

Nicholson, Vukmir agree to sign state GOP's unity pledge

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Senate candidates Kevin Nicholson and Leah Vukmir Wednesday agreed to sign a unity pledge from the Wisconsin GOP so they'll be eligible to win the party's endorsement at the state convention in May.

Winning the party's backing would be a significant boost for any candidate in winning the nomination in the August primary considering it comes with access to things such as the state GOP's donor lists, infrastructure and turnout machine.

The pledge to back the eventual nominee against Dem U.S. Sen. Tammy Baldwin comes after Nicholson backers have knocked Vukmir as a "RINO" and the GOP state senator has questioned the conservative credentials of her opponent, who was president of the national College Democrats in 2000.

The Wisconsin GOP also announced that U.S. Sen. Ron Johnson, who won the party's endorsement at the 2010 state convention, will chair the process at this year's meeting, which will take place May 11-13 in Milwaukee.

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"We've all witnessed what happens when Washington, D.C.-based 'political experts' of all kinds get involved in U.S. Senate races," said Johnson, who saw national groups abandon his race last year until the very end. "Here in Wisconsin, the grassroots have a track record of nominating candidates who reflect our values — not Washington's — and we can do it again to defeat Tammy Baldwin this fall."

Republicans have watched divisive primaries pop up in other states with a clash between candidates backed by former Trump adviser Steve Bannon and those supported by Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell, R-Ky.

Nicholson has won the backing of a super PAC linked to Bannon, while Vukmir met with Bannon as well.

“Kevin of course will sign the unity pledge, and he hopes that all Republicans will unite behind our nominee to defeat Baldwin,” said Nicholson aide Brandon Moody.

Vukmir said, “As a lifelong Republican, I’ve always supported the party nominee and you can bet I’ll be doing everything I can this November to make sure Wisconsin has a senator who believes in the Wisconsin way.”

Under the party’s endorsement process, delegates attending the state convention will vote on whether to back a candidate in contested statewide primaries. To win the endorsement, a candidate has to receive 60 percent of the vote.

Along with being eligible for the endorsement, signing the pledge gives them access to the list of delegates who have attended past conventions as well those who will be in Milwaukee for the vote. That will allow candidates to begin courting party delegates.

In addition to supporting the eventual nominee, the pledge says candidates must conduct their campaigns “in a manner that is respectful of my fellow Republican candidates.” But the party said it doesn’t to police the ads or comments contenders make.

Dems knocked the party’s push for a show of unity.

“The fact that Wisconsin Republicans need a unity pledge shows how nasty their primary has become, but — no matter who the nominee is — both Vukmir and Nicholson are willing put their billionaire donors and special interests ahead Wisconsin by driving up the cost of health care and working to cut Wisconsinites’ Social Security and Medicare,” said Dem spokesman Brad Bainum.

The pledge also includes a line about respecting the endorsement process and operating “within the confines of the rules of convention.” Some party officials have had concerns the process could become contentious.

In 2010, then-gov candidate Mark Neumann tried to pull his name off the endorsement ballot ahead of convention, saying the voters should decide the nominee, not a roomful of activists. That attempt was rejected, and then-Milwaukee County Exec Scott Walker overwhelmingly won the endorsement vote on his way to

winning the gov's office.

Two years later, Neumann's campaign challenged the credentials and membership status of some delegates behind the scenes ahead of the endorsement vote as he sought the GOP nomination for U.S. Senate.

Both Neumann campaigns were led by Chip Englander, who worked as a consultant for Nicholson, but left in the fall. Englander was expected to join Solutions for Wisconsin, a super PAC backing Nicholson.

In the 2012 endorsement vote, none of the four GOP U.S. Senate candidates in the race crossed the threshold of 60 percent needed. Former Gov. Tommy Thompson won the contentious primary, but many Republicans believe it drained his resources and left him bruised before he lost to Baldwin.

Read the pledge:

<https://www.wisgop.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/Endorsement-Committee--Candidate-Pledge-2018.pdf>