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**State GOP endorsement process drawing criticism**

*By WisPolitics.com*

The state Republican party endorsement process in Wisconsin is drawing criticism from some of its candidates as just two GOP governor and four lieutenant governor hopefuls have so far met campaign finance thresholds needed to qualify for the party’s endorsement.

Just two of the nine GOP candidates for governor have met the state party’s fundraising benchmarks to be considered for its endorsement at the convention in May, according to a WisPolitics.com survey of the campaigns in mid-March. And one of those candidates is labeling the process “cooked,’’ comparing it to “insider trading.’’

The state Republican Party convention will be held May 20-22 at the Madison Marriott West hotel in Middleton.

Delegates from each county Republican Party will vote at the convention on who gets the state party endorsement. Candidates have to get at least 60% of those votes to receive the endorsement. Each county has its own number of delegates and each has its own process for how to choose which delegates vote at the convention.

The fundraising threshold for gubernatorial candidates to be considered for endorsement requires at least $100,000 from 1,000 donors or more. Former Lt. Gov. Rebecca Kleefisch told WisPolitics.com she easily eclipsed the thresholds, but declined to offer her thoughts on whether thresholds were the right move.

Rep. Tim Ramthun told WisPolitics.com he broke the $100,000 barrier earlier this month from an estimated 1,800 to 2,000 donors to his gubernatorial campaign. The Campbellsport Republican added he feels the thresholds are wrong.

“I think it’s a huge mistake,” Ramthun said. “I’m going through the process to make them work for it and make them prove it. I may do it just so I don’t make it easy for them. But I won’t hold my breath because I think it’s all insider trader things and they’ve already got this thing cooked.”

Ramthun also said he plans to meet with the party as part of the endorsement interview process on Tuesday, but added it’s “probably a waste of time because they have their candidate picked out.”

Former Marine and U.S. Sen. candidate Kevin Nicholson last month said he is not seeking the GOP endorsement because he does not think the party should endorse any candidate. Nicholson said the endorsement process fractures the party ahead of the primary and has contributed to 11 Republican losses in the past 12 statewide general elections.

Out of 10 people vying for lieutenant governor this year, four Republicans have met the benchmarks, the survey showed. But even some of the leading candidates likely to qualify are unhappy with the process.

Under state Republican Party rules, candidates for lieutenant governor must raise at least $50,000 from 300 donors in order to seek the GOP endorsement and speak at party events. Some candidates are criticizing the criteria, which they say is unfair to grassroots candidates.

Ben Voelkel said he met both thresholds. The former aide to U.S. Sen. Ron Johnson, R-Oshkosh, had $70,080 in his war chest at the end of December after raising just over $116,000.

Voelkel has also criticized the state party for setting benchmarks, which he called “fundamentally wrong.”

“I just think that sends the totally wrong message to the grassroots of the party, especially at a time where there’s already a sense out there — some stoking it more than others — a sense that it’s rigged or the fix is in,” Voelkel said.

“These are arbitrary numbers that I’m not sure where they came from. I really think we should be doing everything we can to let the grassroots have a say in who the candidates are,” he said.

“There’ll be people who are frustrated and confused as they see people campaigning for months who don’t get a chance to speak at the convention, and then all of a sudden people they’ve never heard of are up on stage speaking at the convention.”

Sen. Pat Testin, R-Stevens Point, said he met the GOP standards for lieutenant governor candidates. Testin had $131,161 in the bank at the end of 2021 and has raised $203,654 since launching his campaign. Testin said he doesn’t have a problem with the standards and that there should be some in place.

“I’m not going to complain about it,” Testin said. “I’m going to go out there and do what I have to do.”

Sen. Roger Roth, R-Appleton, said he will meet with the party next week to show his cash on hand. At the end of December, Roth had over $400,000 in his war chest rolled over from his state Senate account to his campaign for lieutenant governor.

Roth told WisPolitics.com the party is free to conduct business as it sees fit, but in his opinion, the endorsement process could create more division among Republicans.

“At a time when we’re looking to unite and unify the party, it seems like going through the endorsement process is going to lead to more fracturing,” Roth said.

Lancaster Mayor David Varnam said he did not meet the threshold but wanted to appeal the decision. Varnam told WisPolitics.com he raised about $24,000 and was short 65 donors. He said thresholds are a good idea, but the ones the party set are too high.

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