

Wisconsin is first up in a series of posts on key Senate races. My goal is to describe the candidates' views on key policy issues, not to make a case for either side. The Wisconsin race is a rematch between the incumbent Ron Johnson and the previous incumbent, Russ Feingold, whom he had defeated in 2010. Their lifetime ratings from the League of Conservation Voters tells the story about their views: Johnson's rating is 5%, Feingold's is 95%.

Johnson sometimes describes himself as having sprung from the Tea Party movement. His parents were farmers, and he went to the University of Minnesota for college (Go Gophers!)

He helped launch a plastic sheeting company with family members, taking advantage of a family connection with a major plastics company. He has expressed doubts and says the planet isn't warming, and has voted to bar EPA from regulating greenhouse gases.

Correspondingly, he has been very enthusiastic about expanding production of fossil fuels, and he voted to approve the XL Pipeline. In a radio interview in early August, Johnson also questioned the motives of believers in climate change: "The whole climate change debate gives — and there are all kinds of quotes from adherents of and promoters of climate change — the reason they're doing it is it's such a great opportunity to control, you know, pretty much, government, and control your lives." Johnson also co-sponsored a bill to overturn the Waters of the United States (WOTUS) rule, which is intended to protect wetlands and small streams. Given the closeness of the race, it may not be surprising that he talked to the Libertarian Party candidate about withdrawing, since they compete for some of the same voters.

One of the interesting things about this project is looking at how candidates appeal to local constituencies. So I might as well mention that Johnson has made a strong demand for "the fair treatment of common cheese names in EU trade negotiations."

Johnson's opponent is Russ Feingold. Feingold grew up in Janesville, Wisconsin, a town I used to drive through fairly often. He went to the University of Wisconsin, was a Rhodes Scholar at Oxford, and attended Harvard Law School before working in private practice and then becoming a state senator. When he was in the U.S. Senate, he helped lead the opposition to oil drilling in the Arctic and supported expansive jurisdiction for the federal government over streams and wetlands, putting him on the opposite of both issues from Johnson. He also opposed efforts to prevent EPA from regulating toxic emissions from coal-fired power plants. His environmental views won him endorsements from the Sierra Club and the League of Conservation Voters.

In short, these candidates are just about as far apart on the issues as humanly possible. Wisconsinites have a clearcut choice to make in November.