August 31, 2010

In Wisconsin, an Incumbent Holds Tight

By JEFF ZELENY

WEST ALLIS, Wis. — Senator Russ Feingold says he should not be considered the front-runner in his bid for a fourth term. If that self-appraisal is true, Democrats face a greater risk of losing their majority in the Senate than they believed when summer began.

“Frankly, I love being the underdog,” Mr. Feingold said. “Let me have it.”

As the senator talks to voters across Wisconsin, that description is perhaps an exaggeration for an incumbent with a national reputation, but it has become a central part of his pitch. He is not eager to concede that control of the Senate could hinge on his seat — though it very well could — but he hopes the warning cry will prompt his loyal Democratic followers to rally to his side in a challenging election year.

“As the senator talks to voters across Wisconsin, that description is perhaps an exaggeration for an incumbent with a national reputation, but it has become a central part of his pitch. He is not eager to concede that control of the Senate could hinge on his seat — though it very well could — but he hopes the warning cry will prompt his loyal Democratic followers to rally to his side in a challenging election year.”

“Clearly if somehow I lost, it would be a sign that we’re getting close to the line,” Mr. Feingold said in an interview on a recent day of campaigning. “We won’t lose, but it is something that is legitimate for me to mention — this seat could determine things.”

As his predicament suggests, Republicans have a better opportunity to win back the Senate than they had once imagined. Their chances of reaching a majority in the House still remain greater. But as the field of competitive races has expanded in the Senate, Republicans no longer have to win every close contest to capture the 51 seats they would need to take control.

Wisconsin is more divided politically than it is often perceived, given its well-known progressive streak. But Mr. Feingold’s own polling — in line with the judgment of independent analysts — shows him in an unexpectedly tough race against a neophyte Republican opponent. His challenger has so far spent three times as much as he has, the economy remains lackluster and Mr. Feingold is facing disillusionment with Democratic policies.
Party leaders, who had considered his seat something of a firewall to protect control of the Senate, now see it as a bellwether that could signal whether other once-safe seats are vulnerable.

The main Republican challenger, an Oshkosh millionaire business executive named Ron Johnson, has never run for public office. Yet that may be one of the brightest credentials a candidate can carry these days.

“I would be going to Washington as a citizen legislator,” Mr. Johnson said. “I think that’s really what our founders had envisioned: somebody who’s lived a full life and you take that lifetime of experience and try to apply it to the problems of the nation. Then you go home.”

To win control of the Senate, Republicans need to pick up 10 seats, nearly all of which must come from territory held by Democrats. But there are now enough competitive seats that Republicans could let two opportunities for victory slip away, providing a bit of breathing room for some untested candidates.

“A few months ago, we wouldn’t have been able to say that,” said Senator John Cornyn of Texas, chairman of the National Republican Senatorial Committee, who warns against overconfidence. “We have more options than we ever expected.”

Democratic leaders know the economy is unlikely to improve enough in the next two months to alter the electoral climate substantially, but they say that Mr. Johnson and other political newcomers, many of whom were not the first choices of the Republican establishment, may not fare well with independent voters.

Mr. Feingold, a tenacious politician who has been on the ballot for state or federal office for 28 years, was not initially considered vulnerable by either party; President Obama carried Wisconsin by 14 points in 2008. But Mr. Feingold said he detected trouble for Democrats shortly after the inauguration as he began making his annual pilgrimage to all 72 counties. “A conscious decision was made by certain groups to destroy this presidency the minute it started,” he said.

One of Mr. Feingold’s top selling points has always been an independent streak. He opposed the president’s decision to expand the war in Afghanistan. He voted against bailing out financial institutions in 2008, and he opposed Wall Street regulation this year, saying the restrictions did not go far enough.

As he stood at the Wisconsin State Fair last month here in West Allis, just outside Milwaukee, his challenge became clear. His head did not turn as a man yelled, “Russ, in
November I hope you’re out of a job like the rest of us!” Some people declined to make eye contact or linger for a handshake, yet several others came over to wish him well.

In an interview, Mr. Feingold became visibly agitated when asked whether running for a fourth term in the Senate made him a career politician and made it difficult to claim to be an underdog or an outsider.

“If the question is, ‘Have I chosen a career as a legislator?’ the answer is yes. If somebody wants to put a label on it and call it a politician, that’s like saying a doctor is a quack or something,” he said. “You can use a negative term for it if you want, but to me, public service is an honorable thing if you do it honorably.”

Mr. Johnson, 55, who owns a company that makes plastic packaging material, was drawn to politics last fall when he spoke at a Tea Party rally. But he has not been embraced by all Tea Party organizations in the state, including the Rock River Patriots, some of whose members said they were unimpressed with his knowledge of the Constitution after they held a vetting session with him this summer.

He has pledged to invest at least a share of his personal wealth on the race. So far, he has spent $3.6 million, most of which was dedicated to television spots featuring an upbeat and quirky theme as he talks about “The Johnson Way.” Mr. Feingold has spent $1.3 million so far and is scrutinizing Mr. Johnson’s business practices, including federal grants his company accepted.

In an interview at a Republican office in Green Bay, where Mr. Johnson introduced himself to party activists and volunteers, he acknowledged facing a steep learning curve in becoming a candidate. In the span of a few weeks, he stumbled over whether gun owners should be required to license their weapons and he sought to explain what he meant when he compared Social Security to a Ponzi scheme.

“I’m used to being in business, when you have a half-hour and you can hash things out, you can wax philosophical about things,” Mr. Johnson said. “It’s pretty hard to do in a political campaign when someone says, ‘What’s your position on this?’ And you get a microphone thrown in your mouth. That’s difficult.”

Mr. Feingold has assertively seized on each verbal miscue. Yet he has less control over the environment. Asked whether Democrats were sufficiently motivated about the election, he said, “They’re getting there.”