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MU Law poll: Voters largely undecided in Supreme Court, gubernatorial races

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More than 60% of registered Wisconsin voters hadn't made up their minds about the April Supreme Court race, and the same goes for Dems and Republicans as they look at their August primaries for governor.

Marquette University Law School Poll Director Charles Franklin said the results released today show that "voters just haven't tuned into any of these elections in February."

Among registered voters, 17% said they backed liberal 4th District Court of Appeals Judge Chris Taylor for an open seat on the Supreme Court, while 12% supported conservative 2nd District Court of Appeals Judge Maria Lazar with 66% undecided.

Among likely voters, 22% backed Taylor, while 15% supported Lazar and 62% were undecided.

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Meanwhile, Dems have an enthusiasm advantage going into the April election with 73% saying they are certain to vote, while 67% of Republicans said the same. Those numbers were largely unchanged from October, though 62% of independents now say they plan to vote. That's an increase of 10 percentage points.

Overall, 21% of voters say they have an idea what Taylor stands for, while 15% said the same about Lazar.

Franklin called that a "very vivid gap" compared to last year's race, when Marquette found in February that 51% said they had a clear idea of what

conservative candidate Brad Schimel stood for and 41% said the same about liberal Susan Crawford, who went on to win that race.

In February 2025, 51% had a clear idea of what candidate Brad Schimel stood for and 41% were clear about candidate Susan Crawford.

There's been significantly less paid media in this year's campaign so far compared to a year ago. And this race is not for ideological control of the court like the 2025 contest, so it is getting less attention.

Through Feb. 19, the day the poll came out of the field, AdImpact had tracked $1.6 million in ads for this year's race.

Through Feb. 19, 2025, AdImpact had tracked more than $11 million in ads in the Supreme Court campaign. That went on to become the most expensive judicial race in U.S. history with $115 million spent, according to a WisPolitics tally.

Hong, Barnes lead in Dem guv primary

In the Dem gubernatorial primary, state Rep. Francesca Hong and former Lt. Gov. Mandela Barnes led the pack.

Meanwhile, 63% of Republicans were undecided in the race for the GOP nomination even though Tom Tiffany's only major opponent dropped out of the race last month after President Donald Trump endorsed the GOP congressman.

Among Republicans, Tiffany was backed by 35%, while Andy Manske, a medical service technician, was at 2%.

"That's not because Republicans have deep reservations about him," Franklin said. "It's because they haven't tuned into the race."

Among all registered voters, 21% had a favorable impression of Tiffany, while 25% had an unfavorable one.

Eleven percent of Dem primary voters backed Hong, of Madison, for their party's nomination, while Barnes was at 10%. Lt. Gov. Sara Rodriguez was at 6% and Milwaukee County Exec David Crowley was at 3%, while no one else topped 2%. Sixty-five percent of Dems said they were undecided in the race.

Barnes, who ran unsuccessfully for the U.S. Senate in 2022, had the highest name ID among all voters, though he was also underwater.

Twenty-seven percent had a favorable impression of him, while 34% had an unfavorable one and 39% didn't have an opinion of Barnes, who served one term as lieutenant governor after four years in the Assembly.

By comparison, 84% of voters had an opinion of Barnes at the end of his 2022 U.S. Senate campaign, when his net favorability was minus-4 percentage points.

The favorable-unfavorable split for the other Dem contenders polled were:

- Rodriguez 14-19
- Hong 14-15
- Crowley 12-14
- State Sen. Kelda Roys 10-12
- Former WEDC CEO and Secretary Missy Hughes 7-12
- Former DOA Secretary Joel Brennan 6-11
- Former state Rep. Brett Hulsey 3-13

The poll also found 25% of registered voters had a positive impression of Dem AG Josh Kaul, while 20% had a negative one. For Fond du Lac DA Eric Toney, Kaul's GOP challenger, the split was 15-10.

The poll of 818 registered voters was conducted Feb. 11-19. The overall sample had a margin of error of plus or minus 4.3 percentage points. The sample included 394 Dem primary voters with a margin of error on those questions of plus or minus 6.3 percentage points. There were also 371 GOP primary voters with a margin of error of plus or minus 6.4 percentage points on those questions.

The sample included 613 respondents selected from the state's voter registration list and 205 selected from the SSRS Opinion Panel.

The sample was 36% Republican, 32% Dem and 33% independent, in line with the poll's long-term averages.

Nate Silver ranks Marquette as the nation's second-best pollster with an A/B rating.