

Hitt interview: GOP convention lays groundwork for crucial 2022 election

Posted on Friday, Jun 25, 2021

Ahead of this weekend's state GOP convention, party chair Andrew Hitt says the message will be all about preparing the ground game for the important 2022 election cycle.

In an interview with WisPolitics.com, Hitt highlighted Wisconsin's seemingly perpetual purple-ness, noting "it's a game of inches" to get Republican candidates to a plurality in statewide races.

"We've had great successes over the years, but statewide recently we've struggled to get over the top," he said regarding narrow losses by former Gov. Scott Walker and former President Trump.

He was asked whether there would be the usual swing back against the party in power in DC and how that would affect the races for governor and U.S. Senate. Said Hitt, "I think we certainly can't just rely on that historical norm or past that says there would be an environment that favors us in this coming cycle. There are challenges. There are headwinds. We have to focus locally."

>> WisPolitics is now on the State Affairs network. Get custom keyword notifications, bill tracking and all WisPolitics content. [Get the app or access via desktop.](#)

The key, Hitt said, will be to keep the focus on Dem Gov. Tony Evers' track record and "why we need to send him into retirement." He highlighted previous unemployment benefits payment backlogs at the Department of Workforce Development through the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic as one possible area of attack.

Additionally, Hitt said he hopes to avoid any potentially divisive rhetoric in the expected primary battle in order to keep the party united against Evers.

No Republicans have so far officially announced bids for the governorship, but former Lt. Gov. Rebecca Kleefisch and 2018 U.S. Senate candidate Kevin Nicholson have been laying the groundwork. Hitt said he suspects others might also jump in the race.

Meanwhile, the U.S. Senate race will be one of the top contests in the country. Republican U.S. Sen. Ron Johnson has yet to announce whether he will seek another term, and Hitt said he can see Johnson waiting until as late as February of next year to decide. But that hasn't stopped the Oshkosh Republican from attending fundraisers, county GOP events and meeting with constituents across the state.

Hitt said he thinks Johnson's top priority, whether he decides to run or not, is to make sure his seat in the equally divided Senate stays in GOP hands.

Johnson since the 2020 election has essentially doubled down on backing Trump. He's garnered support with Trump's base by using his power while chair of the Senate Homeland Security Committee to investigate conspiracy theories surrounding Hunter Biden and by sowing doubt about the legitimacy of Biden's victory. Trump has even endorsed him for another term even though he has yet to formally declare for reelection.

Hitt said that while Johnson has catered to the Trump base and echoes some of the former president's political style, he also has "cross-appeal" and could very well win support from moderates in 2022 as well as Trump supporters. Johnson in 2016 outperformed Trump on the Wisconsin ticket, winning 50 percent of the vote in his race compared to Trump's 47 percent of the vote.

But the Wisconsin GOP going forward won't solely be the party of Trump, according to Hitt.

Prominent state Republicans like former House Speaker Paul Ryan and former 8th CD U.S. Rep. Reid Ribble have called for the party to move away from Trump. Ribble has even joined a coalition of former lawmakers threatening to break away from the party and form a new one if it doesn't branch out its priorities beyond supporting Trump.

Hitt called the GOP a "big tent" party that has room for the likes of Ryan and Ribble, as well as Trump. He praised Trump's time in office, saying Biden's "reaping the benefits" of the "good situation" he inherited.

“We have to make sure we acknowledge his accomplishments,” he said. “But going forward, it is a greater party than just about one person, and it always has been.”

Listen to the interview [here](#).