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Uphill in Wisconsin

When it came to the actual details of governing, Senator Russ Feingold, a Democrat of Wisconsin, trounced his Republican challenger, Ron Johnson, in a debate in Wausau, Wis., on Monday night. He knew that the new health care law will not reduce Medicare spending but will slow its staggering rate of growth. He knew that a vast majority of small businesses would not pay higher taxes if rates went up on the wealthy and that global warming isn't caused by sunspots. He knew that without the 2009 stimulus there would be at least 1.5 million fewer people with jobs.

Mr. Johnson, on the other hand, proudly proclaimed recently that he doesn't "think this election is about details." That's as good an explanation as any of why — in Wisconsin as in so many states — candidates like Mr. Johnson are ahead in the polls. Insurgent Republicans don't need details when they can play on the furious emotions of voters who have been misled into believing that positive changes like the health care law are catastrophic failures.

The public's lack of attention to detail, and Mr. Johnson's willingness to exploit it, could end the career of Mr. Feingold, who in three terms has distinguished himself for trying to bring fairness to campaign finance and decency to national security, among other achievements. He has routinely crossed party lines to work with Republicans and has had the courage to break with his own party more often than almost any other senator.

He voted against confirming Tim Geithner as Treasury secretary, citing Mr. Geithner's personal tax issues. He refused to support the Wall Street reform package because it did not go far enough. He was the only senator who voted against the misguided Patriot Act in 2001. He has supported gun rights — more than we like — and has opposed hate crime measures.

Mr. Feingold's independent mind, and his refusal to follow the big-money line on issues like trade, campaign finance and Wall Street reform, should have endeared him to Tea Party members and other independents who are angry at Washington conformists. If they had taken the time to listen.

Instead, they are supporting Mr. Johnson, a wealthy plastics manufacturer unknown to them six months ago. Mr. Johnson says he had long believed government restricted business and individual liberties (we're not clear which ones he has in mind) but decided to run for office when the health care bill was passed, claiming that President Obama was trying to create a socialist state.

At the debate, Mr. Johnson called the bill "an incredibly expensive overreach." When Mr. Feingold noted that it would provide coverage for pre-existing conditions and allow young people to remain on their parents' policies, Mr. Johnson said that it created too much paperwork for small businesses. While dishing out untruths, he said Mr. Feingold voted to cut Medicare benefits, which he has also said in a mailing to older voters.

Many Democrats are running away from their solid accomplishments of the last two years, apologizing for their association with President Obama. Mr. Feingold is one of the very few with the self-confidence to offer a full-throated defense of his votes.

But the Wisconsin electorate he faces seems to have lost its progressive streak and become more like other Midwestern states. Several polls have shown that the number of likely voters who consider themselves conservative has risen from a quarter of the electorate to nearly half. The misinformation and simplistic solutions propounded by talk radio and the Republican Party are having an effect even in a state that preferred Mr. Obama by 14 points two years ago.

Around the country, the Obama voters who were so energized in 2008 are rueful and dispirited, taking their cue from the timid races run by so many fearful Democratic candidates. Mr. Feingold is making the case that there is a choice to make on Nov. 2 and that there is a need for thoughtful voices in Washington.