
POLITICO

May 30, 2012

Wisconsin recall's boomerang effect

By JOSHUA SPIVAK

With Wisconsin polls showing Gov. Scott Walker in the lead for the June 5 recall and a tight race for the state's Electoral College bounty in November, some national Democrats are reportedly regretting the entire recall effort. They may have good reason. The recall campaign could prove an effective weapon against President Barack Obama in a crucial swing state.

In some ways, it may seem odd that this recall could boomerang. Going into it, the Democrats had strong factors that could help the party triumph in November. The Democratic base, enraged by Walker's policies attacking collective-bargaining rights, was far more motivated than the GOP. Union money did help get it on the ballot, but the nearly 1 million signatures that recall proponents gathered in 60 days showed the depth of the base's anger.

Consider, during the 2003 recall effort in California, a state more than six times the size of Wisconsin, with a well-oiled signature-gathering industry, the anti-Gray Davis forces collected 1.6 million signatures (1.3 million of them were verified) in 160 days.

But, with the possibility of losing the governor's mansion, the Republicans are now unquestionably motivated. We saw their strong support come out on the primary day. Walker was facing only token opposition, yet he received 626,000 votes — almost as much as all the candidates in the closely contested Democratic primary.

There is no reason to believe that the recall election is over — despite polls showing Walker in the lead, it remains close. However, regardless of who wins, we may see the possible blowback effect — it can energize the other side.

Republicans have flooded Wisconsin with donations. State law allows unlimited donations to Walker, and outside advocacy groups responded. This recall will likely be the second-most expensive election in the country after the presidency.

Equally important, it has helped Republicans get in shape for November. From a logistical point of view, the GOP has updated its databases and tested out its party voter turnout machine right before the presidential race gears up — at no cost to Mitt Romney's campaign.

The recall could also help in two other ways. Generally, a sitting official's argument that a recall is a waste of public funds is not a strong defense. This may be because recalls are frequently blowouts — one way or the other. Or because it seems like a desperate “change-the-subject move” by the official facing the recall. So saying a recall is a waste of money doesn't matter when nearly 90 percent of the voters hate your guts — as happened to the Miami-Dade mayor.

When the recall is close, however, this sort of defense can be a good way to capture the attention of swing voters. We may have seen this in a recall last year in Omaha, Neb., where Mayor Jim Suttle eked out a victory, 51 percent to 49 percent. Suttle argued that the recall cost was an unnecessary and unjustified expense. The independent swing voters appeared to be convinced.

The same argument may help Walker on June 5. There are very few undecideds, at this point, and this could be an issue that captures their attention.

But it may be even more effective down the line if the recall fails. Then the Republicans and Romney can accuse the Democrats of wasting state money on a sore loser rerun. This argument works perfectly for Romney and plays directly into the Republicans' decades-old — and continually successful — overarching negative campaign slogans of profligate Democrats beholden to special interests.

A victory can help the Republicans in another way. There is a strange psychological effect in which people want to have chosen the winner — even if they voted for the loser. According to numerous surveys, a significant portion of voters regularly tell post-election pollsters that they voted for the winner — even when they didn't.

This pro-winner bias could help the GOP push a post-recall claim that the recall was an expensive waste of money caused by spendthrift Democrats. Since Wisconsin may be decided in November by a small number of votes — in 2004, a little more than 11,000 votes separated John Kerry and George Bush in the state — any issue can help.

The talk of taking out Walker was seductive for Democrats. The party, however, might have overlooked the possible long-term electoral dangers of this tactic. It could cause the party grief come November.

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