

Obama's big sigh of relief in Wisconsin

By JOSHUA SPIVAK, Wagner College

Last Tuesday was a terrible night for unions and a bad one for Wisconsin Democrats. After staking so much time, money and effort on the removal of Governor Scott Walker, the party saw almost an exact repeat of his 2010 election. For jubilant Republicans, despite losing control of the state Senate in the recall, this result confirms the strength of their message. For Barack Obama, there is a very different reaction. While he can't be happy the Democrats lost, the vote totals and polls can allow him to breathe a sigh of relief. He is probably in no great danger of losing his electoral votes in the Badger State.

There are two factors that the Democrats can look at with some relief. The exit polls suggest that numerous people who cast a vote for Walker are willing to switch sides in the upcoming presidential election – 18% according to some of the polls. Their vote was either a protest against the recall – a CBS poll claimed that 70% of voters thought recalls should only be used against misbehaving elected officials or never at all – or a perhaps a protest against unions. This part of the debate cannot be discounted. Based on the limited stats, recalls backed by specific interest groups like unions appear more likely to fail than recalls backed by a political party. You could even see this dynamic playing out in the campaign rhetoric, as Barrett abandoned any mention of the original reasons for the recall, namely the union anger for Walker's treatment of the public sector unions' collective bargaining power.

But there is even more encouraging news for Obama in the hard data. It is the vaunted question of voter turnout. There was an expectation of a massive voter turnout, The Wisconsin's Government Accountability Board (the state's election commission), predicted a turnout of 2.6-2.8 million voters. At last count, turnout was actually below that figure, with a fraction more than 2.5 million getting to the polls. As predicted by everyone, this was a much higher number of voters than in Walker's 2010 triumph. Nearly the same exact event happened in the California recall in 2003, where turnout was about 18% higher than in Gray Davis' reelection in 2002.

However, for Republicans, this is could actually be a sobering figure to look at. The talk of record turnout masks a basic reality – more voters show up to a presidential race than even the most high profile gubernatorial one. In 2008, nearly three million Wisconsin voters went to the polls, with over 1.67 million of them voting for Obama.

What we saw in the recall may be close to the ceiling for Republicans in 2012. The party and its supporters undoubtedly spent well north of \$50 million to win the recall. They are not going to have a better campaign or better get out the vote operation than they did in the recall. With so many other states in play, the party is not going to be able to put a lot of money in Wisconsin, a state that, despite some exceedingly close races in 2000 and 2004, has not voted Republican since 1984. This recall is quite possibly the best they can do – and in a presidential race, it likely won't be enough.

This is not to say that Obama can mark Wisconsin down in his column in permanent ink. Romney will use the recall to accuse the Democrats of wasting state money, which plays directly into the Republicans' best campaign slogan since the end the Civil War – that the Democrats are spendthrifts who will toss money out the window on behalf of unions and other special interests.

In a close race, it is possible that this could help. It also could damage the prospects for the Democrats winning the open Wisconsin US Senate seat. But the Republicans would need some breaks and to continue the voter anger over the recall in order for this to work. And, most likely, it would probably be part of nationwide trend against Obama, not a specific Wisconsin vote.

The Wisconsin Democratic Party is certainly in a state of shock and mourning over the primary results. But for Barack Obama and his team, the vote means that while he still has to focus on the economic, congress and 99 other problems, Wisconsin isn't likely to be one of them.

Joshua Spivak is a senior fellow at the Hugh L. Carey Institute for Government Reform at Wagner College. He blogs at <http://recallelections.blogspot.com/>