

SWING STATE

WISCONSIN STAYS IN PLAY THROUGH '08

JEFF MAYERS

Wisconsin voters went to the polls on November 2 to narrowly favor Democrat John Kerry; overwhelmingly elect a Democrat with a maverick reputation, Russ Feingold, to another term in the U.S. Senate in what was seen as a national Republican year; send an evenly partisan split congressional delegation back to the U.S. House; and boost GOP majorities in the state Senate and Assembly by one each to 19-14 and 60-39, respectively.

Wisconsin voters are—take your pick—either incredibly independent, schizophrenic, or deviously wedded to the system of political checks and balances.

It's that kind of unpredictability that made Wisconsin the top-flight national swing state it was in '04—a place where the presidential candidates spent oodles of time, where campaigns—candidate, 527 and other groups—spent oodles of cash, and where political junkies got to feast on oodles of goodies that their counterparts in the Californias and the New Yorks of the world were denied. Wisconsin has the Electoral College to thank for its time in the limelight and the positive



economic impact of campaign advertising, direct mailing, and polling that totaled tens of millions of hard-to-track dollars.

And there's no reason to believe that things will be any different four years from now. Wisconsin, which elected a Democratic presidential candidate at the top of the ticket by the narrowest of margins for the second straight elec-

tion, will likely be on the battleground map of any D.C. strategist.

In the meantime, statewide races will intervene between now and the presidential contest of '08—races that could determine whether the state goes blue or red in '08.

The final election '04 presidential turnout was nearly 73%, as people decided their vote counted. But in the spring of '05, a fraction of the 2.9 million voters who cast ballots in November will elect a state schools superintendent, a state Supreme Court justice, county executives in Dane and other counties, and numerous local judges, school board members, and municipal officials.

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And then in '06 come the much-anticipated races for governor, attorney general, U.S. Senate, and the Legislature.

Race Snapshots

— The **governor's race**, as of the late '04 writing of this analysis, was already budding: Democratic Governor Jim Doyle was furiously fundraising to build a war chest that could scare off involvement by Republican support groups, and the major GOP challengers and their operatives were girding for a primary contest. Politicos were betting that Green Bay-area Congressman Mark Green would meet Milwaukee County Executive Scott Walker in the primary contest, with Assembly Speaker John Gard staying where he is for now—atop the biggest GOP Assembly majority in decades.

But those close to Gard say the often-controversial, straight-talking speaker could definitely get in the race. His advantage, especially in a primary, would be that on a daily basis he *IS* the Republican alternative to Doyle in the Statehouse. "John Gard is the wild card in the race," said one Gard insider, noting that Gard's involvement, from his district north of Green Bay in Peshtigo, would hurt Green. "Even if he does not get in, he will probably determine the (primary) winner." The logic here is that if Gard stays out, that will help Green dominate the Republican vote-rich Fox Valley and overcome Walker's position in the state's biggest media market and the Republican vote-rich suburban ring around Milwaukee. Said one Republican:

If John gets in and doesn't win it, he and Green split the valley base and Walker gets the nomination. If John stays out Walker can't overcome Green's money and Fox Valley base and Green gets the nomination.

Doyle, meanwhile, is setting a centrist course as a pro-business Democrat who can manage the state's economy and its finances. His two major '02 election promises—no state tax increases and cutting state government employee ranks by 10,000 over eight years—remained intact going into the fight over the governor's 2005-07 re-election budget plan due

to the Republican-run Legislature early in '05. But Doyle's bureaucracy-cutting plans worsened relationships with state employee unions, usually a key Democratic constituency.

Doyle also was under attack for rising school property taxes (up more than 7%) and for giving away exclusive casino rights to the state tribes, which Republicans claim will short state taxpayers by millions, despite a ruling from the state Supreme Court against Doyle-forged gambling pacts. To the disappointment of some Democrats, his property tax-relief strategy was too much anti-freeze and anti-constitutional amendment. Having something positive to talk about in that department would be seen as a boost to Doyle and other Democrats running for office in '06. "Doyle needs a progressive tax reform plan in order to have a forward [-looking] change agenda that will make voters want him to stay," says one Democratic strategist not in the Doyle camp.

Walker, who has emphasized property tax relief, made the point emphatically in a December 2, 2004, press release viewed as the opening shot of the governor's race. "Governor Doyle cut the state commitment to schools and he blocked the freeze on property taxes," said Walker. "He alone is responsible for the sharp rise in school tax levies and upset property taxpayers should let him now about it." The governor's people responded that Walker voted for tax increases as a Republican legislator.

A Republican strategist, with no ties to Walker or Green, lays out Doyle's property tax problem, which began when he vetoed a three-year property tax freeze that resulted in an initial \$165 million boost in property taxes.

With the historic school property tax hikes coming this year, that number is going to be even bigger in December [2005]. By the time the year three impact totals come in December 2005, he could be on the hook theoretically for a half to 3/4 billion dollar property tax hike going into the election. That's real money.

Meanwhile, the cautious Doyle appeared to be taking few risks going into the election cycle, instead relying on a strategy of camping

in the middle—the old basketball player taking away the easy lay up and forcing opponents to take shots from the perimeter. He casts Republicans as extremists and hopes liberal Democrats will have nowhere else to go in November '06. Green and Walker were both seen as threats, but neither has been elected statewide like Doyle, who will be running for his sixth straight and perhaps final statewide victory. But there is a rub, according to one Democratic strategist not in the Doyle camp:

He is running a no-turnovers offense that will force him to take the status quo to voters, but gives his opponents the opportunity of being the candidate of change.

Charlie Cook, the Washington, D.C. handicapper, recently rated Doyle as a favorite for re-election; and Doyle's job performance ratings were said to have been consistently around the 60% mark in '04—a big improvement over the 45% of the vote he garnered in the three-way race against Republican Governor Scott McCallum and Libertarian Ed Thompson, brother of the longtime Republican governor, Tommy Thompson.

Tommy announced in late '04 that he was leaving the Bush cabinet to mull private sector options. But Tommy Thompson's star still shines, and his loyal subjects in the Badger State dreamed of an improbable comeback to the East Wing of the Capitol. Despite Thompson's typical never-say-never approach, another run for governor was seen as unlikely in late '04. He's done the job before, he has the record of 14 years served, and it's time to move on, say friends and associates who were more intrigued about a possible run against another of Wisconsin's most enduring popular politicians, Herb Kohl, the unassuming millionaire-Democratic owner of the Milwaukee Bucks

who has been in the U.S. Senate since 1989. But Republican strategists acknowledged that either race would be tough for Thompson, who last ran statewide in 1998. Thompson's future was uncertain in late '04, but Democrats were going on the assumption that Doyle wouldn't have to face perhaps his toughest opponent in a grudge match.

Doyle, in a December fundraising letter, laid out the rhetoric and the reasoning for his '06 re-election bid:

We've put the state's fiscal house back in order without making devastating cuts to our education systems. We have led the Midwest in job growth despite neglect from

Washington. We have helped thousands of seniors get cheaper prescription drugs from Canada. And, we have protected thousands of acres of unspoiled, beautiful Wisconsin land.

I have been able to accomplish these goals through fiscal discipline, commitment to Wisconsin values, and your strong support. However, the Republican legislature has fought me every step of the way by advocating divisive legis-

lation that pits the citizens of Wisconsin against each other.

In this coming session, I will fight against Republican efforts to kill four year old kindergarten and SAGE. I will fight against a so-called property tax "freeze" that would gut Wisconsin's public schools and cities. I will stand firm against the efforts to legalize concealed weapons and efforts to roll back a woman's right to choose. I will fight Republican extremists to make sure Wisconsin leads the way on stem cell research and help cure diseases and create jobs. And I will continue my drive to raise the minimum wage for the first time in seven years.

Doyle's job performance ratings were . . . consistently around the 60 percent mark in '04.

I'll continue to speak out and fight for the issues we care about and the values we stand for, but I will need your help.

It's been less than two years since my inauguration, but the 2006 race for Governor has already begun. Potential opponents are already attacking me in the press and have started to take questionable steps to sidestep Wisconsin campaign finance law in order to pour millions of dollars into their campaigns.

The last paragraph was a reference to questions over Green's efforts to exploit his \$1.3 million congressional campaign war chest and Walker's effort to pump up his county campaign fund.

"Both are just skirting Wisconsin campaign finance laws so they can double up on donors and PAC money," a Doyle loyalist complained.

— The **attorney general's** race as of late '04 also was attracting interest because of the soap opera surrounding the current AG, Peg Lautenschlager. The Fond du Lac attorney, a former lawmaker and U.S. attorney in Madison who has set a political course much to the left of Doyle in her first term, got the kind of statewide attention that would normally bury future political aspirations when she was caught driving drunk in a state car. But amidst a battle against breast cancer, she in late '04 appeared headed for a re-election run—still very vulnerable but gaining political viability among insiders. Republicans remained confident, however, of a takeaway unless a strong Democrat like Dane County Executive Kathleen Falk, a former environmental attorney and Lautenschlager supporter, would somehow replace the AG on the ticket. State Representative Mark Gundrum (R-New Berlin) was positioning himself for a possible run, but other candidates—such as Waukesha County District Attorney Paul E. Bucher—could emerge. Republicans haven't held the seat since Don Hanaway, a Green Bay pol, held the seat for one four-year term until a guy named Jim Doyle beat him in 1990.

— **U.S. Senator** Kohl was seen as the major favorite for re-election to another six-year term

in '06. Republicans complain he has been a do-nothing senator, but Kohl's quiet accomplishments and a non-threatening persona have led to statewide popularity. He also has many millions of his own money to spend on a campaign—making this a daunting challenge for Thompson, rising national and state GOP star U.S. Representative Paul Ryan, or anybody else. Neither Thompson nor Ryan seemed likely to run unless Kohl for some reason backed out of an expected re-election run, probably leaving Republicans in the uphill situation they faced in their unsuccessful effort against Feingold.

Feingold, attracting double-digit support from Bush supporters, handily beat first-time-statewide candidate Tim Michels, a businessman who won the GOP nomination by beating Russ Darrow and Bob Welch in a September primary.

— The state's **House delegation** has added a new member—former Milwaukee state Senator Gwen Moore, replacing the retiring Democratic U.S. Representative Jerry Kleczka. While conventional wisdom says the delegation is destined to remain at four Republicans and four Democrats, Democrats aren't counting out a strong Democratic challenge for Green's Green Bay-area congressional seat if Mark Green indeed runs for governor. And an unexpected open seat could change the arithmetic.

— Republicans, in a way, have nowhere to go but down in the **legislative elections** of '06, given how they have maximized the current district map. But conventional wisdom has been wrong before when it comes to Republican gains in the Assembly. Gard surprised even Republicans by gaining a seat in '04 and won't be counted out so easily.

But conservative Republicans didn't have such a good feeling for the fortunes of state Senate Republicans in part because of a moderate uprising that supplanted the interim majority leader, Scott Fitzgerald, who had forged a cooperative relationship with Gard. GOP Senators, perhaps looking to show their independence from the Assembly (which senators

regard as the “lower house” even though many of them served there), surprisingly elected state Senator Dale Schultz (R-Richland Center) as leader after he came off a losing congressional bid against U.S. Representative Ron Kind (D-La Crosse).

But the election of Schultz gave rise to controversy, because the swing vote, Senator Mary Lazich (R-New Berlin) lied to district and southeastern Wisconsin conservatives in saying she backed Fitzgerald. She ended up resigning her assistant majority leader post over the controversy, but kept her post on the budget-making Joint Finance Committee. Leaders of Citizens for Responsible Government (CRG) declared themselves still unhappy with Lazich, suggesting a recall could be in her future.

CRG also is a big supporter of the Taxpayers Bill of Rights, or TABOR, a proposed constitutional amendment to limit state and local spending. TABOR continued to divide the Senate GOP caucus in late '04 despite the defeat of Senator Mary Panzer, a West Bend Republican who was majority leader until her primary loss to conservative state Representative Glenn Grothman—in part a TABOR-related event. The Panzer and Lazich episodes point to a tough balancing act for Schultz, who could catch flak from impatient conservatives who ask, “If Gard is for it and can pass it, why can't you?”

Campaign '04 is over and quickly merging into campaign '06. The story of campaign '06 has yet to be written, but there could be reasons for both sides to be optimistic.

Why Republicans Might Be Optimistic

— A proposed constitutional amendment to ban gay marriage could be on the ballot at the same time as Doyle, helping to drive

Republican-base turnout as it did in other states in November. But it could also be a rallying point for Democrats who may not have allegiance to Doyle, even though he's the first Democratic governor since 1986.

— The Panzer and Lazich episodes point to a strong conservative movement in favor of TABOR, which while it can't be on the ballot, could be another issue to spike Republican turnout.

— The feeling that Doyle hasn't and won't be able to fix the property tax problem sufficiently to curb a so-called taxpayer revolt.

— The expectation that Doyle's high job performance ratings would ebb quickly once a campaign began because he has yet to connect with the electorate.

— Lautenschlager's troubles could drag down Doyle.

— The expectation that Doyle's re-election budget will have to be full of big fee increases and maybe even tax increases to erase a \$1.6 billion deficit.

— The September '06 Republican gubernatorial

primary could attract attention, boost the winner when it matters most, and undermine Doyle if the candidates bash the governor instead of each other.

Why Democrats Might Be Optimistic

— Democratic women running in the '05 races appeared to be strong favorites for re-election.

— Democrats continue to dominate statewide elections. Republicans haven't won the presidential contest here since 1984, and they have only one Republican statewide-elected official, state Treasurer Jack Voight.

— Republican officeholders remain split over TABOR.

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— If Ed Thompson runs for governor again, as many Libertarians hope, he could help Doyle by siphoning opposition votes away from the Republican candidate.

—Republican gubernatorial candidates will be distracted by the September '06 primary, spending resources and fighting each other when one candidate could have been going full-time after Doyle.

—Doyle will be well funded, and Kohl likely will help fund the Democratic election machine if he has a race. But some Democrats fear national Republican money will come into the state to grab back the governor's seat.

— Lautenschlager's troubles could evoke a liberal movement to save her, turning out liberal voters for Doyle.

What will happen in '06? The crystal ball remains cloudy in part because the independence of Wisconsin voters makes electoral predictions high risk. But preserving the state's swing status has its benefits. Why would we want to pass up the chance to see the '08 national campaign play out in our own backyard?