

Republican Party of Wisconsin: Wisconsin Democrats in such disarray, candidates for governor dropping out or proving untrustworthy

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[Madison, WI]— Wisconsin Democrats are still in disarray. Prospective candidates are continuing to take a pass on runs for governor, as it becomes more clear that they are struggling to find anyone willing to run against the Wisconsin comeback. All the Democrats have left to offer are the same failed policies of yesterday and out-of-touch candidates who are making clear that hard-working Wisconsin families can't trust them.

Read today's coverage of Democrats' disarray in *The Capital Times* below or online [here](#).

Wisconsin's Democratic governor candidates: Who's in, who's out and who's a maybe

The Capital Times

Jessie Opoien

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Eighteen months from Wisconsin's next gubernatorial election, Gov. Scott Walker's candidacy is all but certain — although he has said he won't announce anything until after the state budget is complete. In the meantime, Democrats have watched

their list of potential candidates narrow significantly over the last year.

The last few months have yielded more potential Democratic candidates declining to run than entering the race, leading Walker supporters to speculate that Democrats are afraid to challenge the governor, who has already won two gubernatorial elections and fought off a recall attempt. Walker's approval rating reached 45 percent in March, the highest it's been since just before he won re-election in 2014.

"With a steady stream of prospective candidates taking a pass it's clear that Democrats are in deeper disarray than ever before and struggling to find anyone willing to run against the Wisconsin comeback," Republican Party of Wisconsin spokesman Alec Zimmerman said in an emailed statement. "Wisconsin's economic outlook is bright, and while Governor Walker continues fighting for Wisconsin's hard-working families, all Democrats can do is offer the same failed policies of yesterday and out-of-touch candidates whose judgment makes clear Wisconsinites can't trust them."

Senate Minority Leader Jennifer Shilling, D-La Crosse, viewed as a strong contender had she chosen to run, said in December she would not run in 2018. Congressman Ron Kind, a perennial "maybe," made the same announcement in March, along with businessman Mark Bakken. Later that month, former state Sen. Tim Cullen, D-Janesville, bowed out after laying months of groundwork, citing the overwhelming challenge of fundraising. Dane County Executive Joe Parisi said in April he would focus on his work in local government rather than launching a statewide campaign. So far, just one Democrat has officially declared his candidacy: 25-year-old Bob Harlow. But liberals are quick to argue that Democrats have plenty of time to field more candidates, pointing to the fact that Walker himself didn't announce his candidacy for the 2010 race until late April 2009.

"After a failed run for president, presiding over a sputtering state economy that has fallen to 32nd in the nation in private sector job growth, and a transportation infrastructure that is the 4th worst in the nation, Gov. Walker is vulnerable in 2018," Democratic Party of Wisconsin spokesman Brandon Weathersby said in an emailed statement. "We are always speaking with potential candidates who have any interest in running for Governor next year. Our process will continue and we'll field a top-notch candidate to take back the Governor's mansion, turn our state around, and give every Wisconsinite a fair opportunity to achieve the American Dream."

The Cap Times checked in with a few of those potential candidates to see where they are in their decision-making processes. The following people have either expressed interest in running or have been suggested as possible candidates by political observers:

Bob Harlow: Harlow, 25, grew up in Barneveld and returned in Wisconsin in August after graduating from Stanford University with a physics degree. He lost a primary election for Congress in California last year, and is the only declared Democratic gubernatorial candidate in Wisconsin. He said in an interview he has wanted to run for office in Wisconsin for most of his life.

"I'm running because I really want to see a strong future for Wisconsin, and so, I think the things we need to do to get there have not been discussed in politics. So, I got in, and I want to make sure that we do do the things we need to do and secure a very strong future for the state of Wisconsin," Harlow said.

A centerpiece of Harlow's campaign platform is a pledge to install a high-speed train line, the cost of which would be shared by Minnesota, Illinois and the federal government, he said.

Harlow said he is meeting with voters throughout the state and his message is being "very enthusiastically received." His campaign infrastructure is "heavily reliant on automation" so resources can be spent sending people door-to-door, he said. The campaign is "doing very well in fundraising," he said, but declined to share specific totals.

Harlow had \$43 in his campaign account at the end of 2016, after about two months of campaigning, according to his most recent finance report.

Andy Gronik: Gronik is "actively working to make a decision soon," he said in an email.

The Milwaukee businessman behind GroBiz, a company that advises businesses, launched a political nonprofit called Stage W last year with a stated mission of "bridging the political divide." Stage W's website offers policy prescriptions for education and job creation, including urban farming, a jobs concierge service, virtual internships and flexible spending plans for school districts.

"Instead of fixing the problems he's being paid to fix, Walker is systematically dismantling our state because he can't figure out how to grow it," Gronik, 59, said. "I'm not a politician and I don't play games — I just dig in and get stuff done. I've spent my entire life solving tough problems so things can move forward and grow. It's going to take someone from the outside with the guts, vision and strength to

buck this broken system and get us back on track.”

The Republican Party of Wisconsin filed a complaint against Gronik with the state ethics commission last month alleging Stage W is a “campaign in waiting.” The complaint followed a Milwaukee Journal Sentinel report that Gronik had paid for a poll to assist with his decision, asking for voters’ opinions on policies ranging from Act 10 to the state’s voucher school system. Gronik has not yet taken a public position on Act 10, an issue that has been used as a litmus test for Democratic support since it was passed.

Matt Flynn: *Flynn, 69, is “very, very seriously considering” a campaign, he said in an interview.*

A commercial litigation partner with Quarles & Brady in Milwaukee, Flynn served as chairman of the Democratic Party of Wisconsin from 1981 to 1985. He mounted several unsuccessful campaigns for the U.S. House of Representatives and Senate, co-chaired John Kerry’s 2004 presidential campaign in Wisconsin and served on Hillary Clinton’s finance committee during her 2008 presidential campaign.

“I think the Republican Party is destroying our democracy in Washington in Madison,” Flynn said. “These people attack health care, they attack public education, they dismantle labor unions. They’re destroying the wealth of the middle class.”

Flynn said he’s considering whether he’s the right person to unify Wisconsin Democrats after the 2016 election, which highlighted divisions between Clinton supporters and Bernie Sanders supporters. He expects to decide “sooner rather than later.”

Kathleen Vinehout: *Vinehout, 58, said she is still considering a run.*

“I haven’t set a deadline. Campaigns are too long. We have just finished one and voters aren’t ready to start another,” Vinehout said in an email. “What I find very motivating is individuals from all parts of the state are encouraging me to run, both in personal conversations and by leaving messages on the kathleenvinehout.org website, and offering to help. I am motivated. But I don’t have a deadline.”

The Alma Democrat has served in the state Senate since 2007. She won 4 percent of the vote in the Democratic primary in the 2012 recall election, and briefly considered a bid in 2014. Vinehout’s Senate term will be up in 2018, so she’ll have to choose between running for re-election and running for governor.

Vinehout had \$6,490 in her campaign account according to her latest campaign finance report, filed in January.

Dana Wachs: *Wachs, 59, is still considering a run. The Eau Claire Democrat was elected unopposed to the state Assembly in 2012 and won his first contested state-level race in November.*

Wachs said he had no interest in competing in a primary with Bakken, a friend of his.

“Now he’s out of it, and so I’ve got a chorus of people that are calling me and asking me to consider doing it, and we’re looking at this very hard,” Wachs said in an interview.

Wachs had about \$16,500 in his campaign account at the end of last year, according to his most recent finance report.

Susan Happ: *Happ, 45, said she has not yet made a decision.*

“I’m still looking at the political landscape and what decision would be best for me and my family,” she said in an email.

The Jefferson County district attorney emerged from a three-way Democratic primary to challenge then-Waukesha County District Attorney Brad Schimel in the 2014 attorney general race, but lost with 46 percent of the vote. Happ told the Cap Times last year she was “not ruling anything out,” whether it be a gubernatorial bid, another campaign for attorney general or something else.

Happ had just shy of \$33,200 in her campaign account at the end of 2016, according to her most recent finance report.

Gordon Hintz: *Hintz, 43, has been floated from time to time as a potential contender. He was first elected to his seat in the state Assembly in 2006.*

“I’m focused right now on the state budget as a member of Joint Finance,” he said in a text message. “This gives me the opportunity to challenge the governor’s priorities that have left our schools, infrastructure and environment in worse shape while making the case for how Wisconsin could be investing in greater opportunity for all people going forward. I plan on playing an important role in the 2018 cycle.”

Hintz was once considered to be headed for a gubernatorial bid, but earned negative attention in 2011 for a sexual misconduct citation issued in connection with a prostitution sting at an Appleton massage parlor. A frequent Walker critic, Hintz often weighs in as a member of the budget committee on issues ranging from transportation funding to tax policy.

Hintz had about \$32,300 in his campaign account at the end of last year, according to his most recent finance report.

Mahlon Mitchell: *The 40-year-old president of the Professional Fire Fighters Association of Wisconsin said it's too early to decide.*

"I appreciate the support I have received thus far but I believe it is still early," Mitchell said.

Mitchell ran unsuccessfully against Lt. Gov. Rebecca Kleefisch in the 2012 recall effort to unseat her and Walker. He told the Cap Times last year he doesn't rule it out when people suggest he run for office, though wasn't sure what office that might be.

Mitchell had about \$6,800 in his campaign account in 2014, the last time he reported activity in the fund.

Jon Erpenbach: *Erpenbach's name has been floated over the last several years as a potential candidate, but hasn't pursued a gubernatorial campaign. He could not be reached for comment on this story.*

Erpenbach, 56, has represented the state's 27th Senate District since 1998. The Middleton Democrat is a frequent Walker critic as a member of the Legislature's Joint Finance Committee, and was one of 14 Democratic senators to leave the state in 2011 in an effort to block the governor's controversial Act 10 legislation.

Erpenbach had just shy of \$3,400 in his campaign account at the end of 2016, according to his most recent finance report.

Daniel Speckhard: *Speckhard, 57, has been mentioned as a potential candidate and has already been the subject of criticism from the right. The former U.S. ambassador to Greece and Belarus and current president and CEO of Lutheran World Relief did not respond to an email seeking comment.*

Mike McCabe: *McCabe is "willing" to run, he said, but he's not sure whether it would be as a Democrat, Republican or something else.*

The former head of the Wisconsin Democracy Campaign, McCabe founded the nonprofit group Blue Jean Nation in 2015 with the goal of restructuring the priorities of the country's political parties.

McCabe, 56, announced his willingness to run this week, after a group of 190 people published a letter encouraging him to do it. He said he's "honored that they see in

in me the qualities they're looking for."

"I think what they've all got in common is they really have lost faith that if they stand on the sidelines and wait for the parties to decide for them who they get to choose from, that they'll be satisfied," McCabe said in an interview. "They really feel like they need to take matters into their own hands, and I think that's inspiring that they're doing that."

Wisconsin has "slipped badly" and fallen behind other states, McCabe said. McCabe ran as a Democrat against now-Congressman Mark Pocan for the state Assembly in 1998, but also worked for three Republican legislators. He would feel most comfortable running as a nonpartisan, he said, but he recognizes the challenges of running as a third-party candidate.

"It's going to take some persuading for me to not conclude that you have to accept that this is a two-party system and run in a party primary," McCabe said. "It obviously is something that is going to have to get decided fairly soon, but I think the most likely path is to crash a party."