You think it's early for 2026 campaign maneuvers? Guess again

By WisPolitics.com

In the political world, it’s never too early to think about the next election.

And so, days after the big April 1 state Supreme Court election, potential candidates are maneuvering on 2026 races for another Supreme Court seat, governor and western Wisconsin's 3rd Congressional District.

So, in order, new developments in those three big 2026 races:

• **Next spring’s race for the Supreme Court.** Two liberal appeals court judges, both former Dem legislators, were atop the list of potential candidates to challenge conservative Justice Rebecca Bradley next spring, when she is up for another 10-year term. Bradley says she'll be running.

Liberal appeals court Judge Chris Taylor, who sits on the Madison-based 4th District Court of Appeals, says she’s been heartened by the encouragement from supporters and will have more to say about a possible bid in the coming weeks.

But Pedro Colón, who’s on the Milwaukee-based 1st District appeals court, tells WisPolitics he's decided against running for state Supreme Court in 2026, citing personal reasons.

Colón said he “was not in a place this time to go through it.”

“Luckily for Wisconsin, there’s a lot of interest in their race, and I‘m sure there’s going to be one or two or three candidates independent of my decision, which will be healthy for the state to figure out the direction it wants to go after the (Susan) Crawford race,” Colón said.

Ideological control of the court won’t be at stake in next year’s race. But conservatives must win the contest to have a shot at flipping the 4-3 liberal majority in 2028.

• **The race for governor.** Dem Gov. Tony Evers has yet to say whether he'll seek a third four-year term. But a host of Republicans are thinking about it.

One is Bill Berrien, CEO of Pindel Global Precision and Liberty Precision, a contract manufacturer in New Berlin. He recently announced the creation of a PAC to advance conservative policy solutions and help “Republican candidates get back to winning.”

Dems have won 15 of the past 19 contested statewide races since Donald Trump first took office in 2017.

“Wisconsin Republicans have been losing elections for too long, and that ends in 2026,” Never Out of the Fight PAC said in the announcement.

Berrien, a former Navy SEAL, dubbed the group the Never Out of the Fight PAC. That refers to the SEAL’s code, “I am never out of the fight.”

The PAC said it has assembled a team that played roles in wins by Trump and GOP U.S. Sen. Ron Johnson.

Betsy Ankney, who served as Johnson’s campaign manager in 2016 and led a super PAC that backed him in 2022, told WisPolitics she’s serving as the general consultant for Never Out of the Fight. Ankney said others on the team include Dylan Lefler, who worked on Johnson’s 2022 campaign and Trump’s bid last year, and BJ Martino, a longtime pollster with the Tarrance Group.

Others mentioned as possible GOP gubernatorial candidates: Senate President Mary Felzkowski, former U.S. Senate candidate Eric Hovde, Washington County Exec Josh Schoemann, state Sen. Pat Testin and northern U.S. Rep. Tom Tiffany.

Testin, R-Stevens Point, told WISN's “UpFront” show recently that his focus now remains on the state budget, while acknowledging questions about whether he may consider a bid for governor in 2026.

“Right now, my primary focus is getting through the state budget process and working with my colleagues,” he said. “You know we might have a tough year of midterms, so right now it's all budget. There’s a lot of speculation, a lot of names being thrown around, and so keeping options open, but right now the focus is the budget.”

• **The 3rd CD race.** U.S. Rep. Derrick Van Orden, R-Prairie du Chien, will be up for his third two-year term in November 2026.

He has been a controversial figure and will be a Dem target again next year.

Dem nonprofit leader Rebecca Cooke, from the Eau Claire area, has already launched her bid to take on Van Orden. It’d be her third run. The first time, she lost in a Dem primary, and in 2024 she won a Dem primary to take on Van Orden in the general election. But she lost as Trump narrowly won the state.

Now Emily Berge, president of the Eau Claire City Council, has filed to run for the 3rd CD, setting up another Dem primary.

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