

Wikler: Dems to offer sharp contrast to GOP at state convention

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State Dem Chair Ben Wikler cites a noticeable difference at his party's convention this weekend compared to Republicans' May event.

Dems aren't trying to eat their own.

With no endorsement process, little drama is expected when Dems gather in La Crosse Saturday and Sunday ahead of the midterm elections. They also don't have nearly as many incumbents facing primary challenges — 13 Republicans to just one Dem — and there aren't debates over whether to decertify the 2020 election results or admonish a party leader.

Instead, Wikler says the public will see a party that's fired up and unified.

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"It really is a study in contrast with the Republican Party where politicians and activists are eating their own," Wikler said in a new WisPolitics.com interview. "For Democrats, it's clear we're a party united by our values, which are Wisconsin values."

It's also a party facing a major headwind blowing out of Washington, D.C. President Biden's job approval numbers nationally have been in the upper 30s and low 40s, while gas prices have set a string of record highs with little relief in sight and inflation is a persistent problem. It has Republicans talking up the chances of a "red tsunami."

But Wikler sees a series of flawed GOP candidates on the ballot this fall. The Republican primary for gov is "brutal" with the candidates "all leapfrogging each other into the right-wing fear swamp." U.S. Sen. Ron Johnson, R-Oshkosh, is a

“uniquely problematic candidate” who has “served himself at every turn and abandoned Wisconsinites.” And 3rd CD Republican Derrick Van Orden is “one of the most toxic nominees in Wisconsin” who’s on probation for trying to bring a gun on a plane, is accused of yelling at a young librarian over an LGBTQ book display and used campaign funds to travel to the Jan. 6 violent protest at the U.S. Capitol.

While Biden’s poll numbers are upside down, Wikler says he would welcome the president to campaign in Wisconsin this fall because he could tell voters about Dem efforts to bring down costs that were opposed by Republicans — like votes in Congress to outlaw gas price gouging and to address the cost of baby formula.

Meanwhile, he said Republicans continue to relitigate false claims about the 2020 election.

“We love having President Biden in the state. His past visits have been dynamite,” Wikler said. “If we should be lucky enough to have his presence, it will ensure the voters hear directly from the president on what he’s doing to bring costs down.”

The state Dem Party set fundraising records under Wikler’s leadership in the 2020 cycle, pulling in \$57.5 million between its state and federal accounts through what it raised and transfers from other committees. Meanwhile, Dems helped Jill Karofsky win the 2020 state Supreme Court race, Biden take the state’s electoral votes and the party preserve the power of Gov. Tony Evers’ veto by preventing Republicans from reaching two-thirds majorities in both houses of the Legislature.

Evers went on to use that veto authority to nix more bills this session — 126 — than any gov in a two-year session. That makes reelecting Evers and stopping the GOP push for a veto-proof majority paramount for Dems this year.

Wikler said he’s excited about the 2022 election because it will be the first cycle that Dems will use a three-pronged approach to connecting with voters, something the party has dubbed the “trident.”

Both parties have long relied on doing doors to reach voters, but Dems paused that activity in 2020 amid the COVID-19 pandemic. That forced the party to develop virtual tools such as online events.

Included: a virtual fundraiser in September 2020 that reunited the cast of the movie “The Princess Bride” and raised \$4.25 million.

Now, the party is weaving a third option into its arsenal. It is making technology available to volunteers so they can enter information about the top concerns of friends and family from their personal conversations with them about issues. That data is then added to the party's voter files so when activists or candidates do doors — for example — they already know that person's top issues and can tailor their message.

He said Dems used a similar approach in the Georgia U.S. Senate runoffs in 2021.

"It's the first cycle we can use every tool at our disposal," Wikler said.