

# Bill Kaplan: Mandela Barnes can defeat Ron Johnson

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The 2022 midterm elections no longer look like a GOP tsunami. Democrats have inched ahead of Republicans in the generic congressional ballot (538 polls). Moreover, Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell told reporters that the GOP might not flip the Senate (Washington Post). He said: "Senate races are just different. They're statewide; candidate quality has a lot to do with the outcome." Perhaps McConnell was thinking of Wisconsin GOP Senator Ron Johnson's reelection. A foot-in-mouth candidate.

Additionally, Democratic challenger Mandela Barnes received encouragement from recent polls. The Marquette University Law School Poll gave Barnes a 7-point lead over Johnson. And, the poll said Barnes led Johnson by 14-points among independent voters. Then FOX News reported its poll showed Barnes up by 4 points over Johnson. At the same time the National Republican Senatorial Committee (NRSC) slashed millions in TV ad buys for Senate races, including in Wisconsin.

However, it's early. Wisconsin Democrats have seen this movie before. In 2016, Democratic challenger Russ Feingold led Johnson by double-digits. "(The) NRSC pulled TV money out of the state ..." (Politico). But as Election Day neared frontrunner Feingold's lead collapsed. Lesson: always run as an underdog and take nothing for granted.

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Nonetheless, I am hopeful that Barnes can defeat Johnson. Once again Wisconsin would have two working senators. But it's important to refute one canard: a Black

person can't win statewide in Wisconsin. Absolutely false! Despite the division and polarization Wisconsin is not a racist state. I am not blind, there are bigots who have crawled out from beneath the rocks. However, Wisconsin overall remains a tolerant state. President Obama won twice here, but with thousands of his rural supporters later voting twice for Trump (they are not racists). Moreover, Barnes has already won statewide as lieutenant governor, and running with Governor Tony Evers, flipped 7 Obama-to-Trump counties.

Moreover, state Democrats Herb Kohl and Russ Feingold, both Jewish, were elected to the U.S. Senate, although Wisconsin is less than 1% Jewish. Most recently, Democratic Senator Tammy Baldwin was elected in 2012, as the state's first woman in the Senate, and became its first openly gay member. Wisconsin elects individuals from diverse backgrounds.

But, Barnes is not running as an identity group candidate. He wants to represent the entire state. The Washington Post asked Barnes: "What would your coalition be in a general election?" (Barnes replied): "It is intergenerational, it is multiracial, it is labor unions. It is farmers. It is working people all across the state of Wisconsin: teachers, service workers, people in the trades, you name it." A bread-and-butter Democrat.

I am very encouraged that Barnes' first campaign rally, after the primary, was at a dairy farm with Senator Baldwin. She said: "He gets us. ... I can't think of a better person to serve as a partner to me in the U.S. Senate." Barnes talked about "an opportunity to protect our family farms in the face of all this globalization, this monopolization." He touted our "Dairy State."

You bet, Barnes can defeat Johnson.

*- Kaplan wrote a guest column from Washington, D.C., for the Wisconsin State Journal from 1995 - 2009.*