

# What's behind Dairy State's rise in GOP circles?

## Ryan, Walker and Priebus form 'Cheesehead Revolution'

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This week's GOP convention will be a striking testament to the remarkable prominence three Republicans from Wisconsin have achieved in national politics.

Reince Priebus will preside as chairman of the Republican National Committee.

His good friend Scott Walker is among a handful of governors with prime-time speaking slots. And their good friend Paul Ryan will be introduced to the nation as Mitt Romney's running mate.

"It's kind of weird," Ryan told me this summer about their rapid national ascent, a phenomenon Walker and Priebus call the "Cheesehead Revolution."

Is it just weird happenstance that Wisconsin has in short order produced the Republican Party's most influential congressman, its most impactful governor and its institutional leader?

Does it say something about Wisconsin's fervid political culture? Its rich political traditions? Its shifting partisan balance? Its well-financed conservative infrastructure? Its unusual history of seeding and shaping the modern conservative moment?

Or is it more emblematic of broader trends: the tea party insurgency; the 2010 Republican wave; and the generational phenomenon of audacious post-baby boom conservatives remaking their party?

"Wisconsin is clearly the center of the universe," says Dave Keene, a Wisconsinite, longtime Beltway figure, former head of the American Conservative Union and current chairman of the National Rifle Association.

He's not entirely kidding.

"At the NRA, everybody is from Wisconsin," says Keene. "I sent an email to a friend of mine in the Romney campaign and said they can go into all of the reasons for picking Ryan, but it's clearly part of the Wisconsin takeover of the world."

Aside from the role of pure circumstance, which should never be discounted, here is a look at what the rise of the Wisconsin Three might tell us about state and national politics:

**Republican revolutionaries.** Ryan and Walker share an aggressive, risk-taking, third-rail approach to policy and

politics that a liberal organizer in Wisconsin last year memorably dubbed "shock and awe politics." To the left, Ryan's mission of overhauling the country's entitlement programs and Walker's move against public employee unions are radical and ominous. State Democratic chair Mike Tate calls it "right-wing social engineering."

To the right, it's exhilarating.

"We both took on the status quo, which was unsustainable," Ryan said in an interview before his selection to the ticket.

"In Wisconsin years ago, I and others just made the determination we would build our party around Scott and Paul. . . . People are just starving for people that can lead," says Priebus. "The party (nationally) looks to Wisconsin for a lot of guidance. It is (about) making promises, keeping promises, having bold ideas."

**Post-baby boom politicians.** Ryan, Walker and Priebus are all fortysomething members of Generation X. They came of age as Tommy Thompson was rebuilding the Republican Party in Wisconsin and just after Ronald Reagan had redefined the Republican Party nationally.

"We didn't know each other growing up. It wasn't like we were all part of the same group of thinkers. Each of us was definitely influenced by Reagan," says Walker.

"Paul and Reince and I talk almost all the time, either talk or text or connect. Particularly for Paul and me, we go back and forth quite a bit just trying to affirm the other one . . . 'Hang in there, you're doing the right thing,' " Walker says.

"We all grew up in the Tommy (Thompson) era, and Tommy was the 1990s version of a reform-minded Republican," says Ryan.

Keene says Thompson's reign "really did kick-start a generation of conservative activism in the state."

In Wisconsin, Ryan, Walker and Priebus are part of a youthful Gen-X cohort that largely dominates the party's leadership tier, something that's far less true on the Democratic side.

**Conservative infrastructure.** Ryan and Walker have both benefited from a formidable mosaic of conservative organizations in Wisconsin, among them the Bradley Foundation - a huge force in funding the movement at the state and national level and in promoting some of the policies identified with Walker and Ryan.

"Bradley's been a big factor in growing the Wisconsin talent and pushing it onto the national stage," says Keene.

Bradley President Michael Grebe chaired Walker's campaign and in a 2009 speech at a Bradley event in D.C., Ryan thanked "my close personal friend Mike Grebe, who's virtually my political godfather."

Grebe says that may be overstating his influence on Ryan, who "has had a number of mentors."

Says Grebe of the Ryan/Walker/Priebus triumvirate, "I have trouble coming up with an overarching theory for why this happened."

But he acknowledges Bradley's role in helping grow the conservative infrastructure in the state and believes that has had an impact on the political culture in Wisconsin.

"I'll leave to others an analysis of how impactful and extensive that has been," says Grebe, who once served as state party chair and general counsel to the Republican National Committee.

Scot Ross of the liberal-leaning group One Wisconsin Now points to the role another conservative organization, Americans for Prosperity, had in mobilizing the right in Wisconsin during the 2010 campaign that put Walker in power and elected a GOP Legislature vital to implementing his policies.

"They were able to create that atmosphere that was toxic to Democrats, or facilitative to Republicans," says Ross, who contends Walker's rise is less about homegrown politics than "the success of corporate special interests in taking over a state and making it a laboratory."

**Republican resurgence in Wisconsin.** The GOP's huge victories in Wisconsin in 2010 not only launched Walker but helped in turn to get Priebus elected chair of the RNC, since his success as chair of the state party was arguably his chief credential. Nationally, the GOP wave also elevated Ryan, installing a huge conservative freshman class that swung the House GOP behind Ryan's budget ideas.

Having three of their own play such prominent roles in the national party is a testament to the GOP's revival in Wisconsin - and its rightward shift since its previous heyday under Thompson in the 1990s.

"This isn't (Democratic Gov.) Patrick Lucey's Wisconsin anymore. It's not even (GOP Gov.) Lee Dreyfus' Wisconsin anymore," says Wisconsinite Dan Schnur, a former California and national strategist in GOP politics, who now heads the Institute of Politics at the University of Southern California.

**Wisconsin's political history and culture.** Where do Walker, Ryan and Priebus fit in the context of Wisconsin's political traditions? Ryan argues he and Walker belong to a broad Wisconsin reform tradition that includes progressives and conservatives (a notion Democrats tend to reject).

"It's a very politically interesting place and it has been for a century, going back to La Follette," says Wisconsinite Paul Gigot, editor of The Wall Street Journal editorial page, who has long known and touted Ryan. "You've got (former Sen.) Gaylord Nelson, Prox (former Sen. Bill Proxmire), Tommy with welfare reform. It's just been a fascinating place where a lot of ideas percolate on the left and right."

Wisconsin's acute activism and polarization, amplified during Walker's governorship, figure into the story. In fact, it was the mobilization of the state's highly engaged Democrats and unions that produced the recall drive that turned Walker into a national figure and hero to conservatives outside the state.

"The Left made him that," Ryan said in an interview this summer.

For one last bit of historical context, there's Wisconsin's unusual role in helping shape the modern conservative movement, from the late Paul Weyrich (co-founder of the Heritage Foundation and a "father" of the Christian Right) to Bradley under Grebe and his predecessor Michael Joyce.

None of this quite rises to an "overarching" explanation for the Cheesehead Revolution.

But for the Republicans that Wisconsin has sent to Tampa this week, it's glory days.

"We should enjoy it," says Steve King, longtime RNC member from Wisconsin. "The stars have aligned."

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