

NINA MOINI: Across the border, Voters in Wisconsin are also heading to the polls tomorrow. And there, the primary for governor is getting nationwide attention. On the Democratic side, the field is crowded with four candidates. On the Republican side, Congressman Tom Tiffany is seen as the presumptive Republican nominee. They're all looking to take over from Democratic Governor Tony Evers, who's leaving office.

Joining me now to break down this race is PBS Wisconsin senior political reporter Zac Schultz. Thanks so much for being with us, Zac.

ZAC SCHULTZ: My pleasure.

NINA MOINI: So let's start here on the Democratic side, which has seen quite a shakeup in the month leading up to this primary. It started as a seven-candidate field, I understand. Now there's four. Can you give us a summary of all-- of what's happened?

ZAC SCHULTZ: Yeah, it started out pretty broad with no real obvious front-runner other than perhaps Mandela Barnes, who was the Democratic nominee for the US Senate position in 2022. Lost a very close race to Ron Johnson, came back to run again for governor. And there were a lot of people thinking, well, he's probably got the most name recognition.

And he started out the race running as kind of a presumptive nominee, kind of ignoring the field. But then Francesca Hong, the Democratic socialist from Madison, in the first sets of polls that came out, clearly showed she had a base of support that was above everyone else at that point. And I think a lot of people weren't sure if there was a ceiling to that support. So they kind of ignored her and were running their own races.

As we got through the spring and into the summer, things got a little different. We had one candidate drop out. And then David Crowley, the Milwaukee County Executive, dropped out, saying he just didn't see a way to the nomination. And he supported Lieutenant Governor Sarah Rodriguez. But a week later, her fundraising collapsed. It showed that she didn't have any money. And the money that she thought she had, \$1 million, had been inaccurately counted by her campaign manager. Her campaign dissolved.

And then Crowley got back in with the endorsement of Tony Evers, who prior to that had sat the race out. So there was a lot of scrambling in the field. And then, a couple of weeks later, Mandela Barnes himself dropped out right before some damaging headlines and opposition news came out about him. So we're down to a four-person field. But Francesca Hong has had a solid polling lead all along from all polls, whether independent or public or outside or not.

NINA MOINI: It's so interesting to see this happening, really, across the country, these more progressive candidates. We've seen some of them win in other Democratic primaries recently, Michigan as an example. How is the sentiment right now across your state regarding just the Democratic Party and in which direction it should go, or what's better?

ZAC SCHULTZ: Well, that's clearly a divide. When Democrats are looking at this race, a lot of them were thinking like the national environment. And so the anti-Trump administration feeling very much has them looking as far left as they can go, which really lends to where Francesca Hong's support really grew organically through this race. But then as we've gotten closer to this primary, there have been more and more establishment centrist, moderate Democrats saying, we don't know if she can win.

And they were supported by the number of Republican groups that were actually spending money boosting Hong, saying that she be an easier candidate for Tom Tiffany to defeat in the fall. And so that really rang in a lot of alarm bells for Democrats saying, well, if Republicans want to face her, and they're actually spending millions boosting her, is this really who we want leading our party?

So there's been a little bit of that back and forth of like, what does it mean to be an establishment candidate? Who's the real progressive? And what is electability and what does it look like?

NINA MOINI: I understand some criticism of Hong, though, has ramped up recently. Some old tweets of hers are being resurfaced. What are some of the criticisms against Hong? And then, how is Crowley trying to get ahead?

ZAC SCHULTZ: Well, the main criticisms of Hong is that her record on Twitter is pretty apparent. She falls in line with a lot of the traditional Democratic Socialists. She's got tweets about abolish the Senate, abolish prisons, defund the police. She's had tweets that were a little perhaps cheeky in tone from COVID era times, talking about attacking different holidays she didn't like.

She used to run a restaurant in Madison. So a lot of those came from customers on Valentine's, or having to cook for Thanksgiving or Halloween customers. And so she's defended those by saying, those were of that time. I don't hate those holidays. It's just as a restaurant industry worker, those could be frustrating times. Some of her other tweets, like defund the police, Republicans are absolutely going to be using those against her.

And Democrats like Crowley and Evers have said that voters need to be aware that those are liabilities. Whether she has pushed those aside and has tried to change her point of view today, which she is obviously pushing-- rejecting those tweets. And saying as governor, she wouldn't do that or wouldn't have the ability to do that.

They're definitely seen as a liability among a lot of Democrats who are trying to urge non-Hong supporters to centralize their support among David Crowley. Part of the issue is more than 100,000 votes have already been cast via absentee ballot. And we know some of those are for candidates that have already dropped out.

NINA MOINI: Wow, OK. So then you mentioned two on the Republican side, Congressman Tom Tiffany. I understand there is another candidate, but people are really backing-- within the party backing Tiffany, right?

ZAC SCHULTZ: Yes. The other candidate has never held elected office and he's never really gotten any footing or any fundraising. He's on the ballot. But this is Tom Tiffany's race all the way. He's been Trump-endorsed and by the entire party. There really isn't-- it's a presumptive nominee scenario. And he's been running preparing for Hong, but also making sure that if she doesn't make it through, he hasn't made them look more moderate by proxy compared to Hong, saying there really isn't a dime's bit of difference between them when it comes down to policy.

So he is prepared to run against Hong, and absolutely happy to do so. But he's making sure that his message doesn't get lost if David Crowley, for instance, comes through and wins a little bit of an upset tomorrow, that he hasn't made him look like a moderate in voters' minds by comparison to Francesca Hong.

NINA MOINI: And some of these primary races, as we've seen here in Minnesota as well, have gotten pretty nasty. Do you think the Republican Party has an edge coming in a little bit more unified into the primary? Or what are people feeling around that?

ZAC SCHULTZ: Yeah, it's interesting because a year ago, people weren't sure who the Republicans would run. Because historically, this would not be a good year for Republican candidate with the Trump administration and Donald Trump's personal ratings being as low as they are. Historically, this is not a time where you would expect a Republican to win statewide.

That's partly why Tom Tiffany had a mostly free run. And he was not known as a big fundraiser, but he has taken advantage of some loopholes in state law that have allowed him to receive millions of dollars from billionaires, who can give money to the party and then transfer all that money to his campaign. So he's actually very well-funded, and has been running a lot of statewide ads portraying himself as your everyday, friendly guy at the bar with a family and a cute mom.

And so he's had a chance to change his image from what he was otherwise known for, or reintroduce himself to the state in a different light. And there's absolutely a concern among Democrats that if they come through this primary not united and out of money, that they could be at a severe disadvantage heading into the fall.

NINA MOINI: You mentioned some people have already voted. And turnout, we know, is normally much lower for a primary. But because of how this race is stacking up, do you expect higher turnout?

ZAC SCHULTZ: I think turnout will be boosted only because of all the chaos that's been in the race. The last few weeks has really awakened a lot of voters to, oh, yeah, there is a primary. August primaries don't get much attention because people are still in the middle of summer break. And they're not thinking about elections until the fall.

And so this usually was more of a hardcore partisan primary. And that's partly one of the reasons why David Crowley thinks he still has a chance, despite the polls showing him being behind by almost 20 points, is he thinks this will actually be perhaps an older and more centrist Democrat base election in this primary. And that Hong's support in polling comes from younger, newer voters who may not actually vote, or don't have a history of voting.

So it will be interesting to see who does show up and where does turnout sit? Because Hong's basic message for electability is she's bringing in an entirely new crowd of voters that have tuned out from the old Democratic establishment's races in the past.

NINA MOINI: Fascinating reporting. Thank you for sharing it with us, Zac.

ZAC SCHULTZ: My pleasure.

NINA MOINI: Zac Schultz is a senior politics reporter for PBS Wisconsin.