

Bill Kaplan: Wisconsin Democrats earn shout out, but no parade

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The Wisconsin Democratic Party (WDP), led by Ben Wikler, has earned a shout out, but no parade. Under Wikler's leadership the WDP has become a fundraising juggernaut with a talented professional staff. The WDP has also shown great imagination in using social media. Moreover, Wikler has a knack for getting press coverage, and is widely recognized as a standout Democratic Party leader.

The WDP has an impressive track record, winning almost all statewide races while losing a few by tiny margins. This is critical as Wisconsin Democratic Senator Tammy Baldwin is running for reelection in 2024. The WDP is lucky to have Baldwin. She has a first rate personality and has wide appeal across Wisconsin. No other Democrat comes close to Baldwin's support in rural areas. In addition, when she romped to victory in 2018, Baldwin flipped 17 counties won by Trump in 2016.

Veteran journalist Craig Gilbert spelled it out: "Through some combination of factors - time and effort on the ground, campaign strategy, a non-divisive persona, a brand of economic populism, attention to home-state interests (including business interests) as a member of the Senate Appropriations Committee, and the vulnerabilities of her opponents - Baldwin has charted her own political map" (MJS). Democrats should learn from Baldwin.

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Baldwin was a keynote speaker at the recent state Democratic Party convention. She talked about bread-and-butter issues such as lowering prescription drug costs. Baldwin led on passing legislation to empower the federal government to begin

negotiating the price of some medicines used by Medicare enrollees, capping annual out-of-pocket prescription costs for those enrolled in the Medicare drug program (\$2,000 a year starting in 2025) and limiting insulin co-payments to \$35 per month for Medicare enrollees. Moreover, Baldwin tried to expand the insulin cap to private insurance. But Wisconsin GOP Senator Ron Johnson and most GOP senators defeated the measure.

Later, the state Democratic Party convention voted for legalization of psychedelics. The resolution described the drugs as “non-addictive and benefit individuals suffering with anxiety and depression.” But there is no scientific research that proves this. By all means do the research and collect data. But this nonsense should have been rejected. Listen to Baldwin, not foolishness.

Although the convention voted in principle for financial support of rural Democrats, a mixed message was sent. “Resolutions that were not adopted include one to establish a pilot program to pay to hire county party staff and another to create grassroots organizations to target rural voters” (WisPolitics). That gets to the Achilles heel of the WDP: an effective, tangible rural strategy. Gerrymandering isn’t the only problem. In 2022, there were no Democratic candidates in 2 congressional, 5 state Senate and 16 Assembly races (MJS).

Former Wisconsin Democratic Representative Dave Obey said: “The best way for Democrats to win in rural Wisconsin is to campaign there. The focus, money and organizational efforts must be on state legislative races in rural areas.” Why not expand on the spectacular success of Project 72 in the recent state Supreme Court race?

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