

NO POLITICS ARE LOCAL

With the rise of the Tea Party and limits on campaign financing slashed by Citizens United, the political landscape of the United States is quickly becoming one of partisan national political issues only. This flattening of local political culture, rather than clearing the way for a vigorous national debate, benefits a homogenizing Republican party and raises questions about what the best institutions are for a Federalist power-sharing scheme in the American system.

In the United States this past spring, all eyes were on Wisconsin. In a race heralded as second in importance only to the 2012 presidential election, Republican governor Scott Walker defended his position as the state's chief executive in a rare recall election.¹ The race was seen as a forecast for Obama's chances come November in crucial swing states like Wisconsin, and more importantly, as a showdown between the two new political ideologies competing for Americans' favour in the upheaval of the Great Recession: the free-market fundamentalism of the Tea Party and the various calls for economic justice of organized labour and Occupy Wall Street. The election also saw record-breaking spending from outside groups.

Wisconsin's recall election was a stage for high national politics, and also a study in how national politics and local political procedures have been reconfigured in a moment of national political reflection and in the wake of the expansion of corporate money into politics. A naïve federalist model in the United States that devolves political power primarily into locally elected representatives and executives ineffectively distributes power when electoral institutions are under undue influence of a narrow few. Furthermore, the constriction of viable political positions in the electoral realm favours the Republican party—which has demographically, ideologically, and financially homogenized since the 1960s—over the traditionally pluralistic Democratic party. In this new situation, Democrats and their allies must turn to democratic institutions outside of the electoral realm, such as public schools and local administrative bodies, as potential sites for the development of independent local politics.

¹ A recall is a procedure in place in many American states by which voters can remove an elected official from office before his term has expired by collecting a certain number of voter signatures and putting the issue to a direct vote.

The second race for Wisconsin's governor

Only twice before in the nation's history have recall elections been called: in 1921 when a conservative faction of Republicans organized the recall of North Dakota governor Lynn Frazier over the issue of state ownership of a flour mill, and in 2003 when Californians recalled Gray Davis during the economic turbulence of the California electricity crisis and the dot-com bubble recession. In Wisconsin in 2010, Republican Scott Walker rode into office on the wave of Tea Party enthusiasm that had ousted incumbent Democrats and Republicans across the country. He promptly introduced an austerity bill to balance the state's budget with a radical provision quietly tucked in that stripped public sector unions of their right to collective bargaining.

Walker's attack on unions was an unexpected move that shocked both his base and the opposition, and precipitated one of the most visible and drawn-out political battles of the past two years. Immediately after Walker's bill was introduced, Democratic representatives fled Wisconsin to neighboring Illinois to prevent the quorum needed to vote on the bill from being reached. Republicans ordered that they be pursued and arrested. Protestors descended on the capitol building and would remain for the next five months. At its height, 100,000 protestors—public employees, farmers, teachers, and private citizens—were in Madison. Egyptians in Tahrir Square, unions in Spain and Poland, and Occupy Wall Street movements across the US issued statements and carried placards expressing solidarity with the protestors in Wisconsin. According to Lorrie Moore, Scott Walker began wearing a bulletproof vest (Moore, 2012). A petition campaign to recall Walker and four Republican senators got underway.

They collected nearly one million signatures across the state to interrupt Walker's first term and put his position as governor to a direct vote. And in the process Wisconsin politics transformed from a historically independent environment of cooperative bipartisan local politics into a toxic and antagonistic stage for the polarized national politics that had Washington in gridlock. Partisans on either side of the recall reported being shocked at the bitterness of the opposition. Some petitioners were physically assaulted, many others reported verbal abuse from strangers as a typical response, while

Walker supporters reported the same (Kaufman, 2012). Local newspapers ran articles

© Conor Gaffney, 2012. Please do not modify or share without attribution (Creative Commons License: Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 3.0 Unported)

about the “decline in civil discourse” due to “national party politics” intruding into the state, and a nationally syndicated public radio show, *This American Life*, devoted a segment to how local Wisconsin politics had been “flipped completely upside down” (*This American Life*, 2011, ‘Act One: War of Northern Aggression’). In a state known for its civility in local politics, the level of vitriol in the fight between Walker and organized labour was something entirely new.

The amount of money pouring into the recall from outside the state was something entirely new as well. All told, more than \$80 million were spent on the Wisconsin gubernatorial recall election, more than twice as much as the \$37 million spent in the original 2010 election. The recent US Supreme Court decision in *Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission* invalidated Wisconsin’s 100-year old ban on campaign expenditures made by corporations and unions and opened the race to national interest groups such as the oil magnate Koch brothers’ Americans for Prosperity, and national labour groups like the Service Employees International Union. Private interest fundraising outspent organized labour massively, and through a quirk in what remained of Wisconsin’s campaign finance laws after *Citizens United*, Walker was able to solicit unlimited donations from individuals while Tom Barrett, his Democratic opponent, was limited to \$10,000 per individual donor. Casino moguls in Nevada and real estate developers in Houston were now writing six-figure checks to a candidate for governor in Wisconsin. The race for the state’s highest office had become, unreservedly, a contest funded by national interests and characterized as a battle between national organized labour and the surging free-market fundamentalism of the Tea Party. Wisconsin’s local political culture had gone out the door in 2012.

What kind of national politics?

Scott Walker survived the recall election, becoming the first governor in the history of the country to do so. In the analyses of the race, several puzzling facts emerged

out of the polling data.² Walker gained support significantly among union members, especially those who belonged to unions that his budget bill did not target (it left intact the collective bargaining rights of police and fire fighters, who had largely supported him in 2010). Additionally, 18% of Wisconsinites who voted for Walker said they were going to vote for Obama in November. In fact, the issue which exit polling revealed to be the best indicator of how an individual would vote concerned the appropriateness of recall elections. Supporters of the incumbent Walker overwhelmingly disapproved of recall elections, while 90% of Barrett voters believed an elected official should be able to be recalled “for any reason.” The race for governor appeared to have really been a referendum on the electoral processes and campaigning that played out in Wisconsin in 2011 and 2012.

In a year when Wisconsin continued to hemorrhage jobs and Walker came up short on his promise to create 250,000 jobs by about 245,000, Walker supporters overwhelmingly approved of his handling of the state’s economy. Walker’s messaging strategy revolved around the claim that his policies would block outside intervention from unions and Obama that was costing the state jobs. In a famous Tea Party bought advertisement, Walker bragged about how he rejected an offer from Washington to build a high-speed rail line between Milwaukee and Madison, a project that would have been federally funded and would have brought thousands of jobs to the state.³ The advert’s insinuation was that a federal investment could only possibly *cost* the state money and jobs.

Here is where the economic conservatism and anti-federal parochialism of right-wing American ideology converge to reveal the vulnerabilities of a strictly constitutional devolution of political power.

As money from outside the state poured into Wisconsin, mostly into Walker’s coffers, the governor’s campaign capitalized on the distrust of outside special interests by targeting the most readily identifiable outside force to intervene in the state, the federal government. Coupled with the related move to portray the electoral procedure of a

² See exit polling conducted by Edison research, published on www.nytimes.com June 5, 2012 (<http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2012/06/05/us/politics/wisconsin-recall-exit-polls.html>)

³ See Walker’s advert at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HcQ7hwRhKIs>

© Conor Gaffney, 2012. Please do not modify or share without attribution (Creative Commons License: Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 3.0 Unported)

recall—meant to give more direct democratic power to a localized electorate—as an instrument for outside interests to interfere with local politics, Walker was able to cast the election exactly as it was: one in which large, well-funded organizations from out of state descended on Wisconsin to play out their national partisan agenda. His messaging strategy simply reversed the players in the drama. The 2010 Walker governorship made all Wisconsin politics national politics with its dramatic and unexpected assault on labour rights, while the Walker recall campaign made all national politics toxic by cashing in on the distrust generated by the open door of *Citizens United* and the ubiquity of anti-federal Tea Party rhetoric.

The short formulation is that as electoral offices come under more and more influence from outsized narrow interests, electoral institutions cease to be trusted as integral sites for the dynamic interaction between independent local politics and larger national political institutions and concerns. Whichever party can function better without the networks and resources created by a participatory local politics (resources like networks of small-amount donors, volunteers, and personal information networks) will have the advantage. Republican candidates, more likely to fundraise from fewer, wealthier, and usually corporate donors, and Republican voters, ethnically and socio-economically more homogenous than Democratic voters, have the upper hand.

Wisconsin-style dramas have played out across the country. Formerly popular moderates, like Senator Dick Lugar of Indiana, are booted from office expressly for their record of bipartisan achievement. In my home county, the local recorder of deeds (a largely administrative position that oversees the sale of land) ran on a social conservative platform that highlighted his opposition to abortion, ousting the local incumbent of ten years.

New sites for federal-local politics

In recent decades, it has become increasingly popular in certain liberal American policy circles to praise public institutions outside the electoral arena (the corollary of the concept of “civil society” in American liberal foreign policy circles) for their redemptive potential to promote participatory democracy and citizen engagement in our age of

flagging voter turnout and scandalized public offices (for instance, Barber, 1984). Public schools, public-private work training programs, block clubs, and community volunteer programs are presented as responsive and durable means to promote political participation, foster dialogue and citizen interaction, and motivate individuals to think politically (Fung and Wright, 2001). The representative mechanisms of the American political system, this line of thinking goes, have shown themselves to be ineffective liberal democratic mechanisms insofar as things like local political offices have neither succeeded in involving historically disenfranchised groups nor solved chronic economic inequalities or other questions of justice. While the right has capitalized on this failure by broadening its attack on the affirmative state, the left has been stuck in the awkward position of defending the government's role in sustaining a healthy democracy while celebrating the pluralism and complexity that classic state institutions seem so incapable of functioning with. This latter commitment in the American liberal ideology is perhaps what has allowed free-market notions to creep so far into the political left's rhetoric: the pluralist, agonistic American democratic public is, at its essence, as complex and conflict-ridden as a marketplace.

It also underlies a new line of thinking among the American left that does not pit affirmative collective action against the specificity and complexity of varying interests and actors of a plural polity. Instead of top-down social programs initiated and managed by the federal government and its oft-reviled functionaries, liberal policy makers are exploring approaches to delivering public goods that reach "beyond" or exist at a "deeper" level in the political and economic life of a plural polity than state institutions do. By fostering organic, ground-level problem solving via local institutions, policy makers avoid challenging the basic assumptions of a free-market saturated political field.

But just as noteworthy is the potential these civic institutions hold as sites to exercise traditional federal power beyond the legislative-electoral apparatus that has been traumatized in the past two years. Though many of these institutions are administered locally—public schools are run by combinations of states, counties, and local school districts, for instance—the federal government often presses its desires on these institutions through financial incentives. Public schools have historically been the sites of social welfare initiatives—basic healthcare and nutrition originally provided by charities

to disadvantaged, typically immigrant, students in public schools were eventually taken over by the state or local school districts (Tyack, 1992). By pressing initiatives decried as “overreaches of big government” through local quasi-governmental institutions, the federal government can strengthen the political efficacy of a federalist devolution of political powers and processes without challenging its ideological commitment to pluralism or resorting to an electoral system in which it is disadvantaged.

References

- Barber, B. *Strong Democracy: Participatory Politics for a New Age*, Berkeley, UC Press.
- Fung, A. and Wright, E. (2001) ‘Deepening Democracy: Innovations in Empowered Participatory Governance’, *Politics and Society* 29: 5-41.
- Kaufman D. ‘How Did Wisconsin Become the Most Politically Divisive Place in America?’, *The New York Times Magazine* 25. 5. 2012.
- Moore, L. (2012) ‘Which Wisconsin?’, *The New York Review of Books* 4. 6. 2012.
- Tyack, D. (1992) ‘Health and Social Services in Public Schools: Historical Perspectives’, *The Future of Children* , 2: 19-31.
- ‘A House Divided’, *This American Life* 24. 6. 2011.