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The Hollow Cry of 'Broke'

"We're broke! We're broke!" Speaker John Boehner said on Sunday. "We're broke in this state," Gov. Scott Walker of Wisconsin said a few days ago. "New Jersey's broke," Gov. Chris Christie has said repeatedly. The United States faces a "looming bankruptcy," Charles Koch, the billionaire industrialist, [wrote in The Wall Street Journal](#) on Tuesday.

It's all obfuscating nonsense, of course, a scare tactic employed for political ends. A country with a deficit is not necessarily any more "broke" than a family with a mortgage or a college loan. And states have to balance their budgets. Though it may disappoint many conservatives, there will be no federal or state bankruptcies.

The federal deficit is too large for comfort, and most states are struggling to balance their books. Some of that is because of excessive spending, and much is because the recession has driven down tax revenues. But a substantial part was caused by deliberate decisions by state and federal lawmakers to drain government of resources by handing out huge tax cuts, mostly to the rich. As governments begin to stagger from the self-induced hemorrhaging, Republican politicians like Mr. Boehner and Mr. Walker cry poverty and use it as an excuse to break unions and kill programs they never liked in flush years.

On Wednesday, to cite just the latest example, House Republicans successfully pressured the Senate to

approve a bill cutting \$4 billion in spending just to keep the federal government from shutting down for the next two weeks. In a matter of days, the Senate will be forced to take up the House bill to make more than \$61 billion in ruinous cuts over the next seven months, all under the pretext of “fiscal responsibility.” (At least the White House says it will be involved in the next round.) Many Republican governors are employing the same tactic.

But now voters are starting to notice the effects of these cuts and to get angry at the ideological overreach. A [New York Times/CBS News poll published on Tuesday](#) showed that Americans oppose ending bargaining rights for public unions by a majority of nearly two to one. And the poll sharply refutes the post-Reagan Republican mantra that the public invariably abhors all tax increases. Nearly twice as many people said they would prefer a tax increase to cutting benefits of public employees or to cutting spending on roads.

A [Gallup poll](#) last week showed that 61 percent of respondents nationwide reject Mr. Walker’s attempt to revoke collective-bargaining rights for public unions, including 41 percent of the Republicans polled. Like the Times/CBS poll, Gallup found a mixed result about the overall popularity of unions, suggesting that labor is on firm ground in defending its basic rights but still needs to negotiate with the public good in mind.

Before the union uprising, Wisconsin voters might not have noticed when Mr. Walker approved business tax cuts earlier this year that made his budget gap worse. But now, with his cries of being “broke,” they should listen more closely. On Tuesday, he unveiled a budget that would cut aid to school districts and local governments by nearly \$1 billion over two years, while preventing those jurisdictions from raising property taxes at all to make up for the loss.

Perhaps because of the economic downturn, [voting among union households](#) was sharply down last November, which may help explain some of the Republican gains. Mr. Walker and his fellow Republicans, may wind up turning that around next year.



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