

Wisconsin primary history

Posted on Monday, Sep 9, 2019

Wisconsin again is highlighted on the maps of war rooms manned by the staffs and consultants of Democratic presidential hopefuls.

And the 2020 spring primary will have added importance since it is in a state that will host the national convention and where Democrats are trying to unseat a Republican president who demolished Hillary Clinton's "blue wall" in 2016.

It wouldn't be the first time that Wisconsin's primary voters were in a position to help elect a president. Most famously, the Wisconsin primary helped catapult John F. Kennedy in 1960 and Jimmy Carter in 1976 to the nomination and the presidency.

In 1960, Kennedy beat Hubert H. Humphrey, who hailed from neighboring Minnesota.

In 1976, Carter upset Mo Udall on his way to an improbable march from the Georgia statehouse to the White House. The lasting image is one of a beaming Carter holding up the early edition of the old Milwaukee Sentinel, Truman style. The headline read: "Carter Upset by Udall."

In 2004, John Edwards helped prolong the Democratic primary fight a little longer with a close second-place finish to eventual nominee John Kerry. Kerry ended up with about 40 percent to Edwards' 34 percent, with one-time frontrunner Howard Dean finishing a distant third at 18 percent, pretty much putting his candidacy to rest. Then in the general election, Kerry edged George Bush in one of the closest state contests, separated by only about 12,000 votes.

Robert "Fighting Bob" La Follette would like the way Wisconsin is in the spotlight. The progressive icon who ran for president but never made it pushed hard for an open primary system to wrest control of politics from the party bosses. In 1905, according to the Milwaukee Journal, the Wisconsin Legislature passed "the nation's first law providing for direct election of all delegates to national party conventions."

The open primary system was used for the first time in 1906. And in 1911, Wisconsin's primary law was expanded to include presidential candidates. The first presidential primary was held in April 1912. Until then, party leaders selected the

candidates.

Added Milwaukee Journal writer Patrick Reardon in 1976: "The stalwarts were vanquished, the bosses were out for good, and the caucus system was dead. Wisconsin took the final major step in 1911, when it followed the lead of Oregon and provided an outright preference vote for president and vice president, in addition to direct election of pledged convention delegates."

The other La Follette legacy is the open primary, which allows any registered voter to cast a ballot — no matter which party. Wisconsin doesn't have registration by party, so crossover voting in primaries can be a factor, and is often used as the scapegoat by losing candidates. Crossover voting often is cited as a major reason for George Wallace's strong showings in Wisconsin primaries over the years.

It's also one of the reasons national reporters often have flocked to Wisconsin. The outcome isn't always predictable.

"Of all fifty states of the union," Theodore White writes in his classic "The Making of the President 1960," "Wisconsin is probably that state in which professional politicians most hate to tempt a primary. It was Wisconsin, as a matter of fact, that in 1903 first invented the presidential primary, which so many other states have since copied. And the political philosophy that inspired that revolutionary invention has made and left Wisconsin in political terms an unorganized state, a totally unpredictable state, a state whose primaries have over many quadrennials proved the graveyard of great men's presidential ambitions."

Humphrey, the liberal favorite from the neighboring state of Minnesota, lost in 1960 to Kennedy and finished third in a field of six major candidates in the 1972 primary, behind George McGovern and Wallace.

Here are some highlights of Wisconsin's Democratic presidential primaries over the years:

1960: This race is political lore, thanks to White's book, the legends of Camelot and the big names involved. A biography of former Gov. Gaylord Nelson, written by veteran campaign consultant Bill Christofferson and published by the University of Wisconsin Press, gives a behind-the-scenes view of Nelson's precarious fence-straddling. Nelson, up for re-election in November 1960, sensed it didn't do him any good to make Dems mad by endorsing. He tried to discourage a showdown in

Wisconsin and opted for neutrality, reports Christofferson, who quotes Nelson saying: "... They're working hard for someone they really believe in (for president), and that goddamn governor, who they support, is trying to beat their candidate. That's nothing but a loser." Nelson's stance helped lead to hard feelings between Nelson and then state party Chair Pat Lucey (later governor), a big Kennedy backer. Nelson turned out to be right. Nelson won re-election in the fall, and the Stevenson-Humphrey wing of the party in and around liberal Madison blamed Lucey for the outcome and voted against him in later primaries for governor, Christofferson reports. Kennedy won with 56 percent of the vote in the first head-to-head with Humphrey, an important win on his way to the White House.

1964: This is the first time George Wallace's influence was felt in Wisconsin. Democratic Gov. John Reynolds ran as a favorite-son stand-in for President Lyndon Johnson, but Wallace got a big chunk of the vote (in second place with more than 260,000 votes to Reynolds' 500,000-plus). This was an embarrassment to the party and to LBJ. A New York Times report from Atlanta called Wallace's surprisingly strong showing "a decided setback for civil rights advocates" and "a challenge to President Johnson's popularity." Upon returning to Montgomery, Wallace told a cheering crowd, "I want you to start eating Wisconsin cheese. ... The liberal politicians in both parties and Washington had their eyeteeth shaken." Republicans conceded a big crossover vote probably helped Wallace, but Democrats maintained the results still represented a victory over bigotry.

1968: Antiwar candidate Eugene McCarthy got 40 percent of the vote in the New Hampshire presidential primary, seriously embarrassing Johnson. Then Robert Kennedy entered the race. The April 2 Wisconsin primary was next, and the outlook was bleak for the president, according to Christofferson's biography of Gaylord Nelson. A Democratic National Committee memo to the White House had warned in December that Wisconsin was "a state fraught with problems for the administration. We are faced with limited pro-Johnson loyalties in a land where (the) Kennedys made great friendships and where the Vice President (Humphrey)'s friends of 1960 seem to be in good numbers anti-Vietnam in 1967," the memo warned. "It is a state where our message has not been told. The facts and our side of Vietnam have just not penetrated." A Wisconsin poll a week before the primary indicated Johnson was likely to get less than half the vote. A national Gallup Poll showed only a 36 percent job approval rating for Johnson and 26 percent approval for his handling of Vietnam. Then on March 31, 1968, Johnson stunned the nation with an announcement that he wouldn't seek re-election. It came after a speech in which he announced a halt to

air raids and naval shelling of North Vietnam and invited Hanoi to negotiate a settlement. Thirty-six hours later, the polls opened in Wisconsin, with McCarthy and Richard Nixon the only active candidates on the ballot. That ended predictions of a record turnout and a huge Republican crossover vote against Johnson. Voters gave McCarthy 56.2 percent of the vote to Johnson's 34.6. Write-ins gave Kennedy 6.3 percent.

1972: Wisconsin's primary proved to be a turning point for many campaigns. McGovern's victory, as the New York Times' R.W. Apple reported, established the South Dakota senator "as a serious contender for the Democratic presidential nomination." Both McGovern and second-place Wallace exceeded expectations, and McGovern went on to get the nomination before getting crushed by President Nixon's re-election campaign. Ed Muskie, once the frontrunner, received a near-fatal blow with a fourth-place finish. Humphrey was denied in Wisconsin yet again and his campaign flagged. New York Mayor John Lindsay dropped out after his loss. And Sen. Henry Jackson kept slogging along for a little while. Lucey, now governor, was neutral like Nelson had been in '60.

1976: Christofferson, a former Wisconsin State Journal reporter, wrote in 2004 that "Wisconsin's last significant presidential primary, in 1976, produced a major upset, a photo finish, victory speeches from two candidates, and even a classic 'Dewey Defeats Truman'-style headline." By the time of the April primary, the 10-candidate field had narrowed to four – Congressman Morris Udall of Arizona, Sen. Henry (Scoop) Jackson of Washington, Gov. George Wallace of Alabama, and former Gov. Jimmy Carter of Georgia. Sen. Fred Harris of Oklahoma also campaigned in the state but ran out of money and ended his campaign just before the primary. Wrote Christofferson, "Udall's liberal politics made him the choice of most of the elected officials and party activists, and he started early to build a statewide grassroots organization. ... Wallace was running to send a message on behalf of disenchanted voters. Jackson was running as a more conservative, pro-defense candidate with the backing of the building trades unions. Harris was an unabashed populist who quoted Woody Guthrie and railed against privilege. Then there was Jimmy Carter, virtually unknown to Wisconsin Democratic party members and voters in the state's open primary. Carter spoke to the Wisconsin delegation at the Democrats' mid-term convention in Kansas City in late 1974, but made no converts. He had a small core of supporters but no real organization in Wisconsin. ... That all changed when Carter put together a string of early caucus and primary victories, beginning in Iowa and New Hampshire. Suddenly, the unknown Carter was on the covers of Time and

Newsweek, and the talk of the television pundits. ...Udall desperately needed a victory to slow Carter's momentum."

But he didn't get it.

Carter's final margin was 7,500 votes, a 1 percent edge, 37 percent to 36 percent. Carter got one more convention delegate than Udall. "But Carter won the election, got the headlines, and continued to build the head of steam that carried him to the nomination," Christofferson concluded.

1984: The DNC sought to crack down on open primaries, so Wisconsin set up a beauty contest followed by caucuses to pick delegates. Gary Hart won the beauty contest over Walter Mondale, 46 percent to 43 percent. Jesse Jackson followed with 10 percent. That was on an early April Tuesday. Then on Saturday, Mondale won the caucuses by a 2-to-1 margin. Hart finished second and Jackson finished third.

— *Sources include WisPolitics.com and newspaper archives.*