

# Nelson Campaign: Madison Isthmus column, who has #1 shot to beat Ron Johnson? Tom Nelson

Posted on Friday, Feb 18, 2022

>> **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.](#)**

APPLETON, Wis. – The Number One Democratic candidate with a chance at winning in all corners of Wisconsin and defeating incumbent U.S. Sen. Ron Johnson in November is pro-labor populist Tom Nelson.

That's the judgment of former Madison mayor Dave Cieslewicz in a recent column in the Madison Isthmus, who called Nelson "far and away, the most qualified candidate in the race."

He cited the political and communications savvy of Nelson, the Outagamie County Executive and former Assembly Majority Leader who has won six times in a Trump-won county.

Wrote Cieslewicz:

"I like Nelson for one simple reason: he has demonstrated that he can win in red parts of the state....He is an unabashed liberal populist and yet he seems to find a way to connect to voters who would certainly not describe themselves that way. And he is, far and away, the most qualified candidate in the race. He's got real government experience at both the legislative and executive levels."

A link to the column is [here](#).

The entire column appears below.

# Who can beat Rojo?

BY DAVE CIESLEWICZ

FEBRUARY 18, 2022

When I vote in the Democratic primary in August I'll have only one question: Who can beat Sen. Ron Johnson?

I really don't care much about anything else. All of the four leading candidates have positions on issues that are pretty much uniformly liberal, though some may have been more outspoken on a few things to their detriment. I'll get to that.

It's not so much that I'll be voting for someone, as against Johnson. Johnson is, to put it as gently as I know how, a stark raving idiot. He has spewed all kinds of baloney and conspiracy theories about COVID, elections, climate change, you name it. And he's also just a really unpleasant guy. He has no sense of humor, much less a self-deprecating bone in his body. When he announced that he would break his promise not to seek a third term he sniffed that he was making that sacrifice for us, because the nation and Wisconsin really needed him. No, trust me Ron, we most definitely do not need you.

You might think that when a politician breaks a promise not to run again and when he embarrasses his home state as much as Johnson has, that he'd be an easy target for a challenger. In fact, a [recent poll](#) found his approval ratings in the tank. But here's the thing. Midterm elections are notoriously awful for the party in power, which this time around is the Democrats. And right now, my party is not exactly lighting it up in Washington either. They're at low ebb. The blue party has the blues. So, if the election comes down to a referendum on [generic party preferences](#), advantage Johnson.

But a lot can change in eight and a half months. Inflation may ease. COVID is already easing. Democrats may yet find a way to salvage some pieces of Build Back Better. They do have the big infrastructure bill to run on. Republicans move further by the day into the dark, murky reaches of bizarre conspiracy theories. All is not lost, at least not yet.

So, as I think about who I might vote for come August, here are my rankings based solely on who I think at this moment has the best chance of beating Rojo.

In first place is Outagamie County Executive Tom Nelson. I like Nelson for one simple reason: he has demonstrated that he can win in red parts of the state. That's key because any Dem will rack up the votes in Dane and Milwaukee counties. But the race could easily come down to 20,000 or 30,000 votes, just like it did for Evers in 2018 and Biden in 2020. The ability to pick up some votes in reddish areas might make all the difference. Nelson won races for state Assembly and then for county exec in the Fox River Valley, normally a Republican stronghold. He is an unabashed liberal populist and yet he seems to find a way to connect to voters who would certainly not describe themselves that way. And he is, far and away, the most qualified candidate in the race. He's got real government experience at both the legislative and executive levels.

I would rank State Treasurer Sarah Godlewski a close second. She can claim to be the only candidate in the field to win a statewide race on her own, which she did in 2018, although that was a good year for Democrats. As the only woman among the four leading candidates, she can also argue that she might be more appealing to suburban women who are turned off by the gruff Johnson and who might be more open to vote for a pro-choice Democratic woman if Roe v. Wade is overturned by the Supreme Court. Her treasurer's job has no real responsibilities, but she was smart to issue a [detailed paper](#) on rural issues recently.

Next comes the apparent front-runner, Lt. Gov. Mandela Barnes. Barnes is liberal and charismatic and he has the support of progressive luminaries like Massachusetts Sen. Elizabeth Warren. He can also claim to have won statewide, though that was on a ticket with Tony Evers. Still, he can argue that he'll turn out the Black vote in Milwaukee. But there's a lot to worry about with Barnes. Milwaukee Journal Sentinel political reporter Dan Bice has [reported](#) what a lot of insiders already knew: Barnes has flirted with some very unpopular leftist ideas. He now claims to have never supported defunding the police or abolishing ICE, but that will be a hard sell come November. Barnes posted a photo on social media holding up an Abolish ICE T-shirt, which he is on record as having requested. To make matters worse, Barnes is [ducking the press](#). When the other major candidates talked to the Wall Street Journal, he would only issue a written statement. He did

the same with Bice. He won't be able to duck the national and state press, much less Johnson, in the fall. You can't get away with running a campaign on paper.

Finally, we have Milwaukee Bucks executive Alex Lasry. As a rule, I try to have some respect for anybody who puts their name on a ballot. I've been there and it opens one up to all manner of abuse. But in Lasry's case, I'll make an exception. Let me be the one to heap on the abuse. Lasry may be a perfectly good guy, but his candidacy is flat out offensive and without, as far as I can tell, a [theory](#) of how he might win. This is a rich kid who has accomplished nothing in life without the help of his [billionaire parents](#). And, by the way, his father made his money as a Wall Street hedge fund operator — not exactly a salt of the earth type. Alex Lasry didn't even live in Wisconsin until 2014 and yet, somehow, he thinks he's qualified to represent our state in the United States Senate. His sole "qualification" is his dad's money. I'll vote for the guy in November if I have to, but please Democratic voters, don't make me have to. He will lose to Johnson. Period. No contest.

So, there you have it. Ron Johnson must be defeated. That's all that matters. If somebody can convince me between now and August that one of these candidates (even Lasry) has a better chance than Nelson, well okay then, I'll go with that. I'm all ears. I just want to win.