

Wisconsin ex-race car driver could play spoiler to GOP's plans to oust Tammy Baldwin

Written by WisDems Press

Thursday, 30 November 2023 12:36 - Last Updated Thursday, 30 November 2023 16:54



MADISON, Wis. — New reporting today highlights the headache and impending “[Civil War](#)” primary that Republicans face in Wisconsin. Scott Mayer took shots at the NRSC and their chosen candidate Eric Hovde, [telling the Washington Examiner](#) that he has hired consultants, conducted polling, and in his own words has “become educated enough to be dangerous.”

[Washington Examiner: Wisconsin ex-race car driver could play spoiler to GOP's plans to oust Tammy Baldwin](#)

By: David Sivak

- National Republicans believe they've found a credible candidate to challenge Sen. Tammy Baldwin (D-WI) in Wisconsin next year.
- Businessman Eric Hovde has all but decided to announce a run in early 2024, according to multiple sources, after months of courting by the National Republican Senatorial Committee.
- His entry would be a major victory for Republicans after high-profile recruits such as Rep. Mike Gallagher (R-WI) passed on a bid. Hovde, a real estate developer and bank CEO, has a promising track record — he nearly defeated Tommy Thompson, the former governor of Wisconsin, in the Republican primary for Senate in 2012 — and is willing to spend millions, perhaps tens of millions, of his own money this go-around.
- That's welcome news for Republicans in a state that topped \$100 million in candidate and outside spending in last year's Senate contest. **But the NRSC has a problem on its hands — one too many wealthy businessmen are interested in the race.**
- Until recently, national Republicans had Scott Mayer, a political newcomer and founder of a successful staffing company, on their short list. Hovde had the bigger bank account and

was a known quantity, but Mayer's ability to self-fund, at least partially, caught the NRSC's attention.

- Mayer gave the impression he'd be a candidate of last resort, telling the press he "might" run "if no one else comes up to the plate." But as Hovde got more serious, so did Mayer.
- **Mayer, the father of NASCAR driver Sam Mayer and a former racer himself, won't make a decision until early next year, reflecting the late filing deadline in Wisconsin, but he's taking all the steps a Senate candidate would when laying the groundwork for a run.**
- **He's hired two consultants, both veterans of statewide races, and has begun testing the waters with internal polling and appearances at party events.**
- **That raises the distinct possibility that Republicans will have a contested primary come next year, something they wanted to avoid at all costs.**
- There's one other wild card in the race — David Clarke, the MAGA-aligned firebrand and former sheriff of Milwaukee County. He's kept talk alive that he might run, but there's a healthy dose of skepticism in Republican circles he will actually do so. Many believe it's a brand-building exercise.
- Two low-profile Republicans have already announced bids, meaning Hovde would not have an entirely clear field. But the most pressing question is whether the NRSC can dissuade a contender with money like Mayer from entering.
- Mayer, too, wants to avoid a bruising primary, and the conventional wisdom had been that if Hovde runs, Mayer won't. But he would not rule out a contested primary in a phone interview with the Washington Examiner, even as he acknowledged Hovde is a factor in his decision-making.
- "I've got a good relationship with Eric. I've got nothing bad to say about him. I think he's a good guy. And, you know, we talk reasonably frequently," Mayer said. "He might well run, and, you know, I might well run as well."
- "It's hard to say at this point," he added.
- The ambiguity is not resting comfortably with the NRSC, which has discouraged him from launching a bid, according to one source familiar with the organization's thinking.
- **Sen. Steve Daines (R-MT), the Senate campaign arm's chairman, has basically said as much publicly. Asked if Mayer should sit out this cycle, Daines told the Washington Examiner he thought he should.**
- **"I would, yeah, if I were Scott," he said in a brief hallway interview at the Capitol. "I think Eric will be a very strong general election candidate, and it'd probably be better if we didn't have a primary."**
- **"If Eric gets in the race," Daines added, "we'd be behind Eric Hovde."**
- His stated preference in Wisconsin is an aggressive move by Daines, who normally waits until his preferred candidate announces before rolling out an endorsement. It's also reflective of the proactive style the NRSC has adopted this cycle after its hands-off approach in 2022 was blamed for a poor showing in the midterm elections.
- Mayer says he is not bothered by the campaign arm's stance. When reached by text, he responded with a shrug emoji, predicting the NRSC will back whoever announces a run.
- "As a side note, the NRSC does not elect you," he said. "People in Wisconsin elect you."
- The remark suggests Mayer does not consider a Hovde run a done deal, and indeed, there is a chance Hovde will opt out. Perhaps Mayer is holding on to that hope.
- But increasingly, there is a sense of inevitability about Hovde's candidacy. One

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Wisconsin operative who met with him recently placed the likelihood he runs at 95%, while another told the Washington Examiner, "I don't think there's any doubt."

- If both candidates run, it would force Republicans to navigate a damaging and costly primary that could put Baldwin, already a formidable Democrat, in a stronger position for the general election. Republicans blame that very scenario for their losses in last year's gubernatorial race and a Supreme Court contest in April they considered winnable.

- Brian Schimming, the chairman of the Wisconsin GOP, has spent the months since then urging Republicans to avoid a repeat of that perceived mistake and instead rally around a single candidate.

- He speaks highly of Hovde — both are from Madison, where Hovde has long invested in the county party and real estate market — but Schimming told the Washington Examiner he does not have a preference in the race. Both, he says, have a path to victory should they run.

- "I wouldn't say Hovde has right of first refusal or something on grabbing the ring, but he brings a lot of things to the table," he said. "My biggest preference is not to have a primary that is a knife fight in a phone booth."

- Hovde and Mayer would largely share the same lane in a GOP primary, relying on their careers in business to pitch themselves as outsider candidates. Another similarity? Neither wants to talk about former President Donald Trump in a state Sen. Ted Cruz (R-TX) won in 2016.

- Mayer called the topic a "hornet's nest," though he plans to support the eventual presidential nominee in 2024.

- There are two differences that make them very different recruits in the eyes of national Republicans, however. Mayer lacks the "polish" of Hovde, a point he readily conceded to the Washington Examiner. He's attended a string of Republican events, in part, to see if being a politician suits him.

- The other, not surprisingly, is money.

- Hovde is ready to put eight figures into the race, a financial commitment that would allow national Republicans to direct more of their limited resources to top-tier Senate races in Montana and Ohio. The more than \$5 million he dropped in his 2012 Senate bid brought him within 3 points of facing off against Baldwin when she was still a House lawmaker.

- Mayer, on the other hand, is a reluctant self-funder. He called \$5 million "not an unreasonable number" when asked how much he might need to contribute but is clearly uncomfortable parting with his money.

- "I want to put in as little as possible," he said. "I mean, it's a tough pill to swallow."

- Instead, Mayer suggested his connections in the business community — he's been on the boards of two Wisconsin commerce associations for over a decade — would help finance his campaign and noted that he had met with the major donors in Wisconsin.

- Mayer expects most of the players in the state to remain neutral in the event of a primary, but he did say he's been encouraged to run by Rebecca Kleefisch, the former lieutenant governor of Wisconsin who lost the 2022 gubernatorial race to businessman Tim Michels.

- Charles Nichols, the former campaign manager for Kleefisch, is consulting for Mayer, as is Juston Johnson, who managed the 2010 campaign of Sen. Ron Johnson (R-WI).

- Ron Johnson is not endorsing in the race but has spoken to a number of possible candidates, including Mayer. "I'll give people my best advice to the extent they ask for it," he

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told the Washington Examiner.

- Mayer has solicited a lot of it, judging that he's spoken with almost every Republican in the Wisconsin congressional delegation.

- "Listen, I don't know what I don't know. I've never done anything like this. So, to offset my inexperience, I make sure to listen to people that know what they're doing," he said.

- **Some of that advice came too late — he views the initial deadline he publicly gave himself to decide on a run, Labor Day, as an "unequivocal" mistake. Time will tell if it's a learning curve he can, or wants to, beat.**

- "Obviously, there's a lot to learn, but I've become educated enough to be dangerous," he said. "There's no question about that."