

Off Wisconsin: Candidate-recruitment concerns plague GOP

The perennial battleground looks anything but competitive early in the cycle.



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Republicans descended on Milwaukee late last month for the first GOP presidential debate and will do so again next summer when the city hosts the Republican National Convention. The swing state, which former President Trump won in 2016 but lost to President Biden in 2020, is a cornerstone of their path back to the White House.

But with all eyes on Wisconsin, Republicans still do not have a major candidate to challenge Democratic Sen. Tammy Baldwin—even as GOP contenders in other battleground states take the plunge 14 months before the election.

“The Republican Senatorial Committee doesn’t have Wisconsin in the top five races,” Wisconsin Republican strategist Bill McCoshen told *National Journal*.

“They’ve got West Virginia, Montana, Ohio, Arizona, and Nevada before Wisconsin, which means whoever gets in this race has to get in knowing there may not be help from D.C. until very late in the race, and only if the race is competitive.”

Republicans were banking on Rep. Mike Gallagher or Rep. Tom Tiffany to run, but both ultimately decided to pass on a statewide campaign. So far, there’s just one candidate in the race: [Rejani Raveendran](#), a long-shot 40-year-old college student. Wisconsin is not a linchpin in the GOP’s path back to the majority in the Senate. The party just needs to net one seat and win back the White House, and Republicans have landed their top recruits in the marquee Senate races in Montana and West Virginia—contests seen as vital to winning the majority.

GOP strategists who spoke with *National Journal* expressed the hope that wealthy self-funders could enter the Wisconsin race soon and start ramping up campaigning as Baldwin banks more than \$5.5 million in her campaign as of the latest quarterly fundraising reports in July.

Eric Hovde, a real-estate executive who ran for the seat in 2012 but lost in the primary, is top of the list. Hovde told *National Journal* he’s “seriously considering” a run and plans to make a decision in “the next couple months.” A national Republican strategist who spoke with *National Journal* said they feel confident that Hovde is taking steps towards running and that his prior experience as a candidate would “make him a strong recruit.”

Businessman Scott Mayer is another name that comes up among Wisconsin Republican strategists and some party chairs *National Journal* spoke with. Mayer said in April he would decide on a run by [Labor Day](#), but he has yet to disclose his plans. In an interview in July, he sounded [reluctant about running](#). Mayer did not respond to requests for comment.

David Clarke, a controversial former Milwaukee County Sheriff, [didn’t rule out a run](#) when asked about it in July.



Though it’s unclear what Clarke will do, [a poll](#) from Marquette University Law School released in June found he had the highest name recognition and favorability of the three potential candidates, and was even better known than Gallagher and Tiffany. Clarke, a vocal Trump supporter, is a frequent guest on conservative networks and local radio, but operatives in the state say he has not been out on the trail acting like a candidate.

Not everyone is sold on the remaining Republican candidates.

Outside of Milwaukee and Madison, three Republican county chairs *National Journal* spoke with say they’re not tuned into the race at all, especially since the first two picks are out.

“I don’t think anybody has any opinion. Most of us barely know who they are. I had to look [them] up to find out who they were,” Ken Sikora, chair of the Oconto County Republican Party, said when asked about his thoughts on Hovde or Mayer entering the race.

“They’re not top-tier candidates. They’re just not. At best, they’re third-rate,” said Evan Zeppos, a Democratic activist who has worked in politics and public affairs in Wisconsin, and who supported Clarke when he ran as a Democrat for Milwaukee sheriff in the early 2000s.

“No one knows who Scott Mayer is. Sheriff Clarke is known as a buffoon. Eric Hovde has kind of gone up to the starting line and backed off more than once; he doesn’t live in Wisconsin full-time; he’s got a lot of baggage,” Zeppos continued, referring to Hovde [owning a \\$7 million home](#) in California.

Political observers say upwards of \$100 million or more will be needed to flip the seat and Hovde appears to be the best option thanks to his personal wealth. Republicans say fundraising will likely be their biggest challenge and that they will need someone with deep pockets like Hovde. Democrats have proven their ability to bring in millions to the state with the recent victories of liberal Judge Janet Protasiewicz, who won the high-stakes state supreme court race earlier this year, and Gov. Tony Evers last year.

If Hovde does not run, the Republican bench starts to thin, though some Wisconsin Republicans *National Journal* spoke with say the primaries are still a year away and that they have enough time to find a candidate.

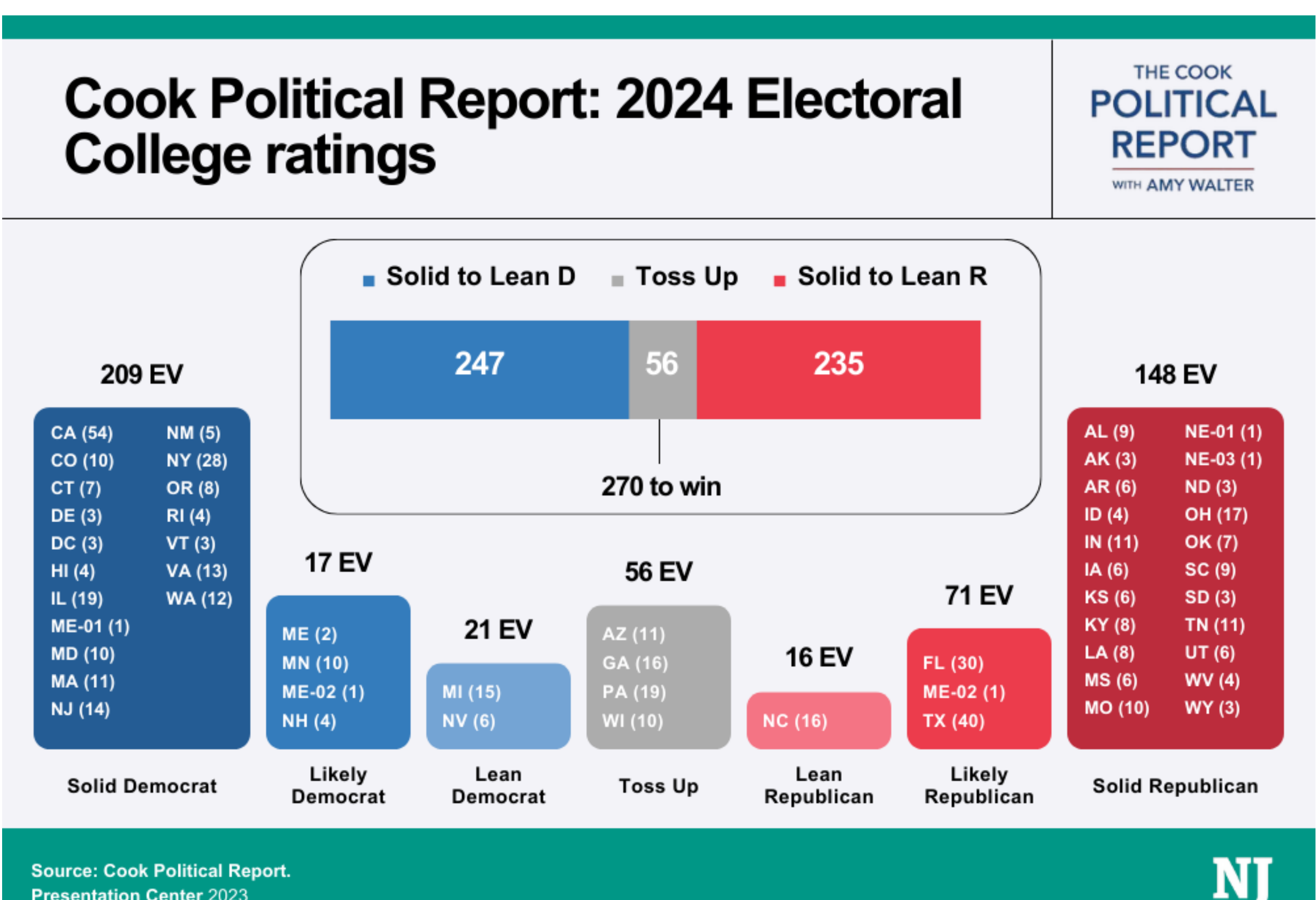
The more time passes without a strong candidate, the more of a fundraising edge the Democrats gain—especially with prolific fundraiser Baldwin at the helm.

“People who are interested in running should have some time to show their value as a candidate, but if they’re starting from ground zero, they don’t have that much time to make their case, and without a substantial reason and case, it’s going to be hard to position Wisconsin as a competitive U.S. Senate race,” said retired Wisconsin Republican strategist Brandon Scholz.

Hovde said he has neither asked for nor received commitments from the state party, the National Republican Senatorial Committee, or major PACs to help him with fundraising if he runs. He said he would be prepared to make a “sizable contribution” to his bid, though he would not say how much. Hovde also would not say whether the NRSC has encouraged him to run, just that they have had “discussions.”

Finding a candidate who can energize the state’s far-right base could get tricky.

Wisconsin Republicans took a right turn under Trump, and some expressed sharp opposition to the state [certifying](#) Biden’s 2020 victory. University of Wisconsin Madison political science professor Ken Mayer says the state GOP’s rightward shift has reached “extremism” levels, but the bloc is now a “major force” the party needs to win seats.



Source: Cook Political Report. Presentation Center 2023

🌐 <https://www.nationaljournal.com/md/722454/> NONE

“The question is, can the party win without that bloc? Now the answer is, it gets harder if half, or a third, or even 20 percent of your party decides they’re going to stay home because you’re not sufficiently conservative—it’s very hard to win in a general election,” Mayer said.

Trump’s endorsement has proven to be the key to success in Wisconsin Republican primaries. But Hovde told *National Journal* he plans to steer clear of presidential politics if he runs, and he refused to say whether he would seek Trump’s endorsement. “I have no interest in talking about the 2020 race,” he said.

Sikora, who describes his county-level operation as an anti-establishment, right-leaning wing of Wisconsin’s Republican apparatus, and who calls 2020 a “stolen election,” said that the candidate most conservatives like is Clarke. However, Sikora admits he still does not know much about Clarke because he has not been positioning himself as a candidate.

“The environment in Wisconsin right now is so bad for Republican establishment candidates that we really don’t have anybody other than Sheriff Clarke,” Sikora said.

Sikora says the biggest challenge in the Senate race will be finding a candidate who will bring the conservative, Trump-leaning voters and establishment Republicans together.

“I think as of right now it’s a big L unless somebody steps up,” he said. [W](#)

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