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**Battle of 70-something New York billionaires shapes up in Wisconsin**

*By WisPolitics.com*

President Trump and former New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg have aggressively built a Wisconsin campaign presence on the ground, while Bloomberg has the airwaves virtually to himself.

Besides Bloomberg, Massachusetts Sen. Elizabeth Warren is the only one of Trump’s Democratic challengers to open a Wisconsin office and deploy paid staff here as of mid-February. Some analysts add that 2016 Wisconsin presidential primary winner Bernie Sanders likely will be competitive in the April 7 contest, given his ability to keep raising money from small donors. A new poll from UW-Madison — done before his big victory in the Nevada caucuses — reported a double-digit lead.

For now, most of the Democratic field is still focused on the early nominating contests, pivoting from Iowa and New Hampshire to Nevada and South Carolina, as they gear up for Super Tuesday on March 3 and several major primaries in the following weeks. The results of those races could lead some of the remaining contenders to drop out before they reach Wisconsin.

All told, 2,704, or 68%, of the 3,979 pledged delegates who will meet in Milwaukee in July will be selected before the Democratic National Convention’s host state gets to vote. The Super Tuesday contests on March 3 will choose 1,351 delegates, more than one-third of the total, compared with 77 from Wisconsin.

In a normal presidential election year, none of the campaigns would even start hiring Wisconsin staff until February or so, state Republican Party Chairman Andrew Hitt says. But as state Democratic Party Chairman Ben Wikler notes, “Nothing about this election cycle is normal.”

One reason is that Trump and Bloomberg don’t have to worry about early contests. Bloomberg, who entered the race later than nearly all of his rivals, made a strategic decision to skip the first four states. Trump rolled up overwhelming majorities over his last remaining primary challenger, former Massachusetts Gov. William Weld, in Iowa and New Hampshire, and his allies canceled the GOP’s Nevada caucus and South Carolina primary.

That frees Trump and Bloomberg to spread their resources to more states, including Wisconsin. As Trump positions himself for the general election, Bloomberg spends heavily to establish himself as a leader in a field of candidates who have been campaigning much longer than him.

Trump isn’t the only one who’s already looking ahead to November. With analysts predicting Wisconsin could play a decisive role in the Electoral College, both parties are using this spring’s state Supreme Court race as a test of their organizing capacities for the presidential election.

Incumbent Justice Daniel Kelly, appointed by ex-Gov. Scott Walker, is seeking his first full term against a challenge from Dane County Circuit Judge Jill Karofsky, after the Feb. 18 primary eliminated Marquette University law Prof. Ed Fallone. Although the race is officially nonpartisan, Republicans are backing Kelly, who has been endorsed by Trump, while Democrats favor Karofsky, who advocates a social justice agenda.

Conventional wisdom suggests Karofsky holds the advantage, because the general election coincides with a hotly contested Democratic presidential primary that should boost liberal turnout. In the Democratic stronghold of Milwaukee, turnout is also likely to be increased by a contested mayoral race, a wide-open campaign for county executive and a Milwaukee Public Schools tax referendum, Wikler adds.

By contrast, state Republicans kept Weld off the GOP primary ballot, ensuring Trump would be unopposed but leaving only the court race to draw conservatives. Indeed, Republican lawmakers were so worried about Kelly’s chances that they floated the idea of separating the dates of the presidential primary and the high court race, backing off only after local clerks warned the plan would be both expensive and unworkable.

Wikler says the court race will be “a huge focus for organizing,” adding, “We will be turning out every Democrat.” He cites the energy generated by more than 100 canvassing efforts launched for the judicial contest Feb. 8.

“If we can do that in freezing weather for a Supreme Court race, we can do great things” for a presidential campaign in warmer months, Wikler says.

Hitt concedes Kelly has an uphill battle, but says it’s possible, particularly in a state with a history of crossover voting.

The high court primary offered a preview of how those get-out-the-vote efforts could play out in the presidential primary and general elections. The turnout Feb. 18 topped 700,000, the highest in more than 20 years, with Kelly capturing about half the vote to 37% for Karofsky and 13% for her fellow liberal Fallone. That was 16% of eligible voters, suggesting the April and November elections are on track to exceed the 2016 turnout marks of 47% and 67%, respectively.

**State of the campaigns**

Here’s a closer look at how each presidential candidate’s Wisconsin effort is shaping up:

**Trump**

For the first time, the national and state Republican parties are integrating their operations with those of the 73-year-old incumbent’s re-election campaign. Hitt says that’s a more efficient approach, avoiding the turf wars and confusion that often arose when the three groups employed separate political, communications and mobilizing staffs for previous presidential campaigns.

The Trump campaign started hiring staff in July and aims to set up a network of nine field offices, each headed by a regional director, Hitt says. More than 50 staff members are on board, working out of offices in Milwaukee, Madison, Eau Claire, La Crosse, Waukesha and Wausau, with both the staff and office numbers likely to grow soon, he says.

Leading Trump’s Wisconsin effort is state director Andrew Iverson, a Janesville native who has been involved in politics since joining a 2015 judicial campaign in Waukesha County. Iverson also worked on GOP Sen. Ron Johnson’s 2016 re-election campaign and held positions in state government and the private sector. In 2018, he joined Bryan Steil’s successful campaign to win retiring House Speaker Paul Ryan’s 1st District seat, serving first as spokesman and then as campaign manager.

Mindful of this state’s importance to their 2016 victory, Trump and Vice President Mike Pence have been showing up a lot in the past year. Trump visited Wisconsin twice in 2019 — an April rally in Green Bay and a July stop in the Milwaukee area — and held a rally in downtown Milwaukee last month. Pence stopped in Pleasant Prairie in October, visited Marinette in November, joined Trump at the Milwaukee rally and returned to Madison two weeks later.

**Bloomberg**

The 78-year-old media mogul has launched a primary effort that adviser Mike Tate says would rival many general-election campaigns.

The Bloomberg campaign is planning to open field offices in each of Wisconsin’s eight congressional districts, with multiple offices in the Madison-based 2nd and Milwaukee-based 4th districts, says Tate, a former state Democratic Party chairman. Four of those offices are already open — in Milwaukee, Madison, Appleton and Eau Claire — with more opening soon, he says.

More than 70 staffers are now on Bloomberg’s Wisconsin payroll, Tate says. He declined to predict how that number might grow.

At the helm of Bloomberg’s Wisconsin campaign is state director Jorna Taylor, a state native with a long background in politics and community organizations. She previously worked on then-Sen. John Edwards’ 2008 presidential campaign and served on Gov. Tony Evers’ staff, among other positions.

Bloomberg visited Milwaukee in December, when he opened his first Wisconsin field office. Among the surrogates who have appeared on his behalf are actor Michael Douglas, former Miami Mayor Manny Diaz and writer Timothy O’Brien, author of the unauthorized biography “TrumpNation.” Additional surrogate visits are expected roughly once a week, and Bloomberg could return after Super Tuesday, Tate says.

But Bloomberg’s biggest impact to date has been on television. He’s paid $5.36 million for Wisconsin TV ads, according to a database compiled by FiveThirtyEight from information supplied by Kantar/Campaign Media Analysis Group.

**Warren**

The second-term senator, 70, opened a Madison field office in January and already has about a dozen staffers on the ground in this state, says Jake Hajdu, her senior Wisconsin strategist. More staff and more offices could be added in the weeks ahead, he says.

Hajdu has been leading Warren’s efforts here since December. He has lived in Wisconsin for 18 years, serving most recently as Democratic Sen. Tammy Baldwin’s outreach director. Before that, he worked on former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton’s 2016 campaign, rising to Wisconsin state director, and spent six years on the state Democratic Party staff, including two as executive director.

Warren visited Milwaukee in July, as one of several Democratic candidates appearing at the national convention of the League of United Latin American Citizens.

**Sanders**

Vermont Sen. Bernie Sanders should be considered the frontrunner to win the nomination, Democratic strategist Tanya Bjork said at a recent WisPolitics.com luncheon in Madison. GOP operative Keith Gilkes added the Vermont independent has a “well-cultivated group of small-dollar donors” who are pumping in enough cash to fuel his campaign. He has an active volunteer effort in Wisconsin, spokesman Kolby Lee says. Sanders, 78, carried Wisconsin in the 2016 primary, defeating Clinton everywhere except Milwaukee County. Like Warren, he appeared at the LULAC convention in Milwaukee in July. He also has been endorsed by 2nd CD Congressman Mark Pocan, who predicts Sanders will win the primary.

**Other Democrats:**

* Billing herself as “the senator next door,” Minnesota’s Amy Klobuchar has been to Wisconsin twice in the current election cycle. The third-term lawmaker, 59, appeared at a Fox News town hall in Milwaukee in May, then returned for events in Random Lake and Milwaukee in September.
* The campaigns of former Vice President Joe Biden, 77, and former South Bend, Ind., Mayor Pete Buttigieg, 38, did not respond to requests for information on their Wisconsin efforts. Neither candidate has visited Wisconsin since 2018.
* Besides Bloomberg, billionaire Tom Steyer, 62, is the only presidential candidate who has run a TV ad in Wisconsin this cycle, spending just $42,000, according to FiveThirtyEight. Campaigns didn’t respond to requests on their digital advertising in this state. Steyer visited Milwaukee in November.

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