

Is Scott Wa

The governor's political future depends on w



Walker Done?

Whether he can repair relations and his image

Scott Walker is a one-hit wonder. That's the impression left on the national electorate — inconceivable a few short months ago — following the Wisconsin governor's botched presidential campaign. And it appears that his national collapse has also damaged his standing at home.

By **CHRISTIAN SCHNEIDER**

Cover Story

Walker's job approval rating sank to a low of 37%, with a 59% disapproval rating, in the latest Marquette University Law School poll. The respective numbers in August were 39% and 57%. By contrast, his approval rating during 2012-'14 held steady around 50%.

A majority of Wisconsinites, 62%, do not want to see the governor run for a third term, while 35% do. Among Republicans, 79% support Walker's running for a third term. The Marquette poll, conducted after Walker dropped out of the presidential race, was released on Sept. 30.

Once heralded across the country as a conservative hero for taking on and defeating the state's public employee unions in 2011, the governor couldn't translate that signature achievement into a plausible national persona. A string of gaffes and lackluster debate performances quickly extinguished the one-time Iowa front-runner's momentum.

After such a spectacular fall, is Walker's political future over in Wisconsin? Can he repair relations with GOP leaders and rising upstarts who filled the void while he was courting voters nationwide? Can he win back constituents miffed by the amount of time he spent not doing the governor's work? What will his priorities be?

Walker says he plans to finish out the remaining three-plus years of his term. Upon his return to Wisconsin in late September, he immediately supported a legislative plan to alter the state's civil service process to streamline the hiring and firing of state employees. This was accompanied by a "kiss and make up" tour around the state to remind Wisconsinites that he was, in fact, still their governor.

He toured a factory in De Pere on Oct. 1 and declared that he'll focus on jobs training to address a worker shortage in skilled manufacturing. (See related stories on Pages 6-11.) "This year, our big challenge is not just creating jobs but filling jobs and making sure people have the skill sets they need," Walker told the Sheboygan Press. "Working with Northeast Wisconsin Technical College or others like them across the state is now more important than ever," he added.

But first, Walker "has some bridges he needs to mend," according to University of Wisconsin-Madison political science professor Ken Mayer. And those bridges must lead to both parties, Mayer says.

"Democrats are not going to be interested in working with



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him, but I think there were some Republicans that were less than thrilled with the way in which the campaign played itself out," he says.

"People viewed the state as a stepping stone for his bigger ambitions, and if it served his purposes

to throw people under the bus for his presidential ambitions, then he was willing to do that," Mayer adds.

Former Gov. Tommy Thompson agrees that Walker has repair work to do with the Republican Legislature, telling a Milwaukee TV station that Walker "left them a bad budget" and "didn't give them the leadership they expected."

Walker also needs to improve his standing with Republican voters who didn't want him to run for president in the first place, says Mike Wagner, an associate professor in UW's School of Journalism and Mass Communication.

According to the Marquette poll, 30% of Republicans say they wish Walker had not run for president; 51% of right-leaning independents wish he had not run. Only 28% of Republicans and right-leaning independents say they would have supported him had he stayed in the race, with 55% favoring a different candidate.

When Walker gets back to taking on big issues, Republican voters will come around, Wagner says. "To come back and immediately meet with the Republican caucus and to begin talking another bold policy reform that's in the same vein as

his other major policy reforms — these are all signals to Republicans who might have been upset at him that he's going to be the Scott Walker they knew and liked," he says.

The extent to which Walker is able to get things done in Wisconsin also rests on his long-term plans, whether he still has

national aspirations and how the 2016 presidential election plays out.

If a Democrat wins the White House, Walker might consider another presidential bid. The chance to challenge a first-term Democrat, with lessons learned from this year's campaign, could lure Walker in 2020.

But there is also the Rick Perry lesson. GOP voters remember the presidential candidate's implosion four years ago, and that helped doom the former Texas governor's run this year. Walker could suffer the same fate in 2020.

Because running for president as an out-of-office candidate

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is difficult, Walker might seek re-election in 2018 to help his presidential chances.

If a Republican wins the presidency next November, the office is likely blocked for another eight years. Walker has said he's not interested in a cabinet position, but if he's still taking a beating in state polls next fall, he might change his mind and accept the call.

Or the governor could drift away from politics altogether. If Walker — a middle-class family man with two college-age sons — has the chance to finally make some money in the private sector, he couldn't be blamed for taking it. But could someone who's held elected office since 1992, much of his adult life, simply walk away from politics?

If the perception in Wisconsin is that Walker isn't running for a third term, state Republicans may begin trying to draw contrasts between themselves and the incumbent in order to bolster their own gubernatorial prospects.

Legislative leaders in Wisconsin might be more willing to exert the influence they gained while Walker was on the campaign trail. As he traveled the country, the Legislature was busy making Wisconsin a right-to-work state, repealing the prevailing wage law for local government and enacting a ban on abortion after 20 weeks.

Each of these bills originated with the Legislature, and Walker took credit for each of them while campaigning for president.

Assembly Majority Leader Jim Steineke says Walker's absence prompted the Legislature's surge in activity. "If you don't have the guy at the top with the bully pulpit, picking that direction and moving the Legislature in that direction, there's going to be more of the individual personalities pushing their own agendas and trying to rally people toward that," he says.

It's unlikely that Assembly Speaker Robin Vos and Senate Majority Leader Scott Fitzgerald will fade into the background willingly, especially when their caucuses face elections in 2016.

Vos suggests a new path for Republicans moving forward. "We have to remember we are in a purple state," Vos says. "As conservatives, we have to make sure that we always bring the public along, convince people of why we're doing things and speak to win people over, as opposed to just speaking to people we've already won."

And despite Walker's reputation for getting things done, there

is still much to do. For instance, even with the state's union reforms and tax cuts, the Tax Foundation named Wisconsin eighth worst for taxes. While the sales tax is relatively low, Wisconsin still ranks near the top in income taxes and property taxes. Momentum also has been

building to repeal the state's minimum markup law.

Thus, in Walker's absence, legislative leaders were formulating their fall agendas. Proposals likely to see action include banning the sale of fetal body parts, campaign finance reform, reforms to the Government Accountability Board and the John Doe process, and a package of bills targeting fraud in public benefit programs such as FoodShare.

"I think there's a ton of issues we can work on — some of which might be partisan, unfortunately, but plenty of which are bipartisan," Vos says.

It is difficult, however, to lead on statewide issues from the Legislature, and Walker could be an asset if he somehow can repair his image. How can he do that?

"You have to start re-establishing those connections and making it clear to people that you care what's happening to them," Mayer says. "And that is going to take some work."

"I think it's a fair statement to say everything he has done in the last 18 months he has done to advance his presidential ambitions. Now he has to undo some of that and persuade people that he is — to use an overused sports metaphor — 'all in' in Wisconsin," he says.

But even if Walker is invested, his time in Wisconsin may have passed.

"He's going to run into people whose time is now," Wagner says. "People who might want to run for governor or move up in leadership — they're all going to be telling voters what they're for and

what they're going to do should voters be willing take a chance on them," he adds.

"There's going to be more pressure than Gov. Walker is used to not run for re-election, and he showed in this presidential run that he's not very skilled at taking friendly fire," Wagner says.

It remains to be seen whether Scott Walker has any political capital left to lead effectively or whether too much damage has been done and he'll be eclipsed by those seeking his job.

Christian Schneider is a columnist and blogger for the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel.

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