



WisPolitics: Incumbent Wirch faces challenge from newcomer Steitz

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PLEASANT PRAIRIE -- In a normal state Senate election, a longtime, well-regarded incumbent like Democrat Robert Wirch, who has lived and worked his entire life in the 22nd District, would face little threat from a little-known opponent with no political experience and few strong Wisconsin ties.

But this is neither an ordinary election nor ordinary political times.

Republicans are hoping conservative voters will choose little-known Jonathan Steitz to unseat Wirch, much like Ron Johnson came out of nowhere to defeat longtime U.S. Sen. Russ Feingold last November.

But perhaps Steitz's conservative supporters don't know much about him either. He tells WisPolitics he won't be a rubber stamp for Gov. Scott Walker or for Republican party bosses because he's not planning on becoming a career politician. While he's fiscally conservative and espouses many GOP principles, Steitz disagrees with Walker and GOP legislators on some issues and plans to be an independent thinker.

Wirch, on the other hand, has a reputation for moderation and collegiality that has built up goodwill in his district. But Wirch shocked many constituents in February when he did something that was anything but moderate: He joined 13 other Democratic senators in fleeing to Illinois to stall a vote on Walker's budget repair bill for nearly three weeks. Many residents found the surprise move gutsy. But others were angered -- enough of them to force a recall election.

The question that voters will decide in the Aug. 16 recall election -- one of two that day -- is whether to retain Wirch. The Democrat's personal background -- lifelong Kenosha resident, Army Reserves veteran, and former factory worker -- is comfortably familiar to many in the working class area. His opponent is a newcomer with conservative views but a personal lifestyle unlike many in the district -- living on the road for years touring with rock bands, then becoming a corporate attorney who often does business on a different continent.

"It's a clear choice," said Wirch, 67, in a recent interview in Kenosha, before Tuesday's six recall elections involving GOP incumbents "I have a proven record of standing up for the middle-class families, fighting for the environment, fighting for consumer protection, fighting for children, vs. a Chicago corporate lawyer who is just spouting a lot of empty, campaign rhetoric."

Steitz, 37, wryly notes that it's inaccurate for others to call him a "Chicago attorney" because he rarely goes to his Chicago office with the international law firm of Latham & Watkins LLP. He actually works for the firm's London office. He and his family lived in London from 2007 until last July. Now, Steitz says he works from his Pleasant Prairie home using the Internet and flies back and forth from London as needed.

But he says he and his wife are choosing to raise their children in Wisconsin. And while he never envisioned himself running for office, he got caught up during February's political uproar in a groundswell of opinion that the fleeing Democratic senators should be replaced.

WisPolitics audio

- [Bob Wirch interview](#)
- [Jonathan Steitz interview](#)
--[Steitz follow-up](#)

"I consider myself a concerned citizen that sees problems in the state government, and I want to help fix them. I've got four children and that's one of the big reasons I'm running right now," said Steitz. "With all due respect to Bob Wirch, he hasn't been a strong advocate for this area."

Steitz calls Wirch a "career politician" and says he thinks state government needs people with "real world experience."

Steitz notes that he is a former small business owner. In the early 2000s, Steitz said he was traveling in excess of 300 days per year, to sites in nearly all 50 states, as well as Europe, Australia and Mexico, with his business, Cornerstone Audio Works, which provided audio and stage production for music bands. The Dallas, Texas-area born and raised Steitz ended up in Kenosha in 2001, after his top client, a nationally known Christian rock band called Skillet, moved there.

Wirch rips Steitz for failing to pay taxes related to his business. Steitz says he once missed a sales and use tax payment, but it was an honest oversight due to traveling so much. He says it happened eight years ago and the amount was immediately paid.

"Business owners understand, there's a mountain of paperwork that goes with owning a business. Bob Wirch doesn't understand; he's never owned a business," said Steitz.

In 2004, Steitz sold the business to attend Northwestern University in Illinois, where he obtained his law degree and an MBA. He says he commuted by train from Kenosha to the university. After graduating in 2007 and joining Latham & Watkins, he accepted a two-year stint in London, which got extended until 2010.

Wirch points out on his Facebook page that Steitz only rents the Pleasant Prairie home where he and his family live, and that the home is owned by an out-of-state couple. Steitz says his family outgrew their previous home in Kenosha, which he still owns, and that the owners of his current home live in Utah to care for their aging parents.

Wirch says he's troubled that Steitz's law firm has represented Koch Industries in various legal transactions.

Steitz says he has never personally represented Koch Industries and has no ties to them or the Americans for Prosperity Tea Party group funded by the Koch brothers.

"I think my diverse experience makes it an asset for us. Better to have somebody who's seen different parts of the world than somebody who's lived in one community their whole life," said Steitz.

For Wirch, that's the case. He was born and raised in Kenosha, and now lives in Pleasant Prairie in Kenosha County. He's been a public official for 25 years, having served on the Kenosha County Board from 1986 to 1992, when he was elected to the state Assembly. He was elected to the state Senate in 1996 and re-elected in 2000, 2004 and 2008.

But he points out that he didn't become an elected official until he was in his 40s, and says his earlier years working as a union metal worker and serving in the Army Reserves gave him solid experience in the "real world."

And Wirch says his accomplishments in office speak volumes.

"I'm an advocate for children. I put together the Drake London bill that was a direct response to a horrible child abuse case in Kenosha," Wirch said. "I'm an advocate for autistic children. I have pushed for economic development, bringing hundreds of jobs into this area.

"I'm very proud to say, as a Democrat, that I have brought billions of dollars in tax relief of middle-class taxpayers. I did that, as a member of Joint Finance, by indexing tax brackets to inflation. I smile when Republicans say they're the taxpayer's friend. I say, really, how much have you saved? I've saved billions of dollars for the taxpayers.

"I also helped the taxpayers by insisting on an audit investigation of Gateway Technical College about five years ago

when they were wasting taxpayer money," said Wirch. "It made them, in fact, change their ways of economic development, and it was more accountability for taxpayers' money due to the investigation that I set in place."

--22nd Senate District details --

The two are battling for the southeastern-most district of Wisconsin, bordering Illinois -- an area that's mixed in many ways. It contains the sizable city of Kenosha with its Lake Michigan harbor and long history of automaking and other manufacturing. But farming is just as solid a tradition in vast swaths of the 22nd District. There are two lighthouses standing sentry along the Kenosha lakefront, but many dozens of equally stately silos stand guard over cornfields and pastures.

The district also contains environmentally prized geological features, such as the Kenosha Sand Dunes, Petrifying Springs Park and the Chiwaukee Prairie. It's home to the University of Wisconsin-Parkside, Carthage College and Gateway Technical College.

As a mixture of students, professors, farmers, and factory workers, voters tend to be split between conservative and liberal, Democrat and Republican.

In 2008, Democrat Barack Obama beat GOP John McCain in the 22nd District by a margin of 57.1 percent to 41.3 percent. and Wirch beat his GOP opponent 66.7 percent to 33.2 percent.

But in 2010, GOP Scott Walker won the governor's race 52.6 percent to Tom Barrett's 46.3 percent. Earlier this year, JoAnn Kloppenburg prevailed over Donald Prosser, 51.5 percent to 48.3 percent.

Some local elected officials think Democrat Wirch will win this one.

"Bob Wirch has been an institution for many years -- people know him," said Kenosha Mayor Keith C. Bosman, who says he's independent and nonpartisan, but whose website indicates backing by unions.

"I look at Reince Priebus (now chairman of the Republican National Committee, who tried unsuccessfully to unseat Wirch in 2008). He put out a lot of money and didn't even come close. I can't imagine (Steitz) has that kind of financial backing," said Bosman, who predicts an easy win for Wirch.

But hasn't there been anger at Wirch for leaving the state, along with his fellow Democrats?

"I would say just the opposite; it's probably energized the Democratic base to get out and vote, more than it has ramped up the opposition to the senator," said Bosman.

For voters, it's the little things that count.

Indeed, at a recent Taste of Wisconsin weekend festival along Kenosha's lakefront, dozens of people were asked their views on the recall, and all but one declared support for Wirch.

Dennis Griffing of Bristol never forgot that Wirch once visited his bakery shop and gave him a calendar. Griffing, who now works at Nestle USA in Burlington, said he doesn't follow politics closely, but was impressed years later when Wirch joined other Democrats in walking out on the budget talks.

"I never heard of anyone doing something like that -- I think it took guts," said Griffing.

"I don't see any reason to recall him. He's done a great job," said Vicki McDermott of Kenosha.

The walkout over collective bargaining "is one of the reasons I feel he definitely should not be recalled," she said. McDermott believes Wirch will support education. Her teenagers want to take more math and science electives, but McDermott says the Kenosha district wants to cut those areas.

Jane Nelson, a Kenosha real estate agent, said the walkout over collective bargaining isn't that important to her. She said she has met Wirch in the past to discuss her uppermost concern: health insurance.

"Access to health care in this country is atrocious," she said. "And the cost of doctors and medications is too high. My husband has cancer and he has to cross the border (into Canada) to get his meds." Her husband was laid off from his job as an industrial sales rep, she said, and his health insurance doesn't cover enough. Nelson said she's been impressed with Wirch's character, even though she says she doesn't like politicians.

But in Burlington, a smaller city surrounded by tranquil farms, yard signs are starting to pop up -- some in support of Wirch, but more, Mayor Bob Miller thinks, in support of Steitz.

Part of that could be the more conservative leanings in the mostly rural area, he thought. But Miller said some people in Burlington think Wirch isn't trying to win over Burlington because he has enough votes in Kenosha.

Sure enough, at a July 31 gathering of the Land O' Lakes amateur baseball team Burlington Barons, featuring a game against the North Prairie Dawgs and a Hall of Fame ceremony honoring six former area ballplayers, feelings about Wirch were mixed -- even among teammates and relatives.

"Throw him out of office," declared Bill Milatz, a retiree who has served on the city's planning and park commissions. "He left his job. If you left your job for three weeks, you'd get fired, and so should he."

Although Milatz said deep down, he disagrees with the collective bargaining changes, he's an "old school conservative" concerned about too many people seeking entitlements instead of working. Knowing that Steitz is a Republican is enough to win his vote, Milatz said.

But his brother Dave Milatz, a Waterford Union High School teacher, said, "I do not think Wirch should be recalled - I think Governor Walker should be recalled. I took a hit of \$600 per month and I'm afraid I'll be laid off before I get to 55 and can retire."

Peggy Petersen of Kenosha plans to vote for Wirch, in great part because she detests Walker's stridency. As she watched her grandkids splash in Kenosha's Washington Park pool, she said, "Walker wants to act like he's solely in charge. I know he's the governor but he's supposed to do what the people's wishes are. Some say Wirch did wrong, but that group of Democrats, I don't see what other recourse they had."

But Aaron DeGrave, a Burlington city worker, says in retrospect, the walkout no longer seems like the right thing to have done. It lasted too long, he said, and didn't prevent the budget changes.

"But I'm still voting for Wirch," DeGrave said. "He's the first person to send me a card -- I got my picture in the paper a few years ago and he sent me a card to say I'm doing a good job -- I never forgot that."

--Standing up to Walker--

In another area of Washington Park, the Kenosha County Democratic Party was holding its annual picnic. Ducking into some shade and donning a straw hat to fend off 90-degree blazing sun, Wirch recalled those cold, yet heated days in February.

Would he do it again and flee the state?

Wirch replied: "I'd take a strong stand for workers, if it came up again. I always say it's the worst attack on workers in the history of the state of Wisconsin, and it demanded a strong response. The Republican majority was trying to ram through a horrible bill in three or four days. They were doing it while the state was still on a high from the Packers' Super Bowl victory, and they felt they could slip it through. We left simply as a delaying tactic to let the citizens of this state know what was in that horrible bill, and I think we succeeded in that, in educating the state on what was in

that bill. It wasn't just breaking the unions, it was setting up 33 or so patronage jobs, selling state power plants without open-bid contracts, giving huge powers over social programs to the (Health & Human Services) secretary. There were a lot of things in there. We succeeded in educating the public, and we succeeded in defeating parts of that bill."

Asked how he would counter critics who say he wasn't working at all during those three weeks in Illinois, Wirch said:

"I worked every day when I was there. I was dealing with lots of media, I was directing my office, talking to constituents, solving problems, doing a lot of the things I would do from my home for my job on a regular basis."

But that's not how Steitz sees it.

"They basically shut down state government for almost three weeks," he says flatly.

But Steitz doesn't promise to go along with everything Walker and the GOP wants.

"I am not a rubber stamp for Walker; I'm not going to be a rubber stamp for anybody," said Steitz, during a campaign appearance July 30 at the Racine County Fair in Union Grove. "I've got my own ideas. I generally agree with a lot of what Scott Walker has done. Like I said, I'm a fiscal conservative, he's a fiscal conservative. so we're going to line up on a lot of issues. But am I happy with everything he has done? No. I'm not happy with the micro-brewer issue that came into the budget. I wasn't in favor of cutting SeniorCare. ...

"I'm an independent thinker, I'm not a career politician," Steitz continued, "so I'm not the kind of person who's going to get into Madison and feel like I have to follow the party bosses all the time, 'cause, you know, if they don't throw me the favors or whatever the case may be, that's fine. That's not the way I'm going to run my office or my tenure in the Legislature."

--Party strategies--

The Democratic Party of Wisconsin says although Wirch is popular in the district, voters aren't accustomed to having an election in the middle of summer.

"What we're doing is a lot of ground game, knocking on doors, talking to a lot of voters, making sure they know they need to get out and vote," said DPW spokeswoman Gillian Morris.

Republican spokesman Andrew Welhouse is hoping that Wirch's supporters don't get the message to get out and vote on Aug. 16.

"Because the 22nd is a district that is only up during presidential years, Wirch has always benefited from artificially high turnout driven by the top of the ticket, and in 2008 he benefited from a significant Dem wave," said Wellhouse in an email. "There's a sizable population in the 22nd that only votes in presidential years, and much more attention is going to be focused on the race in the 12th (Senate district recall race), so turnout could be an issue for him," ventured Wellhouse.

Historically, the Kenosha metro area has leaned Democratic, whereas the rural portion of the 22nd District, west of I-94, has leaned Republican.

And far more people live in the eastern urban areas of the district.

But that's also true of neighboring District 21, where far more voters reside in the Racine metro area, than in rural Racine County. Yet in November, voters chose Republican Van Wanggaard over Democratic incumbent John Lehman as their state senator.

Racine Mayor John Dickert says there are plenty of independent voters living in Wisconsin's southeastern-most corner and that they, rather than party loyalists, are the ones who decide elections. That also means elections tend to swing back and forth between Democrats and Republicans, he said.

Dickert predicts a victory for Wirch -- but cautions:

"The real question for this recall," said Dickert, "is who's going to come out to vote?"



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