State Supreme Court race could set another spending record

By WisPolitics.com

After the deluge of ads and campaigning surrounding the presidential race in swing state Wisconsin, you may not be ready for this.

But the big-money race for ideological control of the state Supreme Court is underway. And some are betting that the two candidates and their allies will exceed the record $56 million spent in 2023, when liberals won control of the court for the first time in 15 years.

Why the fast start? The stakes are high, there is no primary, and the two combatants have been known for months: Dane County Judge Susan Crawford vs. Waukesha County Judge Brad Schimel, a former GOP attorney general.

Crawford and Schimel have already raised a combined $5 million.

And traditional players such as Americans for Prosperity have already been working doors in Wisconsin for Schimel. And AFP reports a $1 million digital buy that will run through the April 1 election, pushing its investment in the race to more than $1.3 million since mid-November.

In early January, Crawford announced she had raised $2.8 million since getting into the race in May, while Schimel said he had pulled in $2.2 million since announcing his bid in November 2023. By comparison, the four candidates who were vying for an open seat in the 2023 election had combined to raise $1.7 million over a similar time frame.

WisPolitics eventually tracked more than $56 million in spending in that race as liberal Janet Protasiewicz won, ending 15 years of conservative control on the state’s highest court.

Energized by Donald Trump’s victory in November, conservatives are hoping to flip the court back in April, with many insiders trying to figure out how Trump's first few months in office could play into the race. History has shown that while Trump supporters will turn out when he’s on the ballot, they aren't nearly as enthusiastic to head to the polls when he’s not.

Conversely, the incoming president has a special talent for inspiring Dems to turn out against him, whether he’s on the ballot or not. November’s loss was a crushing blow for Dems, though, and some wonder whether progressives are ready to get themselves off the mat and back into the fight.

Some Wisconsin conservatives, meanwhile, wouldn’t mind seeing Trump’s campaign pledges of mass deportations and high tariffs to progress incrementally until after April 1. That scenario could give the GOP base just enough inspiration to remain engaged without possibly hitting swing voters in their pocketbooks or throwing red meat to the

liberal base.

Insiders also note the shifts in the off-year electorate in Wisconsin since Trump first came on the scene. Those college-educated suburbanites that were once the backbone of the GOP have moved away from the Republican Party in the Trump years, but they still turn out at a higher clip than the blue-collar workers that now make up a big portion of the party base. Trump also made inroads with voters of color and college students in 2024, but neither has a long track record of getting heavily engaged for spring elections.

And progressives still have Dane County as a turnout powerhouse. The state’s second-largest county produced 141,672 votes in the spring 2023 state Supreme Court election, compared to the 134,505 that came out of Milwaukee County, even though the latter’s population is 59% higher. Groups such as Turning Point USA bragged about efforts to turn out conservative college students for Trump last fall and are pledging to be involved again in Wisconsin this spring. Some are skeptical of just how much impact Turning Point had. They’re more focused on

whether Elon Musk gets invested in the race, calling him a new wild card in politics with his PAC.

One of the big assets for Protasiewicz was the state Dem Party providing nearly $10 million in help to her in 2023 as she won by 12 points.

Insiders say they don’t expect a similar gap this spring. For one thing, Schimel has already proven to be a more aggressive fundraiser than former Justice Dan Kelly, who unsuccessfully sought to make his way back to the court against Protasiewicz in 2023 after losing his seat in 2020.

Plus, he won’t make the mistake that Kelly did of refusing to accept direct transfers from the state GOP. The option

Republicans created a decade ago of political parties being able to take in donations of any size and then make unlimited transfers to candidates has been a gold mine for Dems.

Insiders aren’t sure the state GOP can match the Dem Party for what it can bring in. Still, conservatives hope state Dem Chair Ben Wikler is distracted enough by his run for national party leader that he eases off dialing for dollars.

The issues? Conservatives are already diving into Crawford’s background, from calling the state’s voter ID law “draconian” during her 2018 campaign for the Dane County bench to her past work against Act 10 and for then-Gov. Jim Doyle. She’s got baggage, conservatives say, and there will be fodder galore for TV ads.

Schimel has his own issues. While abortion may not be as salient of an issue as it was two years ago, Dems still believe Schimel is out of the mainstream on the issue, and they point to past controversies from his days as AG such as a backlog of rape test kits as issues that may not sit well with voters. Plus, he lost his 2018 reelection bid for AG

to Dem Josh Kaul.

Brace yourself. Another contentious statewide election is at hand.

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