



WisPolitics: Speakers urge Dems to do better job touting their successes

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By Kay Nolan
For WisPolitics

Milwaukee -- Dems must do a better job of communicating their positive accomplishments and appealing to working- and middle-class voters if they are to hold on to key political offices in Wisconsin, supporters were told Saturday evening at the state Democratic Party's major annual fundraising event.

Pennsylvania Gov. Ed Rendell chided his fellow Dems for allowing Republicans to "control the dialogue" regarding national issues such as stimulus efforts and national health care.

"We've got to get on the stick," he said. "We can't let the tea party become the only voice America hears."

Rendell spoke to about 400 people at the party's Founders Day dinner at Italian Community Center in Milwaukee, along with U.S. Sen. Amy Klobuchar of Minnesota, Milwaukee Mayor and gubernatorial candidate Tom Barrett, U.S. Sen. Russ Feingold, U.S. Rep. Steve Kagen, Gov. Jim Doyle and U.S. Rep. Gwen Moore.

Rendell, who himself made the leap from big-city mayor to governor, said his state has improved education and has the lowest unemployment of any industrial state, thanks to Democratic leadership. In praising the national stimulus programs and health care legislation, Rendell said Dems "inexplicably lost the public relations battle" by allowing Republicans to cast a negative spin.

Speakers called on the crowd to fight the perceived negativity of the GOP by focusing on positives, especially as a way to win over the so-called tea party crowd.

"There's a battle for the heart and soul of this country," Rendell said. "On the one side, the tea party says government is inherently bad. On the other side are people like us. We realize that government can't do everything, but it can be an important catalyst to helping people."

"We can't inspire people by only saying no, by being the party of no, no, no," said Klobuchar, who also hinted at winning over votes from the tea party movement by noting that both Wisconsin and Minnesota voters "have a strong independent streak."

"Good leaders believe in bipartisanship, but there don't seem to be many good ideas from the other side," she said. Republicans, she said, are "selling a lot of fear."

"We have to call them out."

Barrett stressed practical goals, such as maintaining infrastructure, improving education and developing high speed rail, rather than ideological discussions that can turn negative, he said.

"It's about getting things done -- this is real world stuff," he said. "Some say the wind is blowing in our face. Some say the pendulum is swinging. We've seen a lot of anger out there." Barrett said afterward he understands why people are angry but that Dems need to talk to tea party sympathizers to explain that many of their concerns were caused by President Bush's policies.

Kagen was the most critical of the tea party and Republicans, especially calls to repeal the national health care bill.

“There’s a headwind out there. It’s a wind that is blowing, but it’s blowing in the wrong direction. Some people said the health care bill moved too fast. My patients couldn’t wait any longer,” said Kagen, a wealthy allergist.

Doyle likewise tailored his remarks on countering the perception that Democrats only raise taxes. He pointed out the state’s tax burden ranked fourth in the country when he took office after 16 years of GOP governance. Now in his last year in office, the state has increased healthcare, expanded education, added tax incentives for businesses, eliminated state taxes on Social Security from income taxes, and yet, Wisconsin ranks 15th in the U.S. in taxes.

Moore said afterward that she hopes to win over many tea party supporters.

“I think it’s extremely important to recognize that these are the people who are feeling some pain during this economy,” she said. “It’s important not to ignore them or berate them, but to remind them that the Democrats are the ones trying to provide greater security.”

Feingold said, “I’m not interested in factions, who’s up and who’s down. I try to represent all the people of Wisconsin, period. If there’s a common goal with any person or any group, I’m happy to share it.”

Asked for his reaction to Dick Leinenkugel’s plans to run his seat and former Gov. Tommy Thompson’s continued flirtation with a bid, Feingold said, “I hear a different name every day. I don’t worry about it. It’s almost like reading the funny papers. One of them’s going to have to step up to the plate and actually run against me, and I’m looking forward to that.”



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