

NINA MOINI: We're turning now to our neighbors in Wisconsin, who are also making sense of primary election results today. The race for governor in particular has received a lot of attention. It's one of several races across the country where progressive or Democrat socialist candidates have faced off against more moderate Democrats. In this case, the moderate won. David Crowley narrowly defeated Francesca Hong. Now, he'll face Republican US Representative Tom Tiffany in the November midterm.

PBS Wisconsin senior political reporter Zac Schultz recently joined me to break down this race. And he's back on the line. Thank you so much for joining us again, Zac.

ZAC SCHULTZ: Sure. And my pleasure.

NINA MOINI: I know you're having a busy day. We do appreciate your time. When we last talked, Francesca Hong, it seemed, was ahead of David Crowley in polls, at least. He ended up winning by less than 1 percentage point. So I want to remind listeners that at one point early in the race, as well as you explained to us, Crowley had actually dropped out and then re-entered the race earlier this summer. What a whirlwind. Would you walk us through just the roller coaster of his campaign?

ZAC SCHULTZ: Yeah, it's been a pretty crazy time for David Crowley. This one will definitely go in the history books. And obviously, if he's able to pull it off and win in November, this would be even more historic. But yeah, he entered the race last year. And it was kind of a quiet campaign in the middle of the field. And then we got to July, and it was time to report fundraising numbers. And he dropped out. And the presumption was, he just hadn't raised enough money. He endorsed one of the other candidates.

But then when her campaign blew up a week later, and she dropped out, there were a lot of Democratic leaders, including Governor Tony Evers, who is not running for a third term, which is why this is an open primary, who said, David, we need you back in the race. You're the person that people can rally around in that moderate, centralist Democratic lane against Francesca Hong, who had really clarified that progressive Democratic, socialist lane on the far left.

And he gained momentum kind of slowly. He didn't come out of the gates. But over time, and especially in the last week and a half, he announced that he had raised twice as much money in that last week as Francesca Hong. And he'd had a lot more Democrats around the country rally for him, especially after we saw the results of the primary in Michigan, where polling showed, oh, that centrist candidate actually can have a chance, that the polling is maybe not quite as accurate. People got more and more on board with the idea that he's got a chance if everything falls right. And believe me, everything had to fall exactly right last night for David Crowley to win.

BRIAN BAKST: Zac, this is Brian Bakst here. And I just wanted to note for our listeners that there were some other candidates who did drop out who were still on the ballot, who got quite a few votes. I mean, how much nail biting was there about whether they could be the difference in this outcome?

ZAC SCHULTZ: Yeah, early on, the question was the two of the prominent Democrats that had dropped out, Lieutenant Governor Sara Rodriguez and then former Lieutenant Governor Mandela Barnes. Both were out of the race. And it was known that there had already been people who had voted for them by absentee ballot before they dropped out of the race. So we knew they were going to get votes. The question was, would that be enough to be the difference between first and second place? And not only was it the difference, it was an overwhelming amount of votes.

So that really was a question. And especially as we got to late this morning, actually, around 1 o'clock in the morning, when the Milwaukee County absentee ballots were finally released from the city of Milwaukee, we knew there were 28,000 votes that were going to be released as far as their totals, but we didn't what that composition was.

And what was intriguing about those absentee numbers is some of those people started voting when Crowley had already dropped out of the race. He dropped out, and absentee voting started. So there could have been people that voted and never even knew he was back in the race. And so, we really didn't know what those ballots would show. It ended up being Crowley won those over Hong by about 3,000. And that really cemented his victory early in the morning.

NINA MOINI: Zac, just lastly, we know that you mentioned Republican groups really wanted Hong to win because they thought that she would be easier to beat in the general election. So what does Crowley's win mean for the Republican candidate, Tom Tiffany?

ZAC SCHULTZ: They're scrambling their message. And they were doing it already last night in his comments. It was clear that they were expecting to take on Francesca Hong. Now, I had spoken to Tiffany a couple of weeks on the campaign trail, and I had asked him, is there a concern that by focusing so much on Hong, that if someone else wins, they would almost look more moderate and reasonable by comparison for independent voters, who do listen to what Republicans have to say? And he said, no, no matter who wins, there's not really a bit of difference between them.

So he was already starting to moderate his message in this case, in this case that someone other than Hong would win, and they would look like a more, quote unquote, "reasonable" Democrat for a lot of the independent and moderate voters in Wisconsin, who do decide these elections.

NINA MOINI: Zac, we really appreciate you sharing your reporting with us again. Hope you'll join us again sometime.

ZAC SCHULTZ: Anytime. Thank you.

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