

WTC President Still: “With primaries over, here’s early look at Evers, Michels on business and economy”

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MADISON, Wis. – Statewide primary elections usually turn on appealing to loyalists in both major parties versus deep dives into specific issues. Primary campaign advertising is largely about introducing (or reintroducing) candidates in broad strokes of personality and vision, not painting a detailed policy picture.

Sitting for a fuller, issue-based portrait is a process that will unfold for incumbent Gov. Tony Evers and Republican challenger Tim Michels between now and the Nov. 8 general election.

Perhaps naively, I assume many voters would prefer to make their choices on the issues rather than the red meat of raw politics and who endorses whom. So here’s an early glimpse at what Evers and Michels have said so far about the Wisconsin economy, as gleaned from their respective campaign websites. In alphabetical order:

Tony Evers does what most incumbents should do: He talks first about his record after nearly four years in office. His tonyevers.com website breaks down positions on the economy under “Plan for Wisconsin,” with sections on small business, workforce development, infrastructure, inflation, use of the state’s projected surplus and rural development.

Under small businesses, Evers touts “innovative and resilient” entrepreneurs as key to economic growth. The COVID-related “We’re All In” grant program through the Wisconsin Economic Development Corp. is credited for 125,000 business grants and the “Main Street Bounceback” program for another 3,000. Evers notes Wisconsin

ranks among the nation's top two states in targeting federal aid to economic development or direct grants to businesses, such as these examples.

The workforce section acknowledges Wisconsin has “struggled” for years to fill job openings, well before the pandemic, and cites creation of 12 regional workforce development initiatives. Under infrastructure, Evers points to high-speed internet access as driving growth in a digital era and touts second-term expansion to another 300,000 homes and businesses. His plan for returning a portion of the state's predicted \$3.8 billion budget surplus includes direct rebates, credits for Child and Dependent Care and creation of a new Caregiver Tax Credit.

The Evers website section on rural development and agriculture cites creation of an Office of Rural Prosperity within state government and millions of dollars directed to support 20,000 Wisconsin farmers over time. His section headlined “Tackle Rising Costs” leads with gasoline price relief through repeal of the state's Mandatory Markup Law, which requires gas stations to mark up prices by at least 30 cents per gallon.

Tim Michels does what most challengers should do: Question the accomplishments of the incumbent, tout his own related experience with business and the economy, and propose ideas.

At ***Michelsforgovernor.com***, the construction company executive says, “Wisconsin needs a governor who won't stand in the way of economic growth” while noting he is “the only candidate who has created jobs.”

In the website's “Blueprint” section, Michels lists 11 proposals. They include competing with neighboring states by reducing corporate and individual income taxes to attract and retain more talent; eliminate the personal property tax; recruit out-of-state military veterans to join the Wisconsin workforce; lever Wisconsin's “water and work ethic” to make the state a manufacturing hub for the defense industry; overhaul the state's occupational licensing laws to eliminate barriers to keep people from starting and expanding businesses; invest in student training for high-demand fields such as health care, engineering and technology so they stay in Wisconsin after graduating; expedite access to broadband; increase opportunities for younger students to get internships, apprenticeships and related programs; and invest more in vocational technical training to “enhance the hands-on skills” of workers.

Michels also calls for “increasing American energy production,” which could be read as supporting renewable energy strategies, but it also refers to the fact his company was awarded contracts to build portions of the Keystone Pipeline before President Biden cancelled the project. He also calls for recognizing that “public safety is economic development,” which ties to another Michels section on crime and support for law enforcement.

Both candidates frame other sections of their platforms as touching on economic growth or, at least, making the state more open to progress. The next three months will tell whether their respective campaign portraits get more depth, perspective and color in a way that will move Wisconsin forward.