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**Nicholson enters gubernatorial race with criticism of GOP**

*By WisPolitics.com*

Republican gubernatorial candidate Kevin Nicholson told WisPolitics.com he is running against a GOP “machine” that failed to do more on school choice, election security and critical race theory when it had a chance. He lumped rival Rebecca Kleefisch in with a “decaying” party establishment.

Nicholson, a businessman and former U.S. Marine, formally launched his bid for Wisconsin governor in late January, vowing to run as an outsider. The winner of the August primary will go on to face Democratic Gov. Tony Evers in November.

In an interview with WisPolitics.com as he rolled out his campaign, he took shots at Kleefisch, state GOP Chair Paul Farrow and Assembly Speaker Robin Vos, R-Rochester. He accused the Republican establishment of losing its way.

“It may be painful for people like that to hear because they think they’re big shots because they’re welded to the machine,” Nicholson said. “But the reality is they need leadership.”

State GOP chair Paul Farrow didn’t directly address Nicholson’s criticism, saying, “Any Republican candidate will be a far better choice to get our state back on track than our current governor, and we are looking forward to working hand-in-hand with whichever candidate emerges to defeat Tony Evers in November.”

Nicholson’s entrance into the race for the GOP nomination sets up the potential for a bruising primary. It also could be an expensive one with Republican megadonors Liz and Dick Uihlein each backing different candidates. Liz Uihlein gave $20,000 to Kleefisch’s campaign and $200,000 to a PAC supporting her bid. Meanwhile, Dick Uihlein publicly called for Nicholson to get into the race. Groups backed by Dick Uihlein spent an estimated $11 million supporting Nicholson’s unsuccessful 2018 U.S. Senate bid.

Democratic Governors Association Executive Director Noam Lee called Nicholson an “extremist” who supports abortion bans with no exceptions.

“He has already signaled a divisive primary ahead, attacking Rebecca Kleefisch’s proposals for being ‘dumb as a bag of hammers,'” Lee said. “Nicholson’s entrance to the GOP primary will trigger a brutal, expensive race to the right where candidates duke it out over who’s most out-of-touch with Wisconsin values.”

While critical of Kleefisch, Nicholson also said he will support the winner of the August primary.

Nicholson also said he will urge delegates at the Republican state convention this spring not to endorse in the race. The party’s backing can be a significant boost because it means access to the state GOP’s infrastructure. In the 2018 race for U.S. Senate, then-state Sen. Leah Vukmir, of Brookfield, overwhelmingly won the endorsement vote with nearly three-fourths of delegates at the convention backing her over Nicholson. Candidates need 60% of the vote to win the endorsement.

Vukmir went on to beat Nicholson by 5.1 percentage points in the August primary, thanks largely to her performance in southeastern Wisconsin. Nicholson has pointed out he won 57 counties.

Nicholson in the interview suggested Kleefisch would get and then “play up an internal, insider endorsement,” saying it is antithetical to the mood of the electorate.

“Anybody who is pushing for that is just missing the forest through the trees,” Nicholson said. “The electorate wants to make their own decision.”

Nicholson faulted Wisconsin Republicans for not doing more to address critical race theory before it became a national discussion in 2021. He argued the signs were already there that it was being taught in Wisconsin schools — a contention that Democrats dispute — but establishment Republicans ignored them.

He also argued Republicans should have moved to a system where education funding is attached to each student so parents can direct it as they wish. Under former Gov. Scott Walker, Republicans expanded the school choice program, which began in Milwaukee, to Racine. They then added a statewide program that includes limits on how many students

from each public district can transfer into the program. That limit is scheduled to end after the 2025-26 school year.

And Nicholson faulted Republicans for creating the Wisconsin Elections Commission as he ticked off issues he had with the 2020 election.

Nicholson declined to say if he would’ve certified Wisconsin’s election results for Joe Biden, saying he wasn’t going to get into hypotheticals. He also declined to declare the winner of Wisconsin’s 10 electoral votes because of the issues with the election.

A recount of Dane and Milwaukee counties affirmed Biden’s win, and various lawsuits seeking to overturn the results were rejected.

“I believe the 2020 election was a mess,” Nicholson said. “I don’t know what happened because it was such a mess.”

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