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Top strategists review Baldwin-Thompson Senate race

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Tommy Thompson lost to Tammy Baldwin in the U.S. Senate race because voters perceived her as being for them, while the former gov was thought to be in it for himself, according to strategists for both campaigns.

John Kraus (pictured at left) with Baldwin's campaign and Keith Gilkes (pictured at right) from Thompson's also agreed during a forum at Marquette University Law School that that ads in which Baldwin was heard saying, "You're damn right" failed to hurt her image with voters and that Thompson's focus on his past accomplishments as Wisconsin governor was an ineffective strategy.

Gilkes, who also served as Scott Walker's campaign manager, also spoke with reporters after the forum about the ongoing John Doe investigation that has ensnared former aides to the gov when he was Milwaukee County exec.

During the forum, Kraus said Thompson's campaign tried to remind people how great things were years ago when he was gov.

"Kind of like Brett Favre. They wanted to take voters back and say, 'Remember when Favre was throwing all those touchdowns and taking the Packers to the Super Bowl? Wasn't that great?'" Kraus said. "Our task was to say, 'Remember when he left and went to go play for the Jets? And if that wasn't bad enough, remember when he went to play for the Vikings? You may have had a Brett Favre jersey hanging in your closet, but would you really want to put it on and wear it?'"

Gilkes agreed that last-minute ads attacking Baldwin over her votes related to Sept. 11, 2001 and her stance on Iran sanctions backfired, inadvertently playing into an image of Thompson as stuck in the past.

Gilkes said, "I could make an argument that it felt like the right thing at the right time. Was it effective? Well, we lost."

Gilkes argued that Thompson had an uphill battle because he was forced to spend down his campaign funds on a GOP Senate primary race against businessman Eric Hovde, former Congressman Mark Neumann and state Assembly Speaker Jeff Fitzgerald. Gilkes lamented that last-minute support by outside groups didn't happen for Thompson and said he was "constantly digging

himself out of a hole toward the end."

But Kraus scoffed at that analysis, noting that \$4.5 million was spent on ads attacking Baldwin.

"The idea that we were the only team on the playing field is just not true," said Kraus, adding that voters perceived Thompson as wealthy and that his complaints about money fed the perception that he was only in the race for his own benefit.

Gilkes also looked back at the June recall election, telling the forum the ongoing John Doe investigation involving Walker aides didn't have a negative effect on the recall campaign because voters were "understanding of circumstances."

Gilkes said Walker's successful defeat of a recall effort in June was likely decided by Wisconsin voters as early as January, when the gov explained his stances and his actions since taking office.

"My gut level feeling was that Walker established himself in January when he told his side of the story. I think essentially, at that point, people had made up their minds," Gilkes said.

Gilkes later told reporters voters were "understanding" of the situation and of what happens when there are "problems with personnel."

"He is the one who brought discrepancies to the attention of the DA, and has decisively taken action when anything's been brought to his attention," Gilkes said of Walker.

Gilkes also told reporters he "had no knowledge" of a private wireless router system that allegedly enabled a secret email system in the Milwaukee County Courthouse.

Asked if a similar router exists in the state Capitol, Gilkes became angry.

"That's just absurd, I'm done," he responded and walked away.

Before the talk with reporters ended, Gilkes was asked about recent court documents that revealed daily conferences were held between Milwaukee County staffers and the Walker campaign. Walker has said there was nothing wrong with having such conferences.

"It was simply a scheduling and mechanical process element balancing the work of elected officials and the campaign at the same time. You have to make decisions about who's assigned what responsibilities, whether they be political or their official duties," Gilkes said. "And at all times, (Walker) has to be

available for contact by official office or the campaign. It was an opportunity to explain where he could be reached."

Gilkes said he couldn't comment further on documents introduced by Assistant DA Bruce Landgraf at the sentencing of former Walker aide Kelly Rindfleisch.

"Because of my cooperation with the DA, I'm not going to comment on that," Gilkes said. "It's part of the legal proceeding that I'm not allowed to talk about."

Gilkes said he's no longer working for Walker and has yet to decide if he'll work for any future Walker campaigns. Walker is up for re-election to a second four-year term in 2014.

-- *By Kay Nolan*
For WisPolitics.com