

September 21, 2010

[Dystopian Wisconsin: Who is Ron Johnson?](#)

by [Abe Sauer](#) posted @2:30 PM



Come November, it is the intention to throw the bums out. All of them. Many Senate seat challengers, while running as Republicans, have risen to the top with backing from the "tea party." Wisconsin's Ron Johnson is just such a candidate. A fiscally conservative businessman, Johnson has never run for public office and is an inexperienced campaigner. But the way his rhetoric matches with fact, he already seems the pro. Ron Johnson can now distinguish the bum's face. That bum is incumbent Senator Russ Feingold.

Now campaign finance filings found by The Awl show that despite his vigorous denouncement of the bank bailouts, Johnson's campaign has received funding from many of the same banks who received bailouts. This means you and I have helped fund Ron Johnson's anti-bailout campaign. So we should get to know him.

Johnson has gladly taken the tea party badge. Back in May, *Washington Post* columnist and conservative icon [George Will said Johnson](#) "is what the Tea Party looks like." FreedomWorks, the Dick Armey-run conservative organization that [organized the 9/12 rally in 2009](#) but is not at all behind many "grassroots" tea party events, called Johnson a "Champion of Freedom."

His website's rundown of his personal history ("[Meet Ron](#)") begins, "Ron grew up in a family and in a place where one of the greatest compliments you could give a person was to say that he or she was a hard worker." And it only gets more vague. Apparently, this is intentional. Johnson declined to meet Feingold in all six debates, agreeing to just three. That a long-time incumbent is challenging his newcomer to debates should immediately raise a red flag. Without detailed positions, what is there to specifically criticize? Johnson's campaign has taken to dismissing all criticisms of the candidate as typical political attack ads, even as Johnson's crew runs similar spots. This kind of electioneering doublethink infects Johnson's campaign, a rhetoric capable of forgetting whatever it's necessary to forget, only to draw it back into memory at the moment it is needed.

Johnson claims to be for freedom, his rallying cry being "First of all, freedom." But then he believes marriage can only be between a man and a woman.

He is a passionate believer in the values of Rand's *Atlas Shrugged*. But not the book's fundamental view of the "monstrous absurdity" of original sin, as he is a fervent and active Lutheran who says "freedom of religion doesn't mean freedom from religion."

Johnson has adopted an all-green design and logo, giving the impression that he is a friend of the environment. But he is a fervent supporter of fossil fuels, defending BP against recent criticisms and calling climate change theories "lunacy" and "not proven by any stretch of the imagination." (Johnson has [suggested sunspots have caused recent weather changes](#), despite sunspots being at historic lows.)

Johnson demands a smaller, less-involved government, saying our current one is "robbing the bank accounts of future generations of Americans." But even while Johnson calls government spending and subsidies a "threat to our freedom" and insists "government doesn't create jobs," he refuses to acknowledge that his company received millions of dollars in industrial revenue bonds. Johnson's campaign maintains the money he received was not a government handout. Yet this exact form of government subsidized loan is what fiscal conservative temple [The Cato Institute calls "corporate welfare."](#)

As everyone debates whether or not this constitutes a government subsidy, the blog Uppity Wisconsin reveals [Johnson's membership on the board](#) of an industrial development corporation partly funded by the city and county that "has successfully helped area business apply for and secure over a million dollars in Customized Labor Training (CLT) grants... designed to assist companies that are investing in new technologies or manufacturing processes by providing a grant of up to 50% of the cost of training employees on the new technologies." Yet, Johnson insists that subsidization "doesn't work through the free market system very well."

Johnson could not be more different than Feingold when it comes to creativity and a voice for Wisconsin. Johnson is a voice for money. He admits as much, saying of Wisconsin's loss of manufacturing jobs to NAFTA "[there are always winners and losers.](#)" For a candidate who complains about a private sector tax base, those "losers" include the 177,000-odd manufacturing jobs Wisconsin has lost in the last decade; that's 177,000 incomes that paid taxes.

From a GOP perspective, he is a midterm wet dream. Giving all the appearance of the throw-the-bums-out attitude of the zeitgeist, Johnson has nonetheless endorsed all the old bums' ideas about how to fix things. For health care Johnson says "Mitch Daniels has the solution," referring to the incumbent Indiana GOP Governor. On taxes, Johnson points to old-school GOP insider Ronald Reagan. Johnson has said that during Reagan's era, the top income rate of 28 percent meant "we were 72 percent free," which suggests Johnson may endorse a complete elimination of the income tax.

For solutions to entitlement reform, Johnson points to fellow Wisconsinite and incumbent GOP Congressman Paul Ryan. (It's noteworthy that while Johnson castigates opponent Feingold for being a career politician, he reveres Congressman Ryan, whose never held a job outside government since graduating college in 1992. Spectacular doublethink).

The greatest doublethink of all is the impression that Johnson is a self-made millionaire, that thanks to the opportunities provided by the American Dream, he pulled himself up by his bootstraps, an example of how America can reward hard-working citizens. On his website, the story goes that after moving to Wisconsin "Ron started a business called Pacur with his brother-in-law" and he has said he built his business from "from scratch," from "the ground up." But what Johnson's campaign doesn't often mention is that the candidate was set up with the business by his billionaire father-in-law. [Uppity Wisconsin](#) has unearthed evidence that Johnson's firm Pacur is the beneficiary of less-than-market-driven business from its main client, Daddy Inc.

Reading a candidate's website for his position papers is for suckers. To really understand how a candidate will vote, one needs to be in on the fund-raising calls he or she spends the majority of the day performing. Since that's impossible, the next best thing is to look at which of those calls were successful. Where each candidate stands is directly defined by the money trail.

Russ Feingold's Federal Election Commission report reads like a who's who of labor. American Maritime Officers Voluntary PAC. American Dental Association PAC. Alliant Energy Corporation Employees PAC. Air Conditioning Contractors of America PAC. Committee on Letter Carriers PAC (yes, this exists). Association of Postmasters. Amalgamated Transit Union. Writers Guild. Sheet Metal Workers. Air Traffic Controllers. United Brotherhood of Carpenters. American Nurses. Optometric Association. Assisted Living Federation. Associated Milk Producers. Boilermakers. Longshoremen. Walt Disney Productions Employees PAC. Bricklayers. Even the PAC from [Awl friends the Human Rights Committee](#) supports Feingold (since 1997).

Meanwhile, Ron Johnson has largely self-funded his campaign, running three TV ads for each one of Feingold's. When asked how much of his fortune he will spend to defeat Feingold, Johnson has said, "All of it." He's off to a good start, spending \$4.4 million in the run-up to the primary, or about \$9 per vote. That's a lot more than the many thousands of dollars both he and his wife gave in 2004 to Feingold's GOP challenger, Tim Michels.

Johnson doesn't really need the \$5,000-odd donations brought in by his committee, Ron Johnson for Senate Inc. That's why looking at his list of donors is even more telling. A newcomer, Johnson's list of financial supporters is short; but it includes the American Bankers PAC, American Express Company PAC, American Insurance Association PAC, Deloitte & Touche PAC, Financial Services Roundtable PAC, National Venture Capital Association PAC, and the Exxon Mobil PAC. The last of those donors recently got Mr. Johnson in some trouble when it was revealed that all his defense of oil exploration in the Gulf, and his criticism of the Obama Administration's treatment of BP, might be because he personally holds hundreds of thousands of dollars in BP and Exxon stock.



Much like many of this year's tea party-associated GOP candidates, one of Johnson's core campaign points is criticism of the financial bailout. Funny then that Johnson's campaign has been the beneficiary of the largess of the very corporations he believes should not have received bailout money.

For example, the cash Johnson received from the Financial Services Roundtable PAC on August 27 and the American Bankers Association PAC on July 8 and July 30 came from, amongst others, hardcore Treasury bailout beneficiaries such as JP Morgan Chase, SunTrust, Bank of America, Regions Financial, Zions and First Horizon. The money Ron Johnson received from the Bluegrass and Senate Majority Fund PACs came, in part, from one of the greatest bailout beneficiaries of them all, Goldman Sachs. Despite statements about staying out of politics this cycle, Goldman donated to both PACs on March 31 of this year. On June 24, Ron Johnson's campaign received two \$5,000 donations from the Bluegrass PAC, a day later the campaign received two donations from the Senate Majority PAC in the same amounts.

To be clear, while it may not be the backbone of his funding, some of the very bailout money that Ron Johnson has criticized is now funding his campaign.

Tea Party members might also be interested to know that some of the \$2,700 PAC donation he received on August 27 came from Sallie Mae.

Johnson's campaign ignored repeated requests from The Awl for comment.

Johnson has, and will continue to, paint Feingold as a Washington D.C. insider. But would a Democratic insider have voted against dismissing President Clinton's impeachment proceedings? Feingold did.

When it comes to true politician insiders, potential Johnson supporters should ask about his connections to Americans for Prosperity's old Republican establishment strategist Mark Block. State political blog [One Wisconsin Now](#) even makes a good case for how Johnson worked with supporters to actually diminish true grassroots tea party involvement after former Governor Tommy Thompson dropped out of the race. Johnson's dismissal of Wisconsin tea party groups and alignment with Americans for Prosperity's tea party is a microcosm of how the entire movement has been clandestinely hijacked by the GOP. And those who genuinely are grassroots tea party patriots should be worried about Johnson's connection to the retail version of their movement. As [One Wisconsin Now](#) also just uncovered, Americans for Prosperity, along with Republican party leaders, are dragging the tea party reputation [into good old GOP voter suppression tactics](#).

The great irony of course is that the newly angry who long for fiscal reason and weep for the Constitution, those who have become the "party of no," could not have a greater ally than Russ Feingold.

Feingold voted against the 2008 TARP bailout. In fact, he voted against the repeal of the Glass-Steagall Act, which in large part caused the need for the bailout. He voted against NAFTA. And just days after 9/11 and at the height of that event's fervor, Feingold hauled his giant balls up to the voting machine and registered a nay vote against the "USA Patriot Act" on the grounds that "The Founders who wrote our Constitution and Bill of Rights exercised that vigilance even though they had recently fought and won the Revolutionary War. They did not live in comfortable and easy times of hypothetical enemies. They wrote a Constitution of limited powers and an explicit Bill of Rights to protect liberty in times of war, as well as in times of peace." He was the only senator to vote no. By all means, [read his full remarks in the wake of the vote](#) and ask yourself why Russ Feingold isn't getting speaking invites for tea party rallies.

The once-progressive Republican [Wisconsin Idea](#) may have suffered greatly of late, broken and ill, slouching toward yore. But the election of Ron Johnson over Russ Feingold would be the ultimate blade run across its throat.

George Will's backseat make-out session with Johnson in May heavily leaned on *Atlas Shrugged* symbolism, noting it was Johnson's favorite book. Will noted Johnson's belief that we are already living in the "novel's dystopian world."

When newspeak replaces debate and the nation's vocabulary gets smaller every election cycle, where doublethink goes unquestioned by voters, we are indeed sliding into a novel's dystopian world, but it wasn't written by Ayn Rand.

Abe Sauer is enjoying [autumn in Wisconsin](#).

Photo by WiscPolitics.com via Flickr

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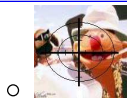
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[deepomega](#) [#1720]

I love how both Dems and Reps in the last few years have begun to scare-quote grassroots movements. Both sides think that it is impossible for the other side to have any sincere ground-up adherents. (Both sides also seem to think that it's possible to organize any movement without spending money – so as soon as someone is donating and isn't a random dude nobody's heard of, hey! "Grassroots"!)

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Seconded. I don't like most Tea Party nuts but I admit that many are real people who are trying to start a "real" political movement. Admitting anything less is intellectually dishonest.

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Yes, BUT, money for these groups on both sides come from questionable-motives-at-best sources. And that's worth pointing out. People like Dick Armey and the Kochs on the right, etc.

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