

Wikler anxious for organizers to hit the doors again

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Dem state Chair Ben Wikler says it's time to get back in the field.

Though the party has won six of the last seven statewide top-of-the-ticket races, Joe Biden's victory by fewer than 21,000 votes last fall came as Dem field organizers remained virtual during the COVID-19 pandemic while their GOP counterparts hit the doors.

Wikler told WisPolitics.com in a new interview going into this weekend's state party convention that face-to-face interaction is essential. He says it's one of the best ways to break through what he sees as political polarization driven by conservative media and social media.

"It was the right decision from a public health perspective," he said. "But it was definitely a political cost, and I think going forward we have the opportunity to get out there and mix it up with people in a way that I'm really excited about."

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Wikler heads into the virtual convention this weekend unopposed for another two-year term and coming off a record-breaking fundraising year. In the runup to the 2020 election, the party reported \$57.5 million in receipts between collections through its state and federal accounts, along with transfers from other committees.

While the party helped put Wisconsin's electoral votes back in the Dem column, those superior financial resources didn't translate into a lot of down-ballot success. Dems lost two seats in the state Senate, but picked up two in the Assembly — enough to prevent the veto-proof majority Republicans sought.

Wikler argued the cycle was still a success in terms of legislative races because

polls and conventional metrics missed the Donald Trump voters who showed up in 2020 and voted for Republicans down ballot as well. That resulted in only a handful of legislative races in Wisconsin being close. Of the Dems' losses in the Assembly, only four were within 5 points.

Compared to other states, Wikler argued, Wisconsin Dems did well to essentially break even.

"I think we would've done even better if we would've been able to use every tactic," Wikler said.

Wikler said the party will begin canvassing efforts this summer. There is a special election in the Watertown-area 37th AD next month. Though it's a strong GOP seat, Wikler said he plans to hit some doors himself in the district.

The party will also reach out to voters about Gov. Tony Evers' budget and President Biden's efforts to stimulate the economy, including the monthly child tax credit payments that will begin showing up for some Wisconsinites in mid-July.

"We want to make sure people know that Ron Johnson voted against that support, that Tammy Baldwin voted for it," Wikler said, previewing one of the themes Dems will use against Johnson if he runs for reelection next year.

"If they want to get that kind of help that every family deserves, they've got to make sure they're electing Democrats in 2022. This can't be a one-off thing."

Wikler acknowledged there could be a headwind for Dems in the upcoming midterm election now that they are the party in power in the White House.

The No. 1 goal for Dems next year, he said, is to turn out voters who were driven to the polls in 2020 to vote against Trump. On the flip side, Wikler added, the top challenge for Republicans is to get Trump voters to turn out again.

That's even more pressing given Wisconsin's 2022 line-up: a governor's race that is Dems' best option to hold back the GOP drive to overhaul election procedures in Wisconsin; a U.S. Senate contest that could determine the majority; a key House race with U.S. Rep. Ron Kind, D-La Crosse, likely a top GOP target; and legislative races under new maps.

"Even if everything was rosy, we have to expect the kind of political backlash you

usually get when the White House changes hands,” Wikler said. “We have to make sure that voters who turned out to defeat the existential threat of Donald Trump turn out again when the president isn’t on the ballot.”

He said the operation the party has in place now is far larger than it had been at the same point in 2015, 2017 or 2019, underscoring that campaigning and organizing has become a year-round operation, even in off years.

“We certainly want people to take breaks, give themselves the space they need,” Wikler said. “But it’s not like we’re going dark for this summer. This is a party that’s organizing across the state, and then we’re going to keep accelerating through 2022.”

Listen to the interview [here](#).