

Bill Kaplan: U.S. Senate candidate Tom Nelson could win statewide

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Democrats have a rural problem nationwide, including Wisconsin. In 2016, “Trump won 206 counties (mostly rural) that had backed Obama (in 2012). Iowa led the nation, with 31 flipper counties ... followed by Wisconsin with 23, Minnesota with 19, New York with 18 and Michigan with 12. Half of Maine’s 16 counties shifted from Obama to Trump” (Washington Post).

MJS reporter Craig Gilbert summarized for Wisconsin: “Trump dramatically outperformed Romney in smaller, rural and blue-collar communities. He won more than 500 (small) cities, towns and villages that voted for Obama in 2012.” In 2020 Biden won Wisconsin, but only flipped 2 of 23 rural Obama-to-Trump counties. However, in 2018 Wisconsin Democratic Senator Tammy Baldwin outperformed Clinton and Biden in rural counties. And, Wisconsin Democratic Governor Tony Evers showed rural support in 2018.

It’s clear a solid win statewide like Baldwin’s requires a candidate who appeals to rural counties. Democratic Senate candidate Tom Nelson has strong support in rural areas. He could win statewide, bridging the rural-suburban-urban divide. Why? Since 2011 he has been the Outagamie County’s elected county executive, winning 3 times. It’s mostly a rural area with one small city, Appleton. Obama won here in 2008, followed by Romney in 2012, Trump in 2016 and 2020. Yet Nelson’s appeal persists in this GOP-leaning dairy farm-manufacturing county. He drew no GOP opponents in his reelections in 2015 and 2019.

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Nelson grew up in rural Wisconsin, the son of a Lutheran minister. Despite having a master's degree from Princeton University, he never forgot his roots. He knows how to win over Trump voters who may disagree. In 2004 Nelson defeated an incumbent Republican for a state Assembly seat. His legislative Democratic colleagues recognized his acumen and interpersonal skills, electing him majority leader. He lost a statewide run for lieutenant governor in 2010. Nelson picked himself up quickly and was elected Outagamie County executive in 2011. A later run for Congress in the 8th congressional district was unsuccessful in 2016, a tough year overall for Wisconsin Democrats.

However, Nelson has had more ups than downs. More importantly, he has remained a tireless advocate for regular folks. Nelson helped lead a successful effort to keep a local paper mill from closing, preserving hundreds of manufacturing jobs. An economic populist, his candidacy is based on his advocacy for economic and healthcare security for all and protecting the environment. Nelson's support for civil and human rights derives from his lifelong religious principles. Finally, his strong support for public education and state universities will appeal to all, including suburban voters.

A quirky underdog, Nelson has already campaigned in all 72 Wisconsin counties. His sense of humor will serve him well in the hotly contested Democratic primary. Setting himself apart from his primary opponents by supporting a ban on stock trading by members of Congress highlights his progressive principles. Nelson may be the best person to bridge a divided and polarized Wisconsin. However, defeating extremist incumbent GOP Senator Ron Johnson will not be a cakewalk.

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