

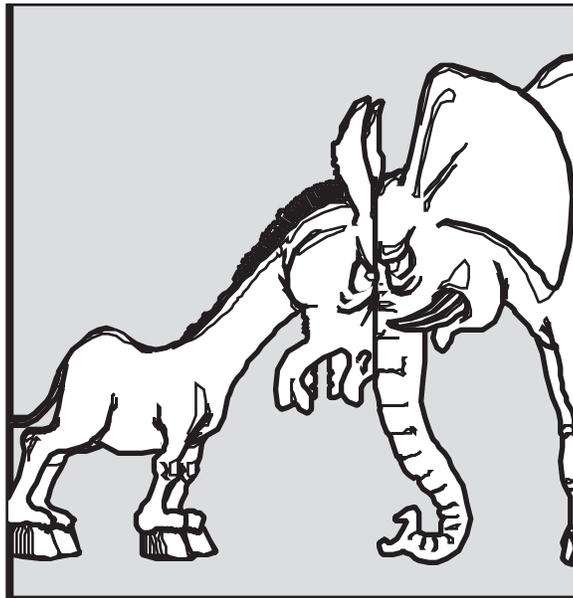
THE FUTURE OF WISCONSIN REPUBLICANS

JEFF MAYERS

Flash forward to December 2002. Wisconsin Republicans are in deep depression.

The governor's office is about to be in Democratic hands for the first time since 1986, following Scott McCallum's loss; McCallum simply couldn't shake off the first recession of the new century. The attorney general's office remains Democratic; U.S. Representative Mark Green declined multiple overtures to run for statewide office and decided instead (under pressure from House Speaker Dennis Hastert) to run for re-election as part of a vain attempt by the national GOP and the Bush White House to hold onto Congress. Congressman David Obey, the irascible northern Wisconsin Democrat, is ready to assume the Appropriations Committee chair after cruising to re-election once again. And Senate Majority Leader Chuck Chvala, D-Madison, the man Republicans love to hate, is now more firmly in control of the 33-member Senate than ever.

The only major Republican left standing in Madison? Speaker Scott Jensen. Jensen, R-Waukesha, is now the sole defender of Republican interests in the statehouse and the default leader of Wisconsin Republicans. But



even the skillful spin-meister Jensen can't erase the evidence that marks Wisconsin as a Democratic state.

If this comes true, Wisconsin Republicans will have to acknowledge that:

- They haven't held a U.S. Senate seat from Wisconsin since 1992, when Bob Kasten got beat by now vice presidential hopeful Russ Feingold. And there haven't been two Republican U.S. senators simultaneously since Joe McCarthy's 10-year stint during the tenure of Alexander Wiley (1939-63).

- They missed Tommy Thompson more than any of them could have imagined. Thompson's dominating personality and political machine, in combination with Jensen's political smarts and cunning legislative maneuvering, gave everybody the appearance that Wisconsin was a competitive state. Thompson held onto office all those years with his populist magic, and Jensen turned a largely Democratic map into one of the biggest Republican majorities in recent history through a take-no-prisoners political philosophy.

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- They haven't won a presidential race in the Badger State since 1984, Ronald Reagan's second go-around. They came awfully close in 2000, but that was against a weak Democratic candidate in a year when Bush traveled to Wisconsin enough times to acquire a hankering for brats with his Texas beans.
- They haven't held the majority in the state Senate since June 1996, when the Miller Park-sparked recall of George Petak gave Chvala the opening he needed to mold the Senate Democrats into a power. Except for Mike Ellis's occasional stints as majority leader in the mid-1990s, Democrats controlled the chamber for most of the last 25 years of the 20th century.
- They've held the attorney general's office for only four years out of the last 27 years. The last GOP AG? Don Hanaway, a one-termer in 1987-91.

For Republicans, this is a worst-case scenario — not because their future would rest with Jensen, but because for the first time in 16 years they wouldn't be able to claim, without seriously tripping off the polygraph, that Wisconsin is a true swing state like they've been saying for all of these years. And for the first time in 16 years, they wouldn't occupy the governor's office.

Now this isn't necessarily a picture painted by Democrats. This is a private fear held by certain GOP strategists who see the political landscape changing for the worse in the short term for Republicans in Wisconsin.

One reason for concern beyond the slowing economy is the lurch to the right. Thompson, while he pushed conservative-minded experiments in school choice and welfare reform, was not an ideologue as governor. He went from Dr. No as Assembly minority leader to Governor Can Do, throwing government resources and his own energy at problems big and small in a populist vein that garnered personal popularity paralleled only by nice-guy millionaire U.S. Senator Herb Kohl, D-Wis. (In the mid-March WisPolitics.com/Wood Communications Group poll, Thompson,

though out of office, recorded a 71 percent favorable rating while Kohl recorded 70 percent — tops among the state's leading politicians.) Conservative forces often privately complained that Thompson was a big-government Republican who expanded state government and its aid programs while failing to tame the Department of Natural Resources and the University of Wisconsin System. He never cut taxes enough to satisfy this wing of the party.

Enter Scott McCallum, Thompson's lieutenant governor for his entire tenure. Upon assuming office on February 1, McCallum early on appeared to be the kind of fiscal conservative that Thompson only talked about. McCallum's playbook seemed to be that of the state's largest business group, Wisconsin Manufacturers & Commerce. He proposed a state spending cap (unthinkable under Thompson, who would have argued that it limited his flexibility), committed to getting Wisconsin out of the top 10 taxing states (on his way out, Thompson contended the state's tax load wasn't as bad as the critics said), and pushed to phase in the single-factor sales tax break (Thompson proposed one, too, but evened it out with a loophole-closing proposal abhorred by big business). The centerpiece spending cap may not be needed in the 2001-03 budget because of a slowing economy and less-than-expected tax revenues, but the early reviews from voters were positive. This is a frugal budget, and McCallum as the frugal gourmet is serving up cod liver oil as he preaches to the spendthrifts: it's time to get the fiscal house in order.

Some of McCallum's early rhetoric turned off Thompson loyalists, who saw McCallum dissing the old boss as a way of getting back for years of being relegated to a bit player. But McCallum later tried to correct what he labeled a misperception, perhaps thinking that he might need the enthusiastic backing of Thompson and his core supporters to earn a four-year term in 2002.

"That was not Tommy Thompson's spending..." McCallum told WisPolitics.com in early March. "And I would like to reiterate that it

was the Legislature that upped every single one of Tommy Thompson's budgets. And I think it is unfair of people to now attribute it to Tommy now that he's gone. He's built a great base for the state of Wisconsin. It is a wonderful economic base off of which we can work. There's been a national slowdown, and we worked on the budget together. And Tommy Thompson understood it, and I think he was very frugal through the years. He did what he could to build the state of Wisconsin, but he had a Legislature to deal with."

So does McCallum. He's a former state senator, but McCallum's early legislative relations were strangely cold — even hostile. He angered Assembly Republicans on a number of fronts: keeping budget secrets, pushing popular Agriculture Secretary Ben Brancel out, and passing over likeable Majority Leader Steve "Mickey" Foti, R-Oconomowoc, in the lieutenant governor sweepstakes. McCallum ended up picking Senator Margaret Farrow, R-Pewaukee, whose confirmation got shelved by majority Senate Democrats for at least six weeks. McCallum wasn't in a hurry to pick his lieutenant governor; so why should they be in a hurry, asked Senate Democrats.

McCallum did much better outside of the Capitol Square, making frequent trips to southeastern Wisconsin and beyond to reintroduce himself to voters as top-of-the-ticket material. While his honeymoon ended early under the Dome, likely voters were giving him the benefit of the doubt in mid-March, according to the WisPolitics/Wood Communications poll. McCallum scored a 44 percent favorable rating and had 82 percent name recognition after six weeks of largely positive press. Democrats, meanwhile, mobilized for their first real chance at winning a governor's race

since Tony Earl got upset by Thompson in 1986; their early front-runner was Attorney General James Doyle, who recorded a 49 percent favorable rating and 80 percent name ID in the WisPolitics/Wood Communications poll.

The political tea leaves suggest 2002 is a make or break transition election year for Republicans:

- Without Bush or Thompson at the top of the ticket, there's concern about the motivation factor. Bush's election run in 2000 excited grassroots Republicans and brought scores of new activists into the party ranks. But those activists need a cause in 2002, and keeping the governor's office will have to be the rallying cry since there's no U.S. Senate race until 2004. In 2004, party leaders hope enough activists will still be motivated enough about Bush and mad enough about the near miss in 2000 (in Wisconsin) to clinch the state for Bush.

- The off-year elections tend to hurt the party occupying the White House. On top of that,

Democratic stalwarts are motivated by the revenge factor. Even if they didn't like Al Gore, many think he got a raw deal in Florida. Bush's approval ratings may have been at dreamy levels in March (58 percent, according to the WisPolitics.com/Wood Communications Group poll), but the stock market crash and subsequent erosion of consumer confidence are sending bad political vibes.

- Democrats are hungry, really hungry, to get back into the governor's office, and the Wisconsin electorate could be swayed by a simple slogan: "It's time for a change after 16 years." Wisconsin voters' sense of fair play, if nothing else, could make it a difficult year for Republicans no matter who's at the top of the

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ticket. In addition, national and state economic troubles could doom many a fledgling incumbent, including McCallum.

- McCallum is conservative enough for Republican activists, but does he have the passion? Republicans got spoiled all of those years with the Thompson shtick — and his ability to impassion audiences despite his Elroy-speak and bombastic rhetoric. McCallum, early on, left some of the GOP power brokers uninspired. Some couldn't get over that McCallum *read* a speech at the March 6 inaugural ball and fundraiser in Milwaukee. The event raised close to \$1 million before expenses, but McCallum failed to cash in the chance to dispel the longtime grumbling about his political skills. Again, McCallum has been far better received by activists outside of the power-centers of Madison and Milwaukee — a by-product, perhaps of a schedule that had him on a plane 18 of his first 45 days.

- McCallum could be a victim of circumstances, holding the budget bag after 14 years of blissful spending (and modest tax-cutting) on the state scene. He came in, tax revenues slowed, and suddenly there's little extra cash to spread around for interest groups, local governments, corporate tax breaks and individual tax cuts. No matter what happens in the legislative budget debate, it's McCallum's budget. The tide of negative publicity about budget details foretells a Democratic strategy of stick it to McCallum. In the budget game, frugality is not the virtue it would appear — especially if individual tax cuts don't appear and property tax relief measures fall by the wayside before 2002. If the economic and budget picture worsen, McCallum will be in the lousy position of truly cutting services or raising taxes. Even Thompson's Teflon might have crinkled under that pressure. Several top GOP strategists have predicted for years that the next governor after Thompson would be a one-termer because of the personality void and budget problems left after Thompson's departure.

- McCallum will need help, and a strong AG candidate could provide a boost at the top of

the ticket. But the candidate many Republicans talked about — U.S. Representative Mark Green, a likable Green Bay attorney who has shown political smarts in solidifying northeastern Wisconsin's 8th Congressional District — appeared unlikely to run at the time of this writing in mid-March. Without Green, Republicans would be left with a bunch of unknown Republican DAs or one well-known one, Waukesha County's Paul Bucher — considered damaged goods after getting chewed up in the Chmura trial.

- Democrats may cut each other up in the 2002 gubernatorial primary. But at least they'll have a primary — often an advantage for the party that's out of power. Not only will Democrats get all of the free media attention for months and months, the winner will get a burst of momentum from the win. And Wisconsin's late primary — in September — means the winner will have the momentum at the right time. The winner might come out of the primary flat broke, but national Democrats will make sure general election campaign money appears. Remember 1992, when Feingold broke through the middle and beat two bickering opponents (Joe Checota and Jim Moody)? The surprise winner, Feingold came out with such a halo, Kasten never had a chance.

- Even if the political and economic tides don't work against Republicans, the party has to contend with the absence of Thompson. Thompson was a unifying force in the party by virtue of his longevity in office, if nothing else. Without him, many observers foresee a struggle between conservatives and moderates for the heart and soul of the party. Thompson led by force of personality first, and ideology second. But activists who fight over the platform often think about ideological purity first, and winning second. Without Thompson at the helm, those forces — including right-to-lifers who disagreed with Thompson on stem cell research — could be unleashed. The ensuing battle could leave the party divided going into the 2002 elections.

That theory's overblown, say party leaders.

The official GOP line is that the party and its followers are pretty unified. "George Bush has a lot to do with it," says Rick Graber, a Milwaukee attorney and state GOP chairman. "In the fall, I never saw so many people energized." Graber says the Bush campaign brought a lot of new faces and new energy into the party last year. That will be good for a party that some internal critics saw as populated with too many of the "usual suspects" after all those years of the Thompson dynasty.

Fresh blood is good. Thompson's iron grip on the office discouraged some good Republican talent. But few would disagree that if Thompson were still in the East Wing and running, he'd be the odds-on favorite to win another four years in office.

Graber puts the best face on Thompson's departure, saying it presents "an opportunity for the next generation to step up and be leaders." The list of future GOP stars in Wisconsin most often include, in no particular order: Jensen, Green, U.S. Representative Paul Ryan of southeastern Wisconsin's 1st Congressional District (now on the Ways and Means Committee and mentioned as a possible Feingold opponent in 2004), Senators Mary Panzer and Alberta Darling, and Scott Klug, the former Madison-area congressman and now magazine publisher. Strangely, strategists rarely mention McCallum, the lieutenant governor who patiently waited 14 years for his chance. In part because of Thompson's dominating personality and governing style and McCallum's family-first work philosophy, the longtime "light gov," as he was nicknamed by his GOP critics, suffered widespread disrespect at the hands of top strategists. Now McCallum has a chance to show them all that he's been

underestimated. This inside audience was very critical in the early going despite McCallum's generally positive re-introduction to the Wisconsin electorate.

McCallum, early in his tenure, showed enough stuff to give fellow Republicans hope. Paul Ryan gave McCallum a good chance at re-election while acknowledging the difficulties ahead. "He has to replace Tommy Thompson. Tommy will cast a shadow over Wisconsin politics for a long time, and we're going to suffer from the lack of Tommy in politics. There are a lot of growing pains right now with the absence of Tommy. Scott, you know, is in the middle of that," Ryan said in a WisPolitics.com

interview in March. "But he's been around for 14 years, and he's got two years to crisscross the state and show himself to the people in Wisconsin. Is it an uphill battle? Yeah, of course it is. [But] I think you have to give the advantage to Scott McCallum being governor after 2002. He is the incumbent, after all. But it's life after Tommy, and that's a big change for all of us."

Graber agrees that after 14 years of one leader, a time of adjustment has arrived. "It takes a little sorting out," he said. But Graber signaled his intention to use the battle ahead as a unifying force. "Our top priority has to be holding onto the governor's office, and it will be hard," he said. "The Democrats are going to be coming after it hard. I fully expect this to be the most expensive governor's race ever."

McCallum is raising the cash, but will he have the political capital he needs to win? He didn't inherit Thompson's large stash of political capital, and he doesn't have much time to earn it. He'll start with a post-Thompson vision that is searching for a slogan.

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“I’ve tried to say my real focus is on building the state, how we can grow, how we can improve the state of Wisconsin. That is why specifically when I talk about the cap on state spending, which if we would have had over the past number of years we would have been in very good shape as a state right now. But the cap was tied specifically to the growth in personal income. It’s not inflation. So we can emphasize people moving up the economic ladder. We can emphasize people having an increase in their salaries,” McCallum told WisPolitics when asked to explain his vision. “So the efforts on the part of the state are to improve our economy, improve jobs, improve education, to allow our economy to grow. . . . If you look within the budget, while again, it was the lowest spending increase in over 30

years, there’s a tremendous emphasis on children, on early childhood, on child care, on K through 12, on education, on improving the way we live in Wisconsin.”

Improving the way we live. It’s a start. But in the meantime, McCallum is forced to establish his own identity, step out from the shadow of Thompson, and embrace the Thompson legacy — all at the same time. It’s created some tension in Republican ranks. As McCallum said, change is hard when you’re following “a giant of a political figure.”

“It’s different. There’s a different way. I’m not putting a value judgment on it. . . . Tommy Thompson did a great job. He was an overpowering political figure.”