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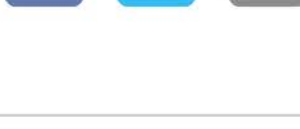


Lombardo rivals say he's hiding on the campaign trail



By Bill Dentzer Las Vegas Review-Journal

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Republican governor candidate and Clark County Sheriff Joe Lombardo arrived at a debate in Reno in early January arm in arm with one of his rivals.

Actually, under her arm.

Lombardo wasn't there in person — he had declined to attend the debate. Another candidate, Las Vegas Councilwoman Michele Fiore, brought a near-life-size picture placard of him that she had flown up with from Las Vegas. Written on the cutout: “No Show Joe.”

“I paid for his plane ticket. It was 75 bucks. He's right over there behind my desk,” Fiore said mockingly during the debate, when someone in the audience [shouted out](#), “Where's Lombardo?”

It's a question asked routinely not only by Lombardo's GOP rivals but also by state Democrats, who hope to see incumbent Gov. Steve Sisolak win a second term this year. Reporters, too, have been left hanging by the telephone. The Lombardo campaign declined to make him available to be interviewed for this story, citing his full schedule, and sent a statement from him instead.

Democrats have built a [snarky website](#) around the question of Lombardo's campaign whereabouts, calling him out for ducking three debates since the start of the year and not responding — on at least 10 occasions, by their count — to questions posed by reporters for news stories.

In his absence from the debate stage, his Republican opponents have been withering in their attacks. As the field seeks to win over the typically more-conservative Republican voter who turns out for a primary, Lombardo's rivals have also sought to portray him as a RINO — a “Republican In Name Only” — whose tenure as sheriff has been marked by departures from the conservative line on everything from immigration to COVID vaccines to gun ownership.

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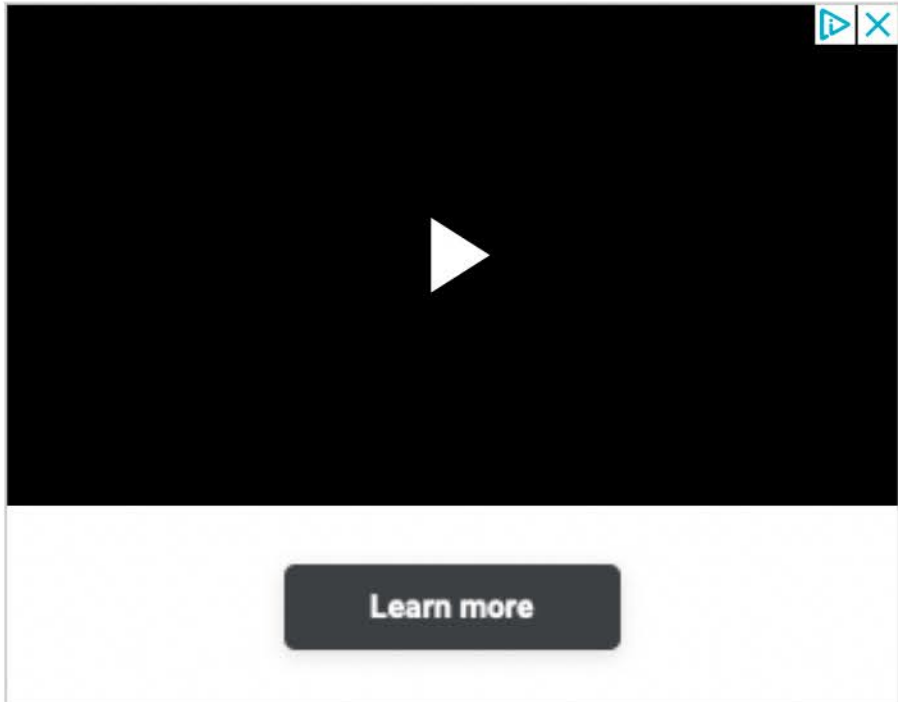


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“Anybody but Sisolak or Joe Lombardo, all right?” another GOP governor hopeful, Reno attorney Joey Gilbert, said at the Reno debate. “We don't need Sisolak with a badge.”

So why does Lombardo get so much grief, and why does he seem to be avoiding the fray?



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The short answer is because he's ahead, and because he can.

Leading in the race

About 100 days out from the June 14 primary, Lombardo is seen leading comfortably in the race for the Republican nomination, making him the candidate his rivals love to hate. Democrats are targeting him because he represents potentially the toughest challenge for Sisolak in the general election by virtue of his campaign cash haul and his name recognition in the most populous southern part of the state, where Sisolak's strength also lies.



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Lombardo's reluctance to debate isn't new. He took criticism for not debating early in his first run for Clark County sheriff in 2014, but eventually took part in four debates, according to his campaign and a review of news stories from the period. In 2018 he didn't have to, winning re-election in a romp. Lying low is a strategy front-runners often adopt with opponents, forcing rivals to hustle while avoiding unforced errors of their own.

In terms of partisanship and pressure, the race for governor scarcely resembles Lombardo's two prior, lower-key races for the nonpartisan sheriff's office. Remaining aloof, his critics say, means he doesn't risk misspeaking in an interview — as he did when he [prematurely confirmed his candidacy to a reporter last May](#) — or potentially more damaging, on the debate stage.

Instead, what voters see of Lombardo comes almost entirely from tightly scripted, slick and gauzy TV ads, and that's by design, according to another candidate who says he knows the playbook because the consultants who once worked for him now are staffing the Lombardo campaign.

“I know their camp really well. They're smug and they're arrogant,” said former U.S. Sen. Dean Heller, one his Lombardo's leading rivals for the GOP nomination. “They believe the only thing that matters in the campaign is not talking to the voters but raising the most money. And they flat out told me that last year.”

Debate position made clear

The Lombardo campaign declined to discuss campaign strategy for this story. On the question of debate participation, Lombardo has been consistent and clear, saying he would take part in debates only after the official candidate filing period closes. The filing period starts Monday and runs through March 18.

“My campaign made the decision early on that we would only be considering debate invitations following the close of Nevada's candidate filing deadline,” Lombardo said in a statement provided for this story. “Instead of spending our time talking with other candidates and career politicians, we've spent our time traveling across the state to talk with voters personally.”

As for accusations that he is hiding, his campaign said that in February alone Lombardo made appearances in Ely, Eureka, Austin, Yerington, Virginia City, Carson City, Incline Village, Reno and Las Vegas. He met with grassroots volunteers and appeared at traditional GOP Lincoln Day dinners and has committed to a March 23 candidates forum in Las Vegas sponsored by the Keystone Corporation.

Where other Republican candidates declined or were slow to respond, Lombardo last week was quick to comment on an incident Sunday in Las Vegas where Sisolak and his wife were accosted at a Mexican restaurant by a man who spewed profanities and insults at the governor and threatened to “string you up to a lamppost.”

Lombardo, as did other Sisolak critics, walked a tightrope in his statement, saying he understood “the frustration with Governor Sisolak and his left-wing policies” but adding that “hateful verbal abuse and violent threats have no place in our political system.”

Lombardo has the apparent luxury of front-runner status in the Republican race. He has raised far more money than his Republican opponents, but Sisolak comfortably leads overall. Publicly released polling, though scant thus far, also shows Lombardo well ahead in the GOP race. A late-January poll by OH Predictive Insights for the Nevada Independent found 28 percent support for Lombardo with all other candidates in single digits. (In the same poll, Sisolak maintained a better than 4-point lead over Lombardo, at 52.2 percent to 47.8 percent.)

Shifting to the right

Lombardo has moved steadily to the right since announcing his candidacy, and on some issues it has caused cognate dissonance from his earlier statements and positions. To cite a few:

■ Asked about the integrity of Nevada's 2020 elections in June, Lombardo [told the Review-Journal](#) he “didn't see any evidence of fraud.” But his comments on election integrity have evolved, and on his campaign website he touts an “election reform package that protects the integrity of our elections.”

■ On immigration, Lombardo, in response to a California court ruling in 2019, withdrew Metro from a partnership with federal Immigration and Customs Enforcement to alert federal officials about jail inmates wanted for deportation. The move has prompted Heller and other rivals to tag him “Sanctuary Joe” in attacks. But Lombardo has also been criticized by immigration advocates for a quiet policy of notifying ICE when an illegal immigrant in custody was about to be released, allowing agents to take them into custody.

On the campaign trail, Lombardo has spoken of his role in deporting 10,000 people and [tweeted support](#) for a “zero tolerance policy” on illegal immigration.

■ Last month Lombardo [rescinded a mandate](#) he imposed last August that new Metro hires be vaccinated against COVID-19, citing a dip in positive cases in the department. He is opposed to vaccine mandates at the state level, and Democrats say he removed a photo on social media of him receiving a vaccination.

“What they're trying to do is hide him and present to the people that he's someone he is not,” Fiore said in an interview last week, adding that Lombardo is “running his campaign strictly by poll numbers.”

“Every time that poll numbers go down, they change strategies,” said Fiore, who added she doesn't trust that Lombardo will follow through on his commitment to debates after the filing period.

Democrats say Lombardo “has a clear reason for hiding — he's taken both sides on a number of issues,” said Mallory Payne of Nevada Democratic Victory, a group formed to support moderate Democratic candidates after last year's takeover of the official state party by its far-left wing. “And facing the public or answering questions makes it harder to keep up his front.”

'The most money'

Heller said that before he announced his own candidacy, the Lombardo campaign approached him to chair Lombardo's Northern Nevada campaign effort. Heller declined, telling the campaign Lombardo was not a conservative.

“They said that doesn't matter, he's gonna have the most money,” Heller said. “That is why he's not going out in public. If you're wrong on every conservative issue, why would you debate? And if you think you have the most money, why would you debate? Why would you go to a forum? Why would you talk to the press?”

Besides Heller and Fiore, the Review-Journal sought comment on Lombardo's campaign tactics from three other Republican governor candidates. Gilbert, in a characteristically bare-knuckled statement, said Lombardo refused to debate him because of “a record of zero accomplishments” and because he was trying to cover up that during his tenure as sheriff he had “allowed Las Vegas' violent crime rate to increase exponentially.”

Guy Nohra, a venture capitalist living in Reno, was more subdued.

“What politicians like Joe Lombardo seem to forget is that the voters are interviewing all of us for the honor to serve them as governor,” he said. “I am a businessman, not a politician, I believe that nothing is handed to you, that you have to go out and earn it.”

North Las Vegas Mayor John Lee's campaign did not provide a comment.

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An earlier version of this story misstated the number of debates Clark County Sheriff Joe Lombardo, a Republican candidate for governor, participated in during his first run for sheriff in 2014. He participated in at least three debates.



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