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State GOP Chair Courtney: Republicans focused on beating Baldwin in 2018

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Since becoming state GOP chair in 2011, Brad Courtney has seen Scott Walker become the first governor in U.S. history to fend off a recall, Republicans expand their majorities in both houses of the Legislature and his party's nominee win Wisconsin's electoral votes for the first time since 1984.

But he's got one piece of unfinished business — beating Tammy Baldwin.

"We have one more Senate seat we need to take," Courtney said in a WisPolitics.com interview ahead of next week's state convention.

Going into last year's meeting of party activists, Courtney said Wisconsin was in the golden age of Republican and conservative politics. Since then, he's added U.S. Sen. Ron Johnson's re-election and Donald Trump's win in Wisconsin, declaring next weekend's convention in the Wisconsin Dells will be a celebration of those successes.

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While Baldwin, D-Madison, is a top target next fall for Republicans here and nationally, the GOP still doesn't have a formal challenger on deck. Several potential candidates are looking into next year's race: businessman Eric Hovde, Senate Majority Leader Scott Fitzgerald, former Marine and business consultant Kevin Nicholson, political newcomer Nicole Schneider and Sen. Leah Vukmir.

Courtney called it a talented group and said any of them would provide a clear contrast to Baldwin.

Five years ago, a contested GOP primary left then-nominee Tommy Thompson bruised and drained of campaign funds. But Courtney said he'd be fine if a primary developed this time. He said his job in the meantime will be to put together the best ground game the state has ever seen.

"In talking to potential candidates, I'll go, 'My promise to you is we have a late primary so we'll have the best infrastructure in place so whoever wins they can hit the ground running so we can have victory against Tammy next fall,'" he said.

The GOP has been pushing a message that Dems are in "disarray" because they don't have a top-tier candidate who has announced plans to take on Walker next fall. Courtney defended that rhetoric at the same time his party doesn't have an announced challenger for Baldwin, saying it's two different situations.

"We have several people seriously looking at it where every other day you see another top-notch Democrat saying, 'I don't want to run,'" Courtney said. "I think that bodes well for us."

The only election cycle that hasn't gone well for Republicans during Courtney's tenure was 2012, when President Obama was at the top of the ticket. But now, Republicans are expected to face headwinds in 2018 with their party in control of the White House.

And while Trump won Wisconsin last year, his polling numbers have been upside down with state voters over the first few months of his term. A Marquette University Law School Poll in March found Trump, who won Wisconsin with 47.2 percent of the vote, had a job approval rating of 41 percent among registered voters.

Courtney said "of course" Wisconsin Republicans are going to embrace Trump while on the campaign trail, saying he's done a good job. What's more, "good results" out of Washington, D.C., including this week's vote on the House GOP health care bill, will keep those Trump voters engaged for next year.

Still, Courtney said Wisconsin Republicans have their own record to run on and will remind voters where the state was in 2010 before they took control of the Capitol. He said that's one drawback to being in charge for so long — people forget what it was like when Dems ran the Capitol.

"In Wisconsin, we have fundamentally transformed the state," Courtney said.

“Again, we just have to remind the voters where we were.”

When Courtney took office in 2011 to replace Reince Priebus, many saw Walker’s influence at play. The two have been close for years, and Courtney worked on Walker’s 2010 guv race.

Now 58, Courtney said he hadn’t been asked before this week’s WisPolitics.com interview when he might leave his post as chair after winning another two-year term in December.

“My wife won’t let me quit, and the governor won’t let me quit,” Courtney said. “We’re doing good things, and that’s really what it’s all about.”

Listen to the full interview:
https://soundcloud.com/wispolitics/170504_002a/s-Mk3q7