

Grim, Grim, Grim in Wisconsin

Michael Sean Winters | Jun. 6, 2012 Distinctly Catholic

To say that last night's results in the Wisconsin recall election were disheartening is a bit like saying oyster sorbet is a bad idea. (Yes, in a fit of inventiveness, the chefs at New York's River Café once created such a concoction and it was as bad as you would imagine.) It is not only that Gov. Scott Walker will be emboldened to pursue his divisive brand of politics in the Badger State, it is that voters in all fifty states must wake to the realization that GOP fundraisers across the country have new evidence to bring to fat cat donors: Give us enough money and we can win.

Gov. Walker raised more than \$31 million in his effort to stay in office while his Democratic challenger raised only about \$4 million. If you go to Sotheby's with seven times as much money as the other bidders, who do you think will come away from the auction with the best items? The spending gap was reinforced by outside groups, now known as SuperPACs although there is nothing "super" about them. GOP groups raised more than twice the amount raised by groups affiliated with the Democrats. The Democrats had hoped that they would be able to offset Walker's enormous financial backing with old-style organizational muscle, with volunteers knocking on doors and making phone calls to turn out the vote. But, it turns out that \$31 million can buy a candidate an awful lot of organizational muscle too: Paid campaign workers can make as many calls and knock on as many doors as volunteers. In county after county, Walker over-performed in GOP-leaning districts compared to his showing in 2010 while the Democratic candidate, Tom Barrett, under-performed in districts he won two years ago.

As I suggested in [my election analysis for NCR's print edition](#) [1] a few weeks ago, the financial bonanza for conservative Republican candidates unleashed by Citizens United may or may not be able to have a decisive impact on the presidential contest. Romney will not out-raise Obama by a margin of seven-to-one. But in specific, targeted congressional races, where the candidates are less well known, money may play a decisive role. It is unclear how effective spending on campaign television ads was yesterday: Most Wisconsin voters reported that they had made up their minds about the recall election weeks ago. But, very few states have endured the high intensity political battle seen on the streets of Madison the past two years. Many voters can't name their congressperson, especially after redistricting may have placed those voters in a different district. In your average congressional district, an extra million dollars in negative campaign ads could spell doom for progressive candidates.

Yesterday was a very bad day for organized labor. According to exit polls, roughly one-third of voters who have a union member in their household supported Walker, the man who rose to fame by breaking the back of public employee unions. Clearly, unions have a lot of work to do within their own ranks. It is tough work. We live in a society that encourages selfishness not solidarity, that lives on superficial and fictitious renderings of the economic problems the nation faces. Whatever else he is or is not, no one can accuse Walker of failing to act boldly, and people want action. Not for the first time have voters cast ballots that were manifestly not in their long-term interest. Unless you are a big investor, you have an interest in the success of unions. The decline in average wages has tracked steadily downward, hand-in-hand with the decline in the percentage of the workforce that is unionized. The lack of consistent vocal support for union rights emanating from the bishops of Wisconsin

only adds insult to injury.

Yesterday was not really a bad day for President Obama: Exit polls showed him winning the state in November handily, by six points, and those polls were taken from an electorate engaged in the act of keeping Walker in office by an eight point margin. But, the weeks preceding the vote in Wisconsin were very bad for the Democratic Party because President Obama failed completely to prove himself an effective head of his party. He did not go to Wisconsin to campaign on Barrett's behalf. Instead, he sent a tweet. Obama did not stand by the unions, the core of the Democratic Party. Say what you want about the Clintons, they understand political loyalty: former President Bill Clinton spent much of the past few years campaigning on behalf of those candidates who supported him or his wife in the past. For President Obama, it is "all about me" all the time. For President Obama, standing by unions was not as important as avoiding a bad headline, and certainly not as important as standing by Planned Parenthood. I do not trust this man to be leader of the Democratic Party. Under his leadership, the Democrats are increasingly at the beck and call of fundraisers animated by social issues and increasingly unalert to the needs and values of blue collar workers, those most hurt by decades of declining wages, those most vulnerable to economic forces over which they have no control, those most likely to see their jobs shipped overseas under the terms of trade agreements that too many Democrats think are just dandy, those who lost their retirement investments (if they had them) because fat cats on Wall Street decided to play games with other people's money in a manner befitting a Third World despot. Alas, Valerie Jarrett and Tim Geithner and Kathleen Sebelius don't spend much time talking to blue collar workers.

What a choice working class Americans have this autumn. Here comes Mr. Romney who made a successful career out of buying companies and "turning them around" in part by ditching pension obligations. And here comes Mr. Obama, a feckless defender of labor, tone deaf to the historic vocation of the Democratic Party as the defender of the little guy. It will be a grim few months before the election and, no matter how it turns out, a grim four years for working class Americans.

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