Suggested headline:

***Wisconsin voters’ declaration of independence***

Like former U.S. Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart said of pornography, “I know it when I see it.”

Or, to deploy another aphorism, if it walks like a duck and quacks like a duck, it’s a duck.

Now, in the next paragraph, replace the words “Elon Musk” with the words “George Soros.”

In the lead-up to Wisconsin’s Supreme Court race, Elon Musk offered $100 to people who would sign a petition opposing “activist judges,” and then wrote $1 million checks to two people who joined his crusade.

If you thought it was fine for Musk to do that, but it would have been horrendous for George Soros to have done it, maybe you need to rethink your logic.

Then, consider reporting by Daniel Bice, a longtime award-winning investigative journalist for the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel.

Bice found two versions of a video placed on Musk’s X social media platform. The first placement said this: “My name’s Ekaterina Deistler. I did exactly what Elon Musk told everyone to do: sign the petition, refer friends and family, vote, and now I have a million dollars.” The second version, placed after the first was pulled: “My name’s Ekaterina Deistler, and I’m from Green Bay, Wisconsin. I did exactly what Elon Musk told everyone to do: sign the petition, refer friends and family, and now I have a million dollars.”

Missing is the word “vote.”

Removed, presumably, because it’s illegal to pay people to vote.

Nevertheless, Ms. Deistler’s original version gives away the game and lays bare what plenty of participants surely thought. Join Musk’s effort to swing the election his way and there was an easy $100 coming – maybe more, even a million.

There’s that know-it-when-you-see-it thing. It really is a duck. Big money trying to buy votes, then pretending it’s something else.

Musk, Soros or anybody, that’s disgusting.

Wisconsin voters saw through it and resoundingly rejected the idea their votes were for sale. Let’s dispense with the phony-baloney that these races are nonpartisan and just say Democrat Susan Crawford defeated Republican Brad Schimel by 10 percentage points, which in 50-50 Wisconsin is a landslide of epic proportions.

Here’s what that means. A significant number of typically Republican voters crossed over to Crawford. It’s hard to pin that on anything but objections to efforts to buy the election.

Shift, for the moment, to the successful effort to pass a constitutional amendment mandating Voter ID at the polls. While Crawford was winning big, the Voter ID referendum – an issue long associated with Republicans – carried by a 20% margin. That means Republicans stayed home and voted for the referendum, and so did a substantial number of Democrats and Independents.

Taken as a whole, one could call this election Wisconsin’s declaration of independence. In large numbers citizens ideologically crossed back and forth while casting their ballots.

Voters are uncomfortable with the increasing role wealth is playing in Wisconsin’s democracy. Let’s be clear. Musk uploaded by far the most – reportedly north of $20 million – on behalf of Schimel, but he was hardly alone. On both sides, other very wealthy people made six- and seven-figure contributions to place their green thumbs on the election scale.

The prize, for both sides, was in plain sight. Republicans and Democrats alike battled for majority control of the court, with an eye toward tipping the scales of justice in their favor on political and ideological issues. For aggressive partisans, impartial rulings may be considered fine for non-ideological cases that come before the court, but for those left-right decisions the investors – and that is an apt term – want absolute certainty.

This is not over, by the way.

Supreme Court elections will take place regularly for the next several years, and the opportunity to flip the court back from liberal to conservative is likely to present itself over and over.

For that matter, if the court flips conservative, then liberals will have repeated chances to reverse course.

The 2025 race set a new national record of more than $100 million for spending in a judicial election – the previous record was set during Wisconsin’s last Supreme Court race – but don’t expect the mark to stand for long, with all those court contests on the schedule.

Even so, take solace in what amounted to a bipartisan message sent to big-money interests by voters in the Crawford-Schimel race.

*Caveat emptor*. A chance to use the Latin I studied in high school. “Let the buyer beware.”

Wisconsin voters barked it loud and proud. They resent the idea that anybody thinks they can be bought. Fishing for votes here using money as bait will be risky.

Independence.

What a wonderful word.

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