a Tea Party emblem, and signs protesting the stay-at-home order.

“We want Governor Evers to open up all businesses in the state immediately before everybody goes out of business,” said Bob Tarantino, a real estate agent who helped organize the caravan.



The order requires Wisconsinites to practice social distancing through May 26.

Credit...Lauren Justice for The New York Times

In Madison, demonstrators carried Trump campaign signs. Several displayed long guns — defying [advice the treasurer of the Republican Party of Wisconsin gave to attendees](#) earlier in the week.

The protests came nearly three weeks after Wisconsin held the nation’s first in-person election as the country was wracked with the coronavirus. Since the April 7 contest, at least 19 people who voted in person or served as poll workers have tested positive for the virus.

Wisconsin's leading legislative Republicans, including Robin Vos, the Assembly speaker, have sued the governor to try to overturn the extension of the stay-at-home order. Mr. Vos encouraged people to gather in Madison on Friday but declined to say if he would attend or if he believed it was safe to do so.

President Trump has encouraged uprisings against stay-at-home orders issued by Democratic governors in several states, though he has not spoken out against the Wisconsin order.

Lawmakers were not permitted to speak at the rally, organizers said.

"Trump, Robin Vos and Wisconsin Republicans bear personal responsibility for the protests taking place today and the infections that will spread because of them," Ben Wikler, the chairman of the Democratic Party of Wisconsin, said Friday. "They believe they can benefit politically," he said, if they try to ignore "the dangerous science of coronavirus and its spread."

Reid J. Epstein reported from Washington and Kay Nolan from Madison and Delafield, Wis.

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