

Panelists mixed on Walker vulnerability, see Baldwin in strong position for 2018

Posted on Tuesday, Sep 19, 2017

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Panelists at a Sept. 14 WisPolitics.com luncheon at UW-Milwaukee diverged on whether Gov. Scott Walker is vulnerable in 2018 but agreed U.S. Sen. Tammy Baldwin enters her re-election bid in a strong position.

Republican strategist Mark Graul, of the Arena Strategy Group, said Walker will be able to point to things such as increased education funding, lower property taxes and the UW tuition freeze that appeal to voters across the political spectrum.

"I think his hand is as strong as it's ever been as he goes into re-election," Graul said at the luncheon at UW-Milwaukee.

He'll also be able to point to the Foxconn deal.

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"We have an opportunity with Foxconn to bring an entirely new manufacturing sector to our state that could be transformational," Graul said. "What we know is Gov. Walker and governors across the country competed to get those jobs here. He won. That gives him a strong hand going into re-election."

RightWisconsin Editor James Wigderson concurred, noting with the boost in education funding in the state budget, Walker and state Republicans have addressed a key vulnerability.

"That was the one thing when you look at the last election cycle that Republicans were vulnerable on," Wigderson said. "Now they've addressed that issue."

He also said the Foxconn deal will allow Walker to gain support in traditionally Democratic areas in Kenosha and Racine. With the Dem primary field opposed to the \$3 billion subsidy package, Wigderson said Dems are running against economic development and growth.

"I just can't imagine why the Democrats, except for those in Madison, seem to think that this is going to be a winning issue for them," Wigderson said.

Democratic pollster Paul Maslin of FM3 Research pointed to several areas he said makes Walker vulnerable, such as transportation funding and a feeling among portions of the electorate that they haven't benefited from Walker's policies.

He noted that while education spending is up, there are districts in northern Wisconsin, which he described as a key swing area, that are still feeling the impacts of previous K-12 cuts.

Maslin also said the Foxconn deal is a lot of money for not a lot of payoff that only helps one part of the state.

"Believe me, there is going to be plenty of doubt and suspicion about it," Maslin said. "It's not that people are standing in the way of progress or jobs or some success. It's just this particular deal just smells."

Walker also will be unlikely to benefit from a GOP wave next year.

"He's not running in a wave Republican election like 2010 and 2014," Maslin said. "The calculus has changed."

Joe Zepecki, of Zepecki Communications, who was top adviser to former Dem gov candidate Mary Burke, said the late state budget and the GOP's failure to address long-term transportation funding present opportunities for Dems.

"I think that sense of frustration with a process that doesn't work is a key ingredient in what may shape up to be a change election next year," Zepecki said.

He also said even those who may have voted for Walker in the past may be asking questions after he said Walker claimed the state didn't have money for education or roads but finds \$3 billion for Foxconn.

He said Walker has damaged his brand with the Foxconn deal.

"This is a guy who says that the market should decide. That government shouldn't pick winners and losers," Zepecki said "And all of a sudden he's playing a game where he pushed \$3 billion in chips to the center of the table and said this is this is worth 13,000 jobs, maybe, over the next 25 years."

Unlike recent elections, there is a wide primary field and no clear Dem favorite.

Maslin pointed to Hillary Clinton, Russ Feingold, Tom Barrett losses, noting Dems have put up "tried and true" well known candidates but lost.

"So this time, whoever it is is going to be somebody that is either new to the scene totally or new to most of the electorate," Maslin said, adding that the winner may be the one who "catches a wave" and appeals to voters.

But he noted it's also good to be in a position like Walker with a large war chest to take on the eventual nominee on day one, while the primary winner may be low on funds to do the same. Some cover, he said, may come from outside groups in a race that will likely gather national attention.

Graul also raised the possibility the Dem primary could produce a strong candidate that resonates with the electorate.

"As a Republican and a Walker supporter, that's the worry you have is that ... one of these guys or gals is going to figure it out and grab that populism wave" that bolstered Trump and Sanders, Graul said. "I don't see that amongst the field, but frankly, like most folks, I don't know most of the Democratic field very well."

Baldwin, the panelists agreed, is going to be tough to beat in a midterm cycle that generally favors the party opposite the president's, particularly with Trump's lagging poll numbers.

Wigderson said the bid for U.S. Senate represents an "uphill race" for Republicans.

"An unpopular incumbent president is going to be weighing down on the Republican candidate," Wigderson said.

But he noted the GOP has two strong candidates in state Sen. Leah Vukmir and business consultant and Marine veteran Kevin Nicholson.

"That'll help, but I think that Baldwin is a lot stronger than some Republican

believe," he added.

Wigderson said Baldwin is vulnerable, however, over her response to the opioid overprescription scandal at the Tomah VA and voter reaction to the price tag for U.S. Sen. Bernie Sanders' "Medicare for All" health care proposal Baldwin co-sponsored.

Graul agreed it will be difficult to unseat Baldwin, although she may be vulnerable to attacks over health care.

"Baldwin is an exceptional politician and she will be very tough to beat, but I do think government-run healthcare is not going to be popular amongst swing voters in this state," Graul said. "So I think that's going to be something that will be used against her."

The challenge for Vukmir and Nicholson, he said, will be demonstrating they can mount an effective campaign.

"They've got to show that they can put together a really good campaign to beat her," he said. "I think they're capable of it, but time will tell."

Maslin said it's tough to predict how health care will play into the race, and whether the debate will focus on her support for Sanders' plan or whatever happens with GOP or bipartisan efforts on the issue before next November.

He said initial polling on the Sanders plan has been positive, but noted the plan is open to criticism.

"I don't think it's necessarily a huge negative for her as you look forward into next year," Maslin said. "I think that she can argue that's accurate in terms of who she's been for all these years, and she's got the guts to come out and support change."

He also said Baldwin's efforts to support northern Wisconsin in terms of trade issues and protecting jobs and businesses give her a "Wisconsin-esque argument that's also going to protect her against any Republican attack."

Zepecki agreed that Baldwin wouldn't be hurt by her health care stance because "it's authentic to who she is" and because she already won in 2012 despite GOP attacks that she backed "socialized medicine" due to her support for Obamacare.

“That’s when Obamacare was almost at its nadir in terms of unpopularity, and she was able to weather that,” Zepecki said. “So I don’t think that six years down the road when Obamacare is more popular, when she’s talking about a solution or potential solution that she’s always been for, that all of a sudden it’s going to be an 800-pound anchor around her neck.”

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