

The Bad News for Labor From Wisconsin

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The defeat of the effort to recall Scott Walker from his post as governor of Wisconsin is less of a victory for the Republican Party, or even a defeat for the Democratic Party, as it is a defeat for the labor movement. Walker, after all, has been a particular anathema to organized labor as his radical anti-union policies have drawn attention and opposition from labor unions and their supporters across the country. For progressives, recalling Walker would have been a major victory, but for labor, the stakes were even higher.

Walker only retained his seat by a margin of about 7%, which is closer than many expected, but in a highly competitive state like Wisconsin, still a significant margin. Labor made an all-out effort to defeat Walker, spending a great deal of both local and national resources, but they still came up short. This will have two damaging impacts on labor. First, it is likely that after fighting off this recall attempt, Walker will feel newly empowered to continue to go after organized labor. This may prove to be a mistake for Walker, but at least in the short run, will make life difficult for labor unions and the workers they represent in Wisconsin. It is also likely that anti-union officials in other states will feel similarly emboldened by the results from Wisconsin.

Second, Walker's victory also raises concerns about labor's ability to deliver for the Democratic Party. Labor is, of course, an enormous institutional player in the Democratic Party, able to produce votes, volunteers and money for candidates from city council to president. In many cases the economic interests of the labor movement and the Democratic Party are very similar; without votes from members of labor unions, Democratic candidates win considerably less frequently.

Members of labor unions often come out in support of Democratic candidates, but significantly, this is not evidence of labor's ability to deliver votes. Many African-American members of labor unions, for example, voted for Obama, but this is clearly a case of correlation between union membership and support for Obama. A direct, or even indirect, causality would be even harder to prove. This week's election in Wisconsin highlights the question of labor's ability to deliver votes because this race, while important to all Democrats, was of particular import to labor union members.

To conclude from this that the Democratic Party does not need organized labor, or that labor unions are of no value to the Democratic Party, would be deeply wrong. The Democratic Party and organized labor, due to intertwined history and interests, as well as contemporary political and strategic realities, continue to have fates which are linked. The Republican assault on labor, of which Walker's attacks are only the most recent, have been bad for labor unions and the workers they represent, but have also been bad for the Democratic Party. Similarly, the inability of the Democratic Party to hold onto its white working class base for what is now close to half a century has contributed to the weakening of labor unions and workers' rights more generally.

Given all this, for the Democratic Party questioning the ability of labor to deliver votes, particularly swing votes that would not otherwise go democratic seems like a risky endeavor that, on balance, is probably not worth doing. If the Democratic leadership confronts the notion that labor's impact on elections may be overstated, there is no particular upside for doing this. Labor and the Democrats will still be closely tied together; the Democrats will still need support from labor; and probably most significantly, there are no institution that can fill in for labor in this capacity.

From a strategic angle, it is critical that Democratic leaders nonetheless understand the limitations of the labor movement today. Candidate Barack Obama understood this in 2008, particularly in the primaries when he did not enjoy early support from much of organized labor, but was still able to win. The lesson from Wisconsin is a similar one, that while support from labor is desirable, it is not, on its own, enough to ensure victory or anything close to it. For Democrats, labor support has been a constant and should be understood that way, part of the coalition, but not in a stand alone way as significant as might be initially thought.

There are many reasons why the labor movement could not pull off a victory in Wisconsin, but the fact that they could not is what is most significant. Union leaders, following this defeat, have few options other than working for the next race which will be in November of this year. The Democratic Party has an analogous lack of options regarding labor and must do what it can to strengthen labor so that it can again become the powerful partner the Democratic Party needs.