



Mark Pocan in a 2012 campaign video.

Pocan, Mark (b. 1964)

by Linda Rapp

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A former seven-term member of the Wisconsin Assembly, Mark Pocan easily won election to the U.S. House of Representatives in 2012. He succeeded Tammy Baldwin, who gave up the seat in order to run for the U.S. Senate, in Wisconsin's Second Congressional District.

Pocan became involved in politics early. A native of Kenosha, Wisconsin, born August 14, 1964, he was on the hustings there at the age of eight, going door-to-door to distribute campaign literature for his father, Bill Pocan, who served as a city alderman in the 1970s and 1980s.

After graduating from Bradford High School, Pocan enrolled at the University of Wisconsin, where he was active in the College Democrats organization. He majored in journalism and received his bachelor's degree in 1986.

Pocan stayed in Madison after college and first ran for public office in 1991, when he won a post on the Dane County Board of Supervisors. He twice ran successfully for re-election.

However, in 1998, he set his sights on the seat in the 78th District of the state Assembly that was being vacated by his friend, the openly lesbian legislator Tammy Baldwin, who was running for the United States House of Representatives. Both Baldwin and Pocan were victorious.

Pocan also founded a small business, Budget Signs and Specialties, in Madison, using the same name that his father had given to an enterprise in Kenosha.

Budget Signs and Specialties is a union shop and uses recycled wires for yard signs, which makes them both good for the environment and more economical for customers. Buyers of yard signs include political candidates, and Pocan has had many among his clientele, including both of his opponents in his first campaign for the state legislature.

In spring elections, which are technically nonpartisan, the company has a wide political range of customers, but, Pocan told Mary Yeater Rathbun of the *Capital Times*, most Republicans go elsewhere for signs in fall campaigns.

As a state legislator, Pocan has worked for glbtq rights, using his muscle on the Joint Committee on Finance to secure domestic partner benefits for state employees and to establish a domestic partner registry for same-sex Wisconsin couples.

"Those are two pretty significant measures for our state that we are rather behind on," declared Pocan to Chris Johnson of the *Washington Blade*.

On November 7, 2006, Wisconsin voters amended the state constitution to define marriage as exclusively for heterosexual couples. Despite his disappointment at the result of the referendum, Pocan proceeded

with his plans to wed. He and Philip Frank--his partner of four years, then a manager of the sign business and now co-owner--had become engaged at Christmas the year before.

Denied equality in their home state, they went to Toronto on Thanksgiving. The following day, with the immediate families of both partners in attendance, they wed at the City Hall.

The couple honeymooned in Indonesia and upon their return, Pocan recalled to Melanie Conklin of *Madison.com*, a customs agent in Los Angeles asked how many declaration forms they needed. "We told her we needed only one, we came together as family, and that we'd gotten married in Toronto. She told us she thought it was nice that they allowed that in Canada."

Pocan reported that reaction to the news of the marriage was "overwhelmingly positive," but there were detractors, including Julaine Appling, the executive director of the Family Research Institute of Wisconsin, an organization that had been a strong proponent of the referendum against marriage equality.

While claiming "a cordial relationship" with Pocan, she dismissed his marriage license as "a meaningless piece of paper" and asked, "Am I going to send him a congratulations card saying Best wishes on your wedding?" Her answer to her own question was "No, because I don't recognize it. Neither does the state of Wisconsin."

Faced with such hostility, Pocan spoke of the personal importance of the commitment that he and Frank had made: "You get the question all the time, and it's a societal question, 'Are you married?' It's nice to be able to say we're a couple, even though we won't be recognized for any of the rights and benefits given to married couples by Wisconsin or the U.S. government. It's important for us to recognize it."

As much as glbtq rights matter to Pocan, he is far from a single-issue politician. A member of the International Union of Painters and Related Trades, he has been a strong voice for unions. When Wisconsin Governor Scott Walker sought to limit collective bargaining rights in February 2011, Pocan spoke out forcefully for union workers, and he rallied glbtq progressives to the cause.

"Many people came with rainbow flags to show support for collective bargaining," he stated to Johnson. "I think it's the collective fight that we have against people who want to take away rights--it's just growing and becoming more powerful."

A few months later Pocan attended--not by invitation--the convention of the American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC), a conservative organization that links business leaders with legislators to help the latter craft "model legislation" to promote special interests.

In an article in *The Progressive* (Madison), Pocan compared the interaction of the business people and lawmakers to a dating service, writing, "If you are a single, somewhat unattractive corporation (maybe you have a chemical dumping problem or something) and you need a little love that only a state legislator can give, ALEC is for you." Pocan made it clear that ALEC is not for him.

Pocan has also been an advocate for healthcare, successfully working to include more people in Wisconsin's BadgerCare plan and to establish the Wisconsin Quality Home Care Commission.

His efforts to protect the environment have won him numerous plaudits from the Wisconsin League of Conservation Voters and other groups dedicated to environmental protection.

Another of Pocan's causes has been ethics reform, and he reached across the aisle to enlist the support of conservative Republican Mark Gundrum. "It's really the first time I've worked with him. We were often

leading the debate against each other," Pocan stated to Scott Milfred of the *Wisconsin State Journal*, but he saw an opportunity for a positive change and did what he could to work for it, which is consistent with the philosophy that he expressed to Jack Craver of the *Capital Times*: "I'm an ideologue in many ways, but I'm practical enough to know how to get things done. For our progressive values that matter most, I've often been there and done that."

As expected, Pocan achieved a solid win in the November 2012 election, defeating his Republican opponent, Chad Lee, by a margin of 68 to 23 percent.

At a victory celebration on election night, Pocan acknowledged the support of his mother and brother, who were in attendance, and especially that of his husband, who was at his side on stage. In his speech to the enthusiastic crowd, Pocan stated, "This district expects a lot from its representatives, and I plan to work hard to be another strong, progressive voice like Tammy [Baldwin]," who moves on to the United States Senate after her own successful campaign.

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About the Author

Linda Rapp teaches French and Spanish at the University of Michigan-Dearborn. She freelances as a writer, tutor, and translator. She is Assistant to the General Editor of www.glbtq.com.