

# Hitt says GOP's 2018 postmortem shows need for grassroots focus

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The state GOP's postmortem of the 2018 elections found the party focused too much on advertising at the expense of engaging the grassroots, new Chair Andrew Hitt told WisPolitics.com in giving the first public overview of the report.

Hitt said the report suggests the state GOP needs to re-focus on congressional and county parties to give those activists the data they need to personally engage neighbors and friends to turn out and vote.

Still, Hitt said he didn't think anyone with the party did anything wrong in 2018. Instead, he believes there was some complacency. And after eight years of Scott Walker in office, the party's focus became the gov.

Campaign finance reports show the state GOP transferred nearly \$5.2 million to Walker's campaign between October 2017 and November 2018.

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"I think RPW needs to be a grassroots-organizing organization and not an extension of a political campaign," said Hitt, a partner and chief operating officer with Michael Best Strategies who was elected to lead the party April 13.

The party did the postmortem after losing all statewide constitutional offices last fall and seeing U.S. Sen. Tammy Baldwin, D-Madison, win re-election by more than 10 percentage points. The effort included members of the party's executive committee, as well as U.S. Sen. Ron Johnson, R-Oshkosh, and legislative leaders Scott Fitzgerald, the Senate majority leader, and Robin Vos, the Assembly speaker. Hitt said it involved interviews with county parties, donors and party stakeholders to gauge the GOP's strengths and weaknesses.

Hitt declined to release the full report until other party officials have had more time to review it. But he provided an overview of the findings in an interview this week.

“We need to balance it out with having a robust data program and a robust grassroots program,” Hitt said.

Hitt said one example of the changes he plans to make following the report is to better share the party’s voter file with local parties so those activists know who to target in their turnout efforts. Hitt said while it’s used by GOP candidates, the file could be better utilized by others on the ground as well.

He also pointed to this spring’s state Supreme Court race as an example of the power of the party’s grassroots.

A WisPolitics.com tally found independent groups spent \$3.2 million backing Lisa Neubauer, compared to \$1.7 million supporting conservative Brian Hagedorn. What’s more, Neubauer outraised her fellow appeals court judge with more than \$1.7 million through the pre-election period, compared to Hagedorn’s nearly \$1.3 million.

But Hagedorn eked out a nearly 6,000-vote win out of more than 1.2 million cast.

Hitt said the party’s focus leading up to that race was on the grassroots.

The party made \$134,168 in in-kind donations to Hagedorn, who transferred \$150,000 to the state GOP in the weeks leading up to the April 2 election. By law, a donor can’t earmark money given to a committee, and Hagedorn’s campaign said it was transferred for GOTV and party activities.

Hitt said the transaction might seem odd when compared to the 2018 Supreme Court race, in which the party gave conservative Michael Screnock \$412,905 and was his biggest donor. That money accounted for 38 percent of what he raised in losing to liberal Rebecca Dallet.

Still, Hitt said the party didn’t have the same resources going into this spring’s race after the 2018 elections.

He also believes engaging the party’s activists helped Hagedorn combat the money disadvantage and negative headlines over his past writings.

“I think the grassroots are the fight against the tide,” he said.

See more from the interview in the [April 26 REPORT](#).