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Dems in good shape to retain Kohl Senate seat in Wisconsin

Raleigh, N.C. – PPP’s latest poll of next year’s Wisconsin Senate race shows incumbent Herb Kohl and potential Democratic ticket replacement Russ Feingold maintaining similarly strong leads over various Republicans as in the previous gauge of the contest last December. Kohl has yet to announce whether or not he will run for re-election.

Rep. Paul Ryan seems an unlikely aspirant, particularly if Kohl does not retire, but if he does run, he would start out the strongest of the Republicans. He lags Kohl and Feingold each by a 49-42 margin. The Feingold-Ryan matchup polarizes the two parties a little more than the Kohl variation—each nominee locking up more of his base and seeing less crossover support. Feingold also performs a little better with independents than the seat’s current occupier, beating Ryan 48-38 versus Kohl’s 45-40 edge.

Attorney General J.B. Van Hollen trails Kohl, 52-37, and Feingold, 51-39. Former Rep. Mark Neumann, who lost the GOP gubernatorial primary last year, is behind Kohl by a 51-37 margin, and Feingold by 50-40. Neumann was not tested two months ago. Kohl does a little better job than Feingold at attracting Republican and independent support against these lesser-known Republicans, holding each to 76% of the GOP’s vote, while Neumann and Van Hollen get 83-84% of their party against Feingold. Regardless, both Democrats win independents by double digits and hold at least 90% of Democrats.

With a 50-30 job approval margin, Kohl is in the 80th percentile among the 82 senators on which PPP has polled in the last 14 months or so. Independents like him by a 2:1 margin, twice as many Republicans have a positive impression as Democrats a negative one, and while three-quarters of his own party rate him well, only 55% of Republicans disapprove. By contrast, newly inaugurated Ron Johnson splits voters pretty evenly. A 39% plurality do not yet know enough about his accomplishments to rate him, and those who have an opinion break only 32-28 in his favor. That makes him less popular than Feingold, the man he ousted from the state’s other Senate seat by five points last fall. Johnson’s predecessor has a 51-39 favorability rating. This disparity speaks to the extraordinarily Republican-heavy electorate in that election.

“Herb Kohl still looks like he would be a solid favorite for reelection,” said Dean Debnam, President of Public Policy Polling. “And if he retires Russ Feingold’s prospects for returning to the Senate would be pretty good as well. Wisconsin’s a different state politically in a Presidential year.”

PPP surveyed 768 Wisconsin voters from February 24th to 27th. The survey’s margin of error is +/-3.5%. Other factors, such as refusal to be interviewed and weighting, may introduce additional error that is more difficult to quantify.