



PROFILE: WISCONSIN ASSEMBLY MAJORITY LEADER TYLER AUGUST

‘Get people to buy in, have them take ownership’: Wisconsin native shares lessons learned from his 13 years as a legislator and longtime caucus leader

by Jon Davis (jdavis@csg.org)

Most parents aren’t quite sure of the career path that their child will take, let alone one just a few years removed from kindergarten.

But in the case of a young Tyler August, his mother and father may have had a pretty good inkling.

“When I was 8 years old, my mom would find me watching the 6 a.m. news in the basement,” August says. “I don’t think that’s what a whole lot of 8-year-olds were doing at the time.”

It was an early sign of what would become August’s deep interest in politics and commitment to public service — as well as his ascension to one of Wisconsin’s top leadership positions.

He served as an intern for a state Senate campaign while in college, got involved early on in party politics, and soon came to Wisconsin’s state Capitol as a staff person for his home-district representative.

And when then-Rep. Tom Lothian decided to leave office, he didn’t have to look far for a suitable replacement.

Lothian asked August, his chief of staff, to run.

“I thought about it and talked to a lot of folks and decided to do it,” August says, “and the rest is history.”

That first race, in 2010, was historically close. August initially appeared to lose by a few votes in the Republican primary, but a subsequent recount gave him a razor-thin win: 23.97 percent to 23.93 percent.

August hasn’t faced races nearly as close since then, and he’s spent nearly his entire 13-year legislative career in leadership. After winning a second term, August was chosen speaker pro tem, holding that post until this current session, for which his caucus unanimously chose him to be Assembly majority leader.

Here are excerpts from a recent CSG Midwest interview with Rep. August.

Q How would you describe your leadership style?

A I’ve always thought that the best way to lead a group of people, whether it’s in politics or otherwise, is to lead by inclusion.

Have people bring their ideas to the table and let them know that they’re part of the team and part of the decision-making process, versus just coming out of a leadership meeting and saying, “This is what we’re going to do and everybody has to fall in line.”

That’s what I try to do: get people to buy into what we’re doing, and have them take some ownership of it along the way.

BIO-SKETCH: WISCONSIN REP. TYLER AUGUST

- ✓ unanimously chosen in late 2022 as majority leader by Assembly Republican colleagues
- ✓ previously served five terms as speaker pro tempore
- ✓ first elected to Wisconsin Assembly in 2010
- ✓ once worked as chief of staff for former Wisconsin state Rep. Tom Lothian
- ✓ is a lifelong, seventh-generation resident of Wisconsin’s Walworth County; resides in town of Lake Geneva



“The best way to lead a group of people, whether it’s in politics or otherwise, is to lead by inclusion.”

Q Who have been your role models in terms of legislative or political leadership?

A Here in Wisconsin, certainly [former state Rep. and Gov.] Tommy Thompson has been a great mentor of mine ever since I first ran. He was excellent at leading the state and bringing people together.

When I was younger, Reince Priebus became and still is a good friend of mine. With [Rep.] Tom Lothian, who did this job at the opposite end of his professional life than I did, I was able to learn a lot of things about even something as simple as patience and not thinking that every single hill is worth dying over.

While my leadership style still has to be mine, I’ve built it on watching what worked for many other people and trying to incorporate that into how I operate.

Q How has leadership changed for you in shifting from being speaker pro tem for so many years to now being majority leader?

A Some of the lessons learned while I was pro tem, as far as working with the minority party, carry over quite a bit.

My role certainly has changed; my priority is now to lead the Republicans. But there is still the opportunity to work across the aisle on certain issues, on running the floor, and negotiating the debate time on bills while they’re on the floor. Things like that.

I think being able to have the respect I earned over nine-and-a-half years of being the pro tem, from the minority, has made conversations easier than they might have otherwise been if I had just come into the majority leader’s job cold.

Also, having been in leadership meetings as pro tem, I was already part of the process within our caucus and behind the scenes when bills were moving. The experience of being in that room is part of why my caucus was confident in my ability to step up and do this new role. Not only had I helped us have success outside of the building in campaign season, I helped us have success in the building when it comes to legislative matters as well.

Q What are some of the adjustments you’ve had to make since the shift in partisan control from a Republican to Democratic governor?

A That’s a big shift when you have members of a caucus that had so much success in the eight years under [former Republican Gov.] Scott Walker.

Now it’s much more difficult, and a resetting of expectations is just the biggest difference. We have very different views of what’s best for the state than the [current] governor does, so managing expectations of what we can actually get done has become a big part of this job.

Q Republicans control both chambers, and in the Assembly, you have a sizable majority (63 of 99 members). What are the challenges in keeping a caucus of that size working together?

A It’s always any leader’s job, of any caucus regardless of the state or party, to try and make sure that everyone understands what’s going on and everyone buys into what’s going

on. If there’s an issue that needs to be addressed, you need to mediate it. You need to be saying, “I know this is important to you, let’s see if we can get this done.”

We’re fortunate to have a great caucus of people who generally — especially on the big items of the day — are moving in one direction. We haven’t seen the fracturing within our caucus anywhere near the extent that you see in other states.

Q What do you look back on as some of your biggest legislative accomplishment(s)?

A It’s an interesting question. Because I’ve been in leadership for so long, and got there so quickly, I haven’t authored a lot of bills on my own.

Being a part of Act 10 [a measure on collective bargaining for public workers] six weeks into my first term will always be toward the top, if not the top, of the list because we fundamentally changed the way that government operates.

One of the bills I did author [AB 143 of 2015] regulated and allowed companies like Uber and Lyft to operate in Wisconsin. That became a model bill for other states, which is pretty cool. That doesn’t happen very often.

And I authored the constitutional amendment to change the way the chief justice of the Supreme Court is selected [Editor’s note: Approved by voters in 2015, the measure switched the appointment from one based on seniority to selection by the justices every two years].

The other accomplishment I’m humbled by, and very proud of, is the fact that I was unanimously elected majority leader out of 64 people. That meant a lot. It is something that I’ll remember for a long, long time.