

POLITICS 98

JEFF MAYERS

GOP Gov.
Tommy
Thompson

has drawn his third straight Dane County Democrat as an opponent and looks headed to another re-election victory as he presides front-and-center over the state's 150th birthday party. Democratic Attorney General Jim Doyle, facing a little-known opponent who didn't enter the race until late May, looks to be cruising toward a second re-election win. The state Senate, known best for its partisan high jinx and not its high-minded policy decisions, is up for grabs yet again even though Republicans have the current upper hand. All legislative incumbents are heavily favored, given the robust economy and a citizen sense of contentment. If a White House sex scandal doesn't move citizens, is it any wonder that most of the activity at the statehouse this year elicited a great big yawn? Is there anything to be excited about this mid-term election year

Certainly. The federal slate is stirring activists and those who give to campaigns. Wisconsin's U.S. Senate and congressional races are the marquee events this fall. The race between U.S. Sen. Russ Feingold, D-Wis., and



J a n e s v i l l e
Congressman Mark
Neumann and open
congressional seat in
s o u t h e a s t e r n
Wisconsin's 1st and
the Madison-area's
2nd are being closely
watched in
Washington and at
home.

"The Republicans' goal is a filibuster-proof Senate. If they want to reach it, they've got to win states like Wisconsin," says Brian Christian-

son, a Madison-based Republican consultant who spent the last campaign cycle on the U.S. Republican Senatorial Committee after a stint as state GOP executive director.

"Republicans also want to demonstrate momentum going into the 2000 presidential elections. And the way to do that is to win and maintain open House seats," adds Christianson, who's consulting candidates in the 1st and the 2nd (Paul Ryan and Meredith Bakke, respectively). Wisconsin's open House seats could be the linchpin for Republicans in

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the Midwest as they try to maintain or widen their narrow House majority. "Republicans can't afford to lose these two open seats in Wisconsin."

A former state Democratic Party chairman agrees the federal races are the ones to watch. And Mark Sostarich thinks Democrats hold the early edge given a U.S. Senate incumbent, an experienced 1st District candidate, Lydia Spottswood, and a trio of strong Democrats in the 2nd. "They've got a multi-front war in which they're going uphill in each one," says Sostarich, a Milwaukee attorney. His big worry: turning out Democratic voters in a year in which citizens are "sleepy ... content."

Christianson sees the economy and tax policy dominating the federal races. He says the upcoming turn of the century, forecasts of budget surpluses and the good economy have combined to create an atmosphere in which candidates can talk about lofty ideas such as how to keep balanced budgets going, how to pay off the debt and how to save Social Security. "(Tax policy) is the No. 1 issue on voters' minds right now," he says.

Sostarich maintains the off-year congressional elections will turn on local issues while Feingold-Neumann will be "very personality driven."

While it is an incumbents' year, Democrats privately worry about Feingold's first re-election race because of:

- Feingold's public link to campaign finance reform, an often obtuse crusade that suffered a great defeat in a March showdown in Washington;
- Feingold's apparently soft poll numbers;
- Feingold's intense and tenacious opponent, Mark Neumann, a millionaire Janesville developer turned congressman who talks about the economy and the budget with evangelical fervor.

- And Feingold's tendency to bypass Milwaukee events well-attended by traditional Democratic constituencies, such as unions. Consequently, some Democrats worry, Feingold doesn't have the support in Milwaukee he should. Neumann, however, benefits from having run two straight tough and high-spending races that depended a lot on advertising in two of the state's biggest media markets, Milwaukee and Madison.

- Neumann is a battle-tested candidate ready to go after the next rung on the political ladder.

"Neumann is a tenacious, vicious candidate with no conscience," Sostarich claims. "Winning is everything. The end justifies the means. He will do whatever it takes. ... He's going to have a lot of resources."

Feingold, meanwhile, has his independent image — a plus. But, adds Sostarich, Feingold's name recognition "is not as high as you'd really like it to be," and Feingold won't get the kind of Washington help he may want because of his public stands against President Clinton, on items such as Bosnia.

Christianson says Washington operatives are excited about Neumann's aggressive early fundraising, his blue-chip campaign organization (led by a former GOP executive director, R.J. Johnson) and his proven ability to win. "He still retains a lot of the 'Mr. Smith Goes to Washington' persona," he says.

Feingold, on the other hand, is seen as concentrating on an issue, campaign finance reform, that voters can't "sink their teeth into." Says Christianson: "He's not going to get a lot of mileage out of that one." Eventually, he predicts, Feingold will have to start talking about budget issues and that will play to the strength of Neumann, the former math teacher who loves to challenge the budget estimates of official Washington.

The two already have faced off on campaign finance reform. Neumann surprised Feingold with a proposal to limit spending and contributions and tried to portray Feingold as a hypocrite on the issue. Feingold shot back with a list of things he would do no matter what Neumann did. Neumann said most of what Feingold will do seemed all right to him. The biggest item, however, is in dispute: whether spending will be limited to \$3.8 million or \$4.5 million. And the candidates had not by mid-April shook hands and personally cemented an agreement. But their political dance on this issue showed the tit-for-tat nature of the race to come.

Feingold and Neumann offer a stark contrast in style and politics. Feingold, a perpetual reform candidate with a choir-boy image, is facing in Neumann another reform-minded candidate who so believes in his convictions that he sometimes scares people. Neumann, who always seems to be trying to tame his most conservative values (on abortion and homosexuals, for example), has yet to sell himself to a statewide audience. The likeable Feingold has, and even though Feingold isn't as secure as he should be, his preliminary poll numbers still indicate he is the favorite.

Feingold also has his own economic record. He won the 1992 race against Republican U.S. Sen. Robert Kasten while touting a specific balanced budget plan, and he claims credit for the current rosy budget scenario because of his support of the first Clinton deficit reduction package.

He also has proven a hard target to hit for Republicans. For example, in March, he voted in the minority against a measure for a

strict national drunken driving standard — tougher than the one currently in place in Wisconsin. Feingold based his opposition on federal intervention in state matters, but Republicans note the vote agreed with the view of the Wisconsin Tavern League and many Wisconsinites. The respected Cook Political Report out of Washington rates the race leaning to Feingold. If Feingold wins this year, he'll be ready for a Proxmire-like tenure in office, many predict.

Open congressional seats are always of interest, but the two in Wisconsin are likely fall battlegrounds on the national level.

Southeastern Wisconsin's 1st CD has been a toss-up seat since conservative Democrat Les Aspin gave it up to become Clinton's first defense secretary. Neumann won it on his third try, in the 1994 GOP sweep, and narrowly won re-election in 1996. The Madison-area's 2nd still leans Democratic even after the reign of Scott Klug, the possible 21st century GOP gubernatorial candidate who has easily held a Democrat-leaning seat since his 1990 upset of longtime

Democratic U.S. Rep. Robert Kastenmeier. Klug is giving up the seat to enter the private sector — at least for a spell.

The two House races also could be historic because both could send Wisconsin's first woman to Congress; they also could be devastating for Republicans, who have a real chance of sliding to a 7-2 partisan deficit in the congressional delegation.

In the 1st, Kenosha's Lydia Spottswood, who came close to beating Neumann two years ago, returned to lead the Democratic slate. The consensus Republican candidate, after some early jockeying, is Paul

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Ryan, a former congressional aide from Janesville who turned heads with aggressive early fundraising and an impressive list of endorsements. Ryan's early show of force helped push out two possible primary opponents: George Petak, of Racine, who has the distinction of being the first Wisconsin lawmaker recalled from office over his vote in support of a sales tax boost for the Milwaukee Brewers new stadium; and Brian Morello, a Beloit beverage company owner who came in second to Ryan in the 1997 fundraising sweepstakes. The Cook Report rates the seat a toss-up, but Wisconsin's unions, heavily organized in the 1st, want the seat back badly.

The 2nd was seen as the Democrats' race to lose — in part because of three tested and well-financed candidates: state Rep. Tammy Baldwin, of Madison, the only openly gay member of the state Legislature; Rick Phelps, the former Dane County executive from Madison and F.O.B.; and state Sen. Joe Wineke, of Verona. Baldwin raised a hefty \$251,701 in 1997 and had \$153,245 in the bank going into the campaign year. She maintained her lead in early 1998 fundraising.

Each candidate could claim a victorious scenario in the state's premier September primary race. Baldwin was seen as having the most committed voters in a primary likely to be dominated by liberals from Madison. Phelps had the edge in name recognition and the record of winning broad margins in Dane County, which dominates the 2nd District. And Wineke had the edge among political constituencies he has championed as a state senator: unionized teachers and blue-collar union members. Wineke also was running the most visible grass roots campaign early in 1998.

Five little-known and politically inexperienced Republicans vied for the GOP nomination early in March. Klug avoided an endorsement, but some of his allies backed Don Carrig, the Sauk County millionaire beer distributor who was seen as the early front-runner. He led the 1997 fundraising with \$67,703 in the bank. But GOP insiders also

gave nods to the campaigns of Josephine Musser, the former state insurance commissioner, and Meredith Bakke, a DeForest chiropractor.

Democrat Jay Johnson's 8th Congressional District seat, once held by Republican Toby Roth, also is on the minds of some Republicans. State Rep. Mark Green, a Green Bay attorney, was considered the top challenger. U.S. Rep. Ron Kind, of the 3rd District, however, was considered a virtual reelection shoo-in this spring partly because of his rather non-partisan entrance into Congress. Some supporters of former Congressman Steve Gunderson, R-Wis., helped shepherd Kind into office in 1996, and Kind ended up keeping some of Gunderson's staff.

The two biggest statewide races aren't without their attractions — especially if you're looking for clues to the shape of Wisconsin politics in the next century.

Consider:

- **The Governor's Race.**

Thompson, seemingly governor for life if he wants it, again was mulling a run for president (or is it vice president?). If tarnished Newt can hope to compete, why not welfare-reforming, job-creating Tommy? Thompson, a rather embittered finalist in Bob Dole's veep-stakes of 1996, could be itching to show his stuff to all those smarty-pants from "Disneyland East," as he occasionally calls our nation's capital. But Thompson's national star still shines faintly in the national sky. An early March straw poll at the Southern Republican Leadership Conference listed 28 Republicans, including Thompson. But Thompson didn't finish among the top seven, led by Texas Gov. George Bush, and U.S. Rep. J.C. Watts of Oklahoma was the favored write-in candidate for vice president.

Top advisers claim the gov doesn't wake up in the morning and think about being president, but then again they don't deny the

thought occasionally crosses his mind. And who knows what a heavy advertising buy in the Dubuque media market during this year's gubernatorial run would do to enhance his standing in the important and early caucuses in neighboring Iowa?

Thompson admitted his national office ambitions in off-handed remarks to Harvard students in April and hinted he'd be a candidate in Iowa if he won re-election. But a spring Des Moines Register poll of more than 400 likely Iowa caucus participants showed Thompson well down the list of favorites. Former Vice President Dan Quayle led a laundry list of names at 20 percent, followed by Texas Gov. George W. Bush and millionaire publisher Steve Forbes. Thompson garnered 3 percent in that early poll.

So it really appears this could be Thompson's last statewide campaign. Of course a lot of people thought that in 1994. Thompson said four years ago he wouldn't be running for governor again, then changed his mind shortly after the election. This time, Thompson says it's "definitely" his last run. Thompson most likely faces Madison attorney and former NFL players union chief Ed Garvey (a true underdog considering his tenuous stand with some union leaders). Milwaukee state Sen. Gary George could surprise observers, challenging Garvey and what the most well-known African-American lawmaker calls the Democratic Party's Madison-based bureaucratic rhetoric.

If Thompson wins yet again and really takes the plunge into national politics, will Lt. Gov. Scott McCallum finally get the chance to leap from "lite-gov" to heavyweight Republican contender in 2002?

Thompson doesn't have to quit if he runs for president, but at the least he'd probably be in line for some cabinet post under a Republican president. Under that scenario, McCallum could become governor mid-term. McCallum strategists think their man would be starting up his gubernatorial campaign the minute Thompson started his national one.

McCallum wouldn't be alone. The list of would be governors is a long one right now. If the scenario plays out, McCallum on the Republican side could be joined by Klug, Assembly Speaker Scott Jensen, Commerce Secretary Bill McCoshen, or state Sen. Bob Welch, the GOP's unsuccessful candidate against Kohl in 1994. Democratic contenders could include those who have bypassed a run because of Thompson's enduring popularity — Attorney General Jim Doyle and Milwaukee Mayor John Norquist, for example — and some new faces — such as feisty blue-collar liberal Russ Decker, a state senator from central Wisconsin's Schofield. But why not the guy who would have been the Democrats' best candi-

date this year: U.S. Sen. Herb Kohl, the millionaire owner of the Milwaukee Bucks who is the only state politician who can match Thompson's popularity?

- **State Senate Races**

Voters won't see "GOP State Senate" and "Democratic State Senate" on the November ballot. But that's the way state strategists and political observers view the 17 individual races that make up the race for the state Senate. Really, only a handful of these are viewed as competitive races — including key swing seats now held by retiring Sens. Tim Weeden, a Republican from Beloit, and

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Democrats Joe Wineke of Verona and Cal Potter of Kohler.

New Berlin Republican Mary Lazich snatched one open seat in an April 7 special election, giving the GOP 17-16 partisan control of the body best known for holding up the 1997-99 state budget. Most observers give the Republicans the edge going into the fall based upon their victory in now federal Judge Lynn Adelman's old 28th Senate District seat encompassing a good hunk of GOP stronghold Waukesha County. But Weeden's departure breathes new life into Democrats.

Lazich's victory over former radio sportscaster Brain Manthey was viewed as a precursor to November. And it provided a lesson for independent expenditure groups such as the new Democratic group called Future Wisconsin: don't hurt your own candidate with a faulty TV attack ad. Lazich's campaign took advantage and never let Manthey talk about his issues.

Likewise, political observers found indicators in the concurrent Assembly special election that filled a Democratic seat in the 28th Senate District, held since the 1970 election by state Rep. James Rutkowski of Greenfield. Republicans won that race, too. Thompson has to receive some credit for the GOP's current hold on the statehouse: the governor urged the GOP-controlled U.S. Senate to ignore Adelman's liberal record and confirm him to a lifetime on the federal bench; he also appointed Rutkowski to an obscure, but higher-paying administrative post. The result? Republicans have a good chance to widen their legislative leads this November.

The party that prevails in legislative elections this fall gains a foothold on a coming power struggle. Reapportionment looms early the next century. That remapping of legislative boundaries is often the most important factor in determining partisan control of the Legislature for the next decade. In the short term, Republicans can control the legislative agenda.

Democrats have reason to be optimistic about the U.S. Senate and congressional races, but they don't have the kind of top-of-the-ticket leader that Republicans have in Thompson. Thompson always makes sure he gets out his vote, and political insiders suspect he'll pull out the stops to make sure he comes very close or tops the near 70 percent vote total from 1994 if for no other reason than to elevate his national status. That kind of effort helps Republicans all the way down the ballot.

In 1994, Democrats had U.S. Sen. Herb Kohl's re-election campaign perform that function. In 1996, they had Bill Clinton. But this year, they have Feingold, whose self-limited campaign doesn't have the money to coordinate massive turnout. It likely will be up to the notoriously independent congressional campaigns, the perennially weak party, or the unions. "We've got a problem. It's going to be difficult to get people to the polls," says Sostarich, the former state Democratic Party chairman. "Without a presidential race and if people perceive the governor's race as not highly competitive, we're going to have a turnout problem." This could be a problem for any incumbent with an highly organized opposition, he says, calling it "an incumbents' dilemma" as to how to approach this campaign year.