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**U.S. Senator Johnson again battling for re-election, but will he be able to replay 2016 comeback win?**

Senator Ron Johnson is again battling for reelection in what should be a Republican year.

But is the Oshkosh Republican poised for another comeback win like his 2016 rematch with Russ Feingold? Or is he becoming an even better target for Democrats and Democratic nominee Mandela Barnes, who are hoping to retake the seat and add to the 50 Democratic seats in the U.S. Senate?

Insiders are divided on whether Johnson or Barnes will win. But recent developments are raising more comparisons with 2016 and giving Democrats hope.

-- In 2016, Johnson was on the ballot as Donald Trump beat Hillary Clinton in Wisconsin and the country. He did better than Trump in the GOP-rich Milwaukee suburbs that year in making his comeback for a second six-year term.

This year, the politician often identified as "Trumpy" is distancing himself from Trump, whose brand could hurt GOP candidates in those suburbs.

“First of all, my election’s about me running as a U.S. Senator dealing with issues that are impacting Wisconsinites,” Johnson recently said on WISN’s “UpFront,” which is produced in partnership with WisPolitics.com. “I don’t personally think Trump should have any impact whatsoever on this election, November 2022. What he does in the future, that’s a decision he’s going to make.”

Johnson also said the Jan. 6 committee has distorted his role in the attempt to deliver a slate of false electors to former Vice President Mike Pence.

“What would they ask me to testify about?” Johnson said when asked if he would testify before the committee. “I had nothing to do with the alternate slate. I had no idea anybody was going to ask me to deliver those. My involvement in that attempt to deliver spanned the course of a couple seconds.”

-- In 2016, Johnson said controversial things but often seemed to be able to portray them in a positive way -- as straight talk to voters. This year, some of the controversial comments are catching more negative attention.

The latest is what used to be called the third rail of American politics -- the funding of Social Security and Medicare.

Johnson is proposing to fund those elderly safety net programs as part of the discretionary budget process.

Democrats have accused him of wanting to put the programs on the chopping block.

Johnson touted a post on his website as laying out a "comprehensive plan for the future viability of the programs." In it, Johnson again called for making the programs part of the discretionary budget process, which involves an annual review of funding levels. But he

offered no other specific proposals to shore up the programs, instead focusing the post largely on how he would change the annual budget process.

Johnson acknowledged the proposals were unlikely to garner enough support from Democrats to meet the 60-vote threshold for passage but argued it would allow "the American public would see who is obstructing a functional process."

"The government has made promises it cannot keep," Johnson wrote. "Unfortunately, most in Washington would rather demagogue than have serious conversations to save these important programs. I will not shy away from this conversation. It's too important to all Americans and the nation's future."

-- In August of 2016, Johnson trailed Feingold by 11 points in the Marquette University Law School Poll. This August, he was down 7 points to Barnes.

But insiders point out two big differences: Johnson's unfavorable numbers are much higher than they were as he headed toward the fall of 2016; and his opponent is much less well known than Feingold was six years ago. The first difference makes it harder for Johnson to change voters' minds. The latter allows Democrats to more easily create a positive image for their candidate.

August 2016 was a low point for Johnson in his first reelection bid. National Republicans announced in mid-July they were pushing back a planned TV ad reservation from August and September to the final three weeks of the race.

Johnson then changed up his campaign staff, parting ways with his advertising consultant and going off the air for two weeks.

In early August 2016, 34 percent of voters had a favorable opinion of Johnson, while 32 percent had a negative one.

But the latest Marquette Poll found 38 percent of voters had a favorable opinion of Johnson, while 47 percent had an unfavorable one.

That underscores to some the stream of negative ads run against Johnson since early last year has had an impact.

AdImpact Politics, which tracks ad buys, found $135.8 million had been reserved for the full cycle in Wisconsin's U.S. Senate race. That includes a significant edge by Democrat groups of $76.3 million to the $59.5 million spent by GOP organizations.

That's another difference from 2016. Open Secrets tallied $29.7 million in outside spending on the 2016 U.S. Senate race for the full cycle. Of that, $10.3 million went to support Feingold or oppose Johnson, while $19.4 million was spent by those boosting the Oshkosh Republican.

These are some of the reasons Democrats say Johnson is the most vulnerable incumbent senator on the ballot this fall.

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