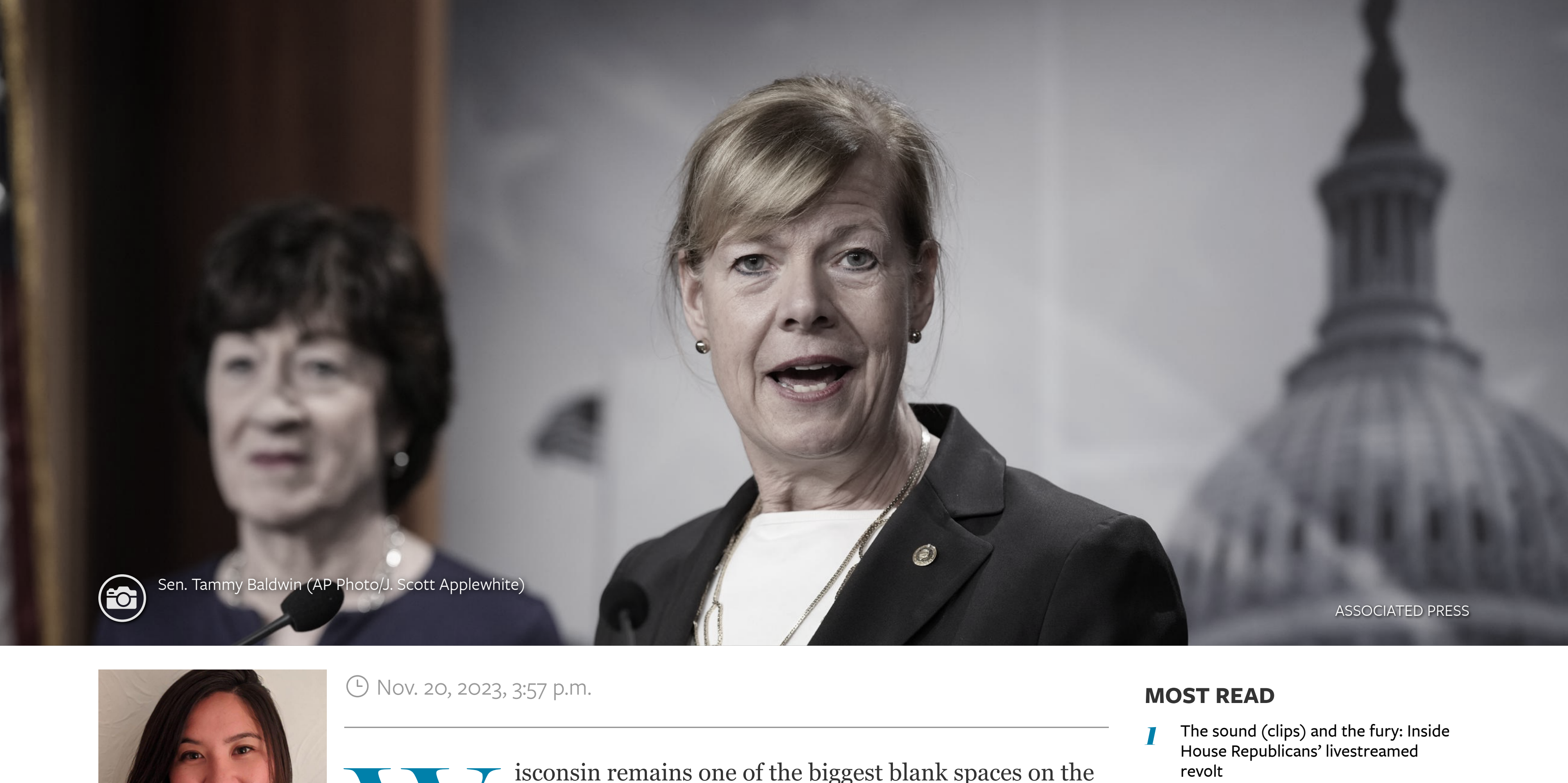


# Republicans look to fill blank space in Wisconsin

Sen. Joe Manchin's retirement raises the stakes in the battleground state.



**Sydney Kashiwagi**  
@SYDNEYKASHIWAGI

- SHARE
- TWEET
- EMAIL

☆ ADD TO BRIEFCASE

See more stories about...

Daily

Elections

Wisconsin remains one of the biggest blank spaces on the map for Republicans less than a year away from Election Day.

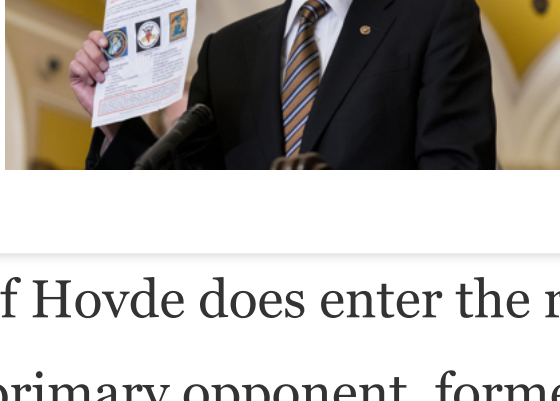
Now that Democratic Sen. Joe Manchin of West Virginia has decided not to run for reelection, Democrats will have to double-down on defending their incumbents, including Sen. Tammy Baldwin, who has been charging full steam ahead with her campaign. Former President Trump beat Hillary Clinton by less than a point in Wisconsin in 2016, and President Biden beat Trump by less than a point there in 2020, making it a prime pickup opportunity for Republicans on paper. However, a formidable Republican challenger has yet to emerge.

The GOP field has remained vacant since the National Republican Senatorial Committee's first pick to take on Baldwin, Rep. Mike Gallagher, passed on a run, followed soon after by Rep. Tom Tiffany.

It is looking likely that wealthy real estate executive Eric Hovde may decide to run. National Republican Senatorial Committee Chair Steve Daines recently [told \*National Journal\*](#) the committee has been having “really good conversations” with Hovde and is “optimistic that he may get in that race.”

A Republican source with knowledge of Hovde’s plans, who requested anonymity to speak freely, confirmed that Hovde will likely wait until next year to make a final decision. The source noted that Hovde has “nothing to gain by stepping into the oncoming fire early,” especially because he can self-fund his race.

Hovde did not respond to requests for comment.



DAILY

**NRSC's Daines: ‘Best map we’ve seen in a decade’ for Senate GOP**

A renewed focus on candidate quality might be enough to retake the Senate for Republicans.

SYDNEY KASHIWAGI

If Hovde does enter the race, he may have to face a controversial MAGA primary opponent, former Milwaukee Sheriff David Clarke, who has not ruled out a run. Businessman Scott Mayer has not ruled it out, either. But if Clarke enters, it is all but certain to turn into exactly the type of messy primary Republicans have been trying to avoid.

A national Republican source said they are uncertain about what Clarke plans to do but fully expects Hovde will enter the race. The source also said Mayer previously had said he would not run if Hovde does.

Republicans have argued that a late entrance to the race might not matter because Wisconsin holds late primaries, in August. Hovde's personal wealth also buys him time. He has said he is willing to partially fund his campaign to the tune of [\\$20 million](#) after he spent [at least \\$4 million](#) on an unsuccessful 2012 bid. So far, Baldwin has [\\$7 million in cash on hand](#).

Wisconsin’s other senator also got into his first race relatively late, in what could serve as a blueprint for Hovde. Now-Sen. Ron Johnson beat Democratic Sen. Russ Feingold in 2010 after entering the race in May, nearly six months before the election.

But that was a much different era for Republicans and for Senate campaigns. In the wake of the *Citizens United* ruling in 2012, the amount of money in politics has increased exponentially. The 2022 cycle was the most expensive midterm election in history. Races in Pennsylvania, Georgia, Arizona, Wisconsin, and Ohio alone cost nearly [\\$1.3 billion](#).

So a late entrance might not be as easy to pull off as it was in 2010, Wisconsin political observers say.

University of Wisconsin at Madison political science professor Barry Burden said that favorable Republican tailwinds in 2010 gave Johnson a boost in the polls right out the gate, despite his low name ID as a new candidate. Former President Obama’s first midterm was a historically strong year for Republicans.

“It was almost that any Republican slotted in there would have had a head start, and that’s not going to be the case in 2024,” Burden said.

Johnson rode the tea-party wave in 2010, which helped propel new upstart candidates. Also helping him that year was conservative talk radio, which, according to Marquette University Law School Director Charles Franklin, is not as powerful as it was 13 or 14 years ago.

“I do think it's important for any candidate, and it would certainly apply to Hovde, not to assume that they can just turn the switch and start spending on an ad campaign in June and be very well known by August,” Franklin said.

There has been limited polling on the race so far, but a poll conducted over the summer by Marquette University showed Hovde with the [lowest name ID](#) of the potential Republican contenders at the time and Clarke with the highest. Another Marquette University poll released this month showed Baldwin [with high favorability](#), but neither Hovde nor any other possible Republican candidates were included.

Johnson recently noted to [NBC News](#) that the sooner Hovde jumps in, the sooner he can start spending and raising money.

Wisconsin Democrats have notched important wins in the last few cycles. Not only did Biden flip the state in 2020, Democrats secured key wins with the victory of liberal state Supreme Court Judge Janet Protasiewicz earlier this year and by reelecting Gov. Tony Evers in 2022.

Though Hovde ran for Senate in 2012, Burden said he is still an “amateur candidate,” and “amateur candidates tend to make mistakes.”

Burden drew parallels between Hovde’s potential candidacy and that of Tim Michels, who was also a novice candidate when he ran for governor in 2022. Michels also entered the race late, [in late April](#), and he lost to Evers in the general election seven months later.

When Michels ran for governor, he [had to answer](#) questions about owning homes in New York and Connecticut. Democrats have already been [hitting Hovde](#) on the [\\$7 million home](#) he owns in Southern California. He has also had to answer questions about failing to cast votes in many recent elections in the Badger State.

“He will be branded as a carpetbagger by the Baldwin campaign for sure if he gets in,” Burden said.

For now, Republicans will have to keep waiting. Hovde considered running for the Senate seat [in 2018](#) and entering the gubernatorial race in [2022](#), but he decided against running both times.

“I think it's a 50/50 chance he's in, 50/50 chance he's out. And I don't know what's going to flip his trigger to make that decision,” said retired Wisconsin Republican strategist Brandon Scholz.

But if Hovde ultimately passes on a run, “then I’ll be talking about Pennsylvania, I guess,” Scholz quipped about the prospect of Republicans being left with Clarke or Mayer to take on Baldwin. [NJ](#)

- SHARE
- TWEET
- EMAIL

- MOST READ**
- 1

The sound (clips) and the fury: Inside House Republicans' livestreamed revolt
- 2

As doctors leave the House, Congress scrambles on Medicare pay
- 3

Hotline's Q4 Senate fundraising roundup
- 4

Domestic-violence, sexual-assault services could face cuts
- 5

Capitol Hill moderates push back against progressive New Jersey candidate

WHAT WE'RE FOLLOWING SEE MORE »

Special counsel Jack Smith filed a brief Wednesday urging the Supreme Court to deny former President Donald Trump's request to stay his federal election subversion case from moving forward as Trump appeals his claim that he should be immune from prosecution.

[abcnews.go.com/Polit...](#)

[abcnews.go.com](#)

Special counsel urg...

14 replies · 447 likes

12h

## RECOMMENDED FOR YOU

**Fundraising among 2024 GOP presidential candidates**

**Republican-held House districts that voted for Biden in 2020**

**State elections in 2023**

**2024 general election polling**

**2024 presidential debates**

**Polling ahead of the first 2024 GOP presidential debate**