

Nelson Campaign: ICYMI, Washington Post Opinion, “Wisconsin’s Tom Nelson reminds Democrats how populists should sound”

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APPLETON, Wis. – Outagamie County Executive and pro-labor populist U.S. Senate candidate Tom Nelson garnered national attention for his consistent advocacy for workers and throwback populist campaign that Democrats could learn from.

Nelson’s relentless focus on Wisconsin workers was lauded by columnist Jennifer Rubin who wrote, “His brand of politics might be exactly what the party needs to retain its Senate majority.”

Nelson spoke about his populist vision and the need to make organized labor at the heart of it:

““There is a vein of populism” running through the country, Nelson said. “One kind is from a very dark place, and one is from our better angels.” It’s that latter populism, which focuses on family and worker economics, that animates his campaign. He thinks federal labor laws need modernizing, starting with the Protecting the Right to Organize Act, and he sees “high morale” around the country as a spate of union organizing wins demonstrate that unions are “alive and well.” He pointed out with delight that he just visited his local drive-through Starbucks, which recently organized.

The full article appears below:

Washington Post: [“Opinion: Wisconsin’s Tom Nelson reminds Democrats how populists should sound”](#)

Jennifer Rubin | April 17, 2022

Tom Nelson, a longtime union advocate, is running for the Democratic nomination for Wisconsin’s Senate seat as a genuine populist, not the phony kind with a Harvard degree who affects an accent. His brand of politics might be exactly what the party needs to retain its Senate majority.

Nelson is not intimidated by his more heavily funded opponents who have spent months buying name recognition. “It’s not just how much money you raise, but how you spend it,” he told me during a phone conversation. Contrary to other campaigns’ overstaffed operations, he said, “My communications team is my campaign manager and me.”

Nelson speaks quickly — really quickly — with the enthusiasm one might expect of a high school sports coach. While he currently holds the position of the chief elected official for Outagamie County, he sounds much like the official from Appleton, Wis., who worked with the United Steelworkers to buy a paper mill out of receivership in 2017 that brought back some 300 jobs. (Indeed, Nelson wrote a book about it.)

He thinks voters sense he’s more like them than well-heeled opponents. “You can’t kid a voter,” he said. He doesn’t present himself as an ideological standard bearer. It’s all about workers. “Once Democrats started running away from worker

economics, we started losing voters.”

With 28 years in politics and 17 years in office, Nelson has put in the work and displays a granular understanding of the state. “You don’t just wake up one day and decide to run for the U.S. Senate,” he tells me. “I’m not running just to check the box.” (That’s an implicit dig at one of his primary opponents, Alex Lasry, the son of a billionaire who has never run for office.)

Unsurprisingly, Nelson names Sen. Sherrod Brown (D-Ohio), whose career is built around the dignity of work and workers’ rights, as a role model. No one would accuse Brown of being a conservative, yet Nelson points out that Brown wins in a red state by talking directly about issues that affect workers, such as trade deals and, now, the pandemic. His other role model is the late William Proxmire, the Democratic senator from Wisconsin who spoke daily on the Senate floor in favor of the United Nations’ genocide treaty, shook every hand he could find in the state, and popularized the Golden Fleece award to highlight wasteful government spending.

Nelson at one point visited all 72 counties of Wisconsin in 43 days, a testament to his work ethic. He says he met with a lot of voters who first supported Sen. Bernie Sanders (I-Vt.) in the Democratic primary in 2016 and then Donald Trump in the general election because they thought “the fix was in” with Hillary Clinton.

“There is a vein of populism” running through the country, Nelson said. “One kind is from a very dark place, and one is from our better angels.” It’s that latter populism, which focuses on family and worker economics, that animates his campaign. He thinks federal labor laws need modernizing, starting with the Protecting the Right to Organize Act, and he sees “high morale” around the country as a spate of union organizing wins demonstrate that unions are “alive and well.” He pointed out with delight that he just visited his local drive-through Starbucks, which recently organized.

Nelson also stressed that voters he talks to see inflation as part of a long economic slide for workers. Trade deals resulted in job losses, America's supply chains went overseas and now we've got inflation, leaving workers with higher prices and long delays for items such as household appliances. For him, the solution for workers is to revive manufacturing and bring the supply chains home.

He argues that should he win his party's nomination, his feistiness will be essential in a general election in which tens of millions of dollars are going to be spent. "These Republicans play rough," Nelson stressed. "I've run against the Scott Walker machine. I've run against the Paul Ryan machine."

One can recall other iconoclastic prairie progressive candidates — Minnesota's Paul Wellstone comes to mind — whose authenticity and energy made up for initial lack of money and name recognition while challenging establishment opponents. Whether Nelson wins or not, he is succeeding in his goal of "elevating" worker economics in the race. The rest of his party would do well to take notice.