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Sen. Paul Wellstone

Incumbent still relishes his populist role

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Wellstone: "This race isn't about myself or Rudy Boschwitz or anyone else; it's about what people stand for. People are going to vote based on how it connects to their lives."

BY JOHN YEWELL

A few hours after Sen. Paul Wellstone announced his run for re-election, Sen. Bob Kerrey of Nebraska spoke to a packed open house at Wellstone's campaign headquarters in St. Paul. Before Kerrey left, Wellstone showed him the famous green bus parked out front on University Avenue. As they mounted the back platform, passing motorists noticed Wellstone and honked in recognition. Kerrey was impressed. "The bus," Wellstone said with a hint of awe, "is magic."

That same day, the Republican Party started a series of new radio ads in greater Minnesota lambasting Wellstone as an "ultraliberal." Within days, one of those ads, aimed at farmers in southern Minnesota, was canceled when a portion of it was found to be false.

It is a propitious beginning for Wellstone, who sits square in the cross hairs of the Republican Party. Although no longer dependent on the mechanical whims of the legendary bus, he will need all of its magic to win. A well-financed incumbent after five years in office, Wellstone still relishes his populist role and hopes to write a book about the re-election campaign.

Three days after the announcement, at his campaign headquarters, Wellstone is relaxed, a geared-down version of the oratorical dynamo that regularly whips his troops into a frenzy.

You said at a recent campaign rally that you had become very good at being a U.S. senator. What did you mean by that?

I think I've always had a special mandate from the voters of Minnesota to be an outsider who can be effective on the inside. It's easy to go home and give rah-rah speeches, but you come through for Minnesotans by learning the process and knowing how to fight hard for the issues you campaigned on. You have to keep your intensity and stay grounded in the people of your state. In our Minnesota office we get over 300 calls a day. We're so good at constituent work, we get further behind every day. A friend said to me today, "For so many people who don't have a voice, who feel most

powerless, you are always there." I'm very proud of that.

I don't imagine you get too many calls from the Christian Coalition.

The Christian Coalition doesn't call to ask me to attend their gatherings, but its members have called because they have a child that's disabled and they're worried about what's going to happen, or because the insurance company wouldn't cover something, or because their dad is a veteran and can't get into the VA center. People don't make these [political] distinctions. That's the part of the job I love: trying to help people. This is important to me, really important.

Republicans say they are winning elections on the strength of their ideas. Wouldn't you say that Democrats have gotten pretty timid about fighting for what they believe in?

Yes.

And does that reveal anything about what they believe in?

No. And I don't think that Republicans at the moment are winning on their ideas. Everybody talks about the political "center." Is that defined by a pattern of power in Washington? Or "center" in the country? The center, without a doubt, is key economic issues — bread-and-butter issues. Robert Dole launched his campaign in New Hampshire by taking on the large corporations and being for the workers. That's what Pat Buchanan has tapped into within a totally different social-agenda framework.

In the past Democrats have been criticized for sounding too much like Republicans. Are you saying Republicans now sound like Democrats?

Different sets of issues have primacy at different times. These economic-justice issues, fairness issues, opportunity issues, which have been my work as a senator, will be the focus of

our campaign. That's what the vast majority of Minnesotans believe in.

When people don't view Democrats as being on their side, in terms of good jobs or good education or fighting for them and their kids, Democrats don't do well. I think this helped create a political void. I think there were a couple of good ideas [from Republicans], but, mainly, Gingrich and others invented enemies for people. We have a history of this in our country. People feel this economic squeeze, you have this decline in the standard of living for large numbers of people, and Gingrich comes in and blames things on the poor, on immigrants, etc.

Republicans say that Democrats create enemies by demonizing the wealthy.

I think the good ideas have to do with the language of decentralization and empowerment. I wasn't the least bit upset when Bill Clinton talked about the end of big government. I was a community organizer. I've always been in favor of decentralization, of people having more say over their lives locally. But it's a shell game when we withdraw key federal resources and then tell people to finance programs out of their property-tax structure.

Don't you think Republicans deserve credit for changing the way we think about balancing the budget and the deficit?

First of all, Bill Clinton deserves credit for having significantly reduced the budget deficit. Second, there are some Republicans and some Democrats — [former Congressman] Tim Penny is a good example — who are very serious about saying: "You can't continue to run up this unconscionable debt." I agree with Kevin Phillips, a Republican, who has said many times that the Republican budget plan was never about balancing the budget. It was about being good to bondholders and wealthy people and about eviscerating many of our safety-net programs that have been important to working people, the middle class and low-income families.

Wasn't that accusation — that the deficit was expanded so social programs could be strangled — leveled at the Reagan administration?

That was Stockman [Reagan's budget director]. He said if you eroded the revenue base, you would then make any new initiative look fiscally irresponsible.

How do you get along with Sen. Grams? Do you work together on anything?

When we can work together, we do. For example, last week I was involved in an effort to protect dairy farmers in our state and Rod joined in.

We have very different methodologies as senators. Somebody said to me that your votes cancel out. Well, voting is the most minimal thing you do as a senator. It's what you do in markup — it's whether you write amendments, it's whether you write bills, it's whether you're active in the debate. I'm fiercely proud of having a major presence in the United States Senate.

Many people see this election as a grudge match between you and Rudy Boschwitz.

I don't have anything to do with who runs, but it's not a grudge match from my point of view. This race isn't about myself or Rudy Boschwitz or anyone else; it's about what people stand for. People are going to vote based on how it connects to their lives. Having a campaign that people will love and enjoy is the goal of all this. The major difference will be that this time I will have much more by way of financial resources, and I will also have much more opposition. This is no secret. I've offended an incredible number of large interests. This election will be a referendum on how campaigns are conducted. I think people will reject the vicious personal-attack stuff.

You used to wrestle. Could you take Gingrich two falls out of three?

Oh, I think three out of three. ♦