

The New York Times

FiveThirtyEight

Nate Silver's Political Calculus

March 10, 2011, 1:35 am

Wisconsin Dispute Could Mobilize Democratic Base

By [NATE SILVER](#)

“If only there were precedent for the upper chamber monkeying around with the fiscal part of a bill to bypass the need for supermajority,” the Republican strategist Patrick Ruffini [noted on Twitter](#) last night.

Mr. Ruffini was referring, of course, to the [decision by Wisconsin Republicans](#) to strip collective bargaining provisions from Gov. Scott Walker’s budget proposal and vote on them separately, overcoming the need for the quorum that Democratic state senators had denied them by leaving the state. He was also referring to the the [Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act](#), the health care bill that Democrats passed by using a budget reconciliation procedure that bypassed the possibility of a filibuster.

Democrats paid a price for passing their health care bill, however, which polls had long shown was unpopular. Some of the 63 seats they lost in the House last November were an all but inevitable result of the poor economy, and reversion to the mean after two strong election cycles. [My research](#), however — as well as that of [several political scientists](#) — suggests that the health care bill was also a factor in their defeat; Democrats who voted aye on the health care bill were considerably more likely to lose their seats, controlling for other factors.

The quality of polling on the Wisconsin dispute has not been terrific. But there’s a [general consensus](#) — including in some polls sponsored by conservative groups — that the Republican position was unpopular, probably about as unpopular as the Democrats’ position on health care. And the most unpopular part of their position — limiting collective bargaining rights — was the one that Republicans passed last night.

Nor is the bill likely to become any more popular given the circumstances under which

it passed. Yes, there's some hypocrisy in claims by Democrats that the Wisconsin Republicans used trickery to pass the bill — they did, after all, approve it with an elected majority, just as Democrats did on the Affordable Care Act. Nevertheless, polling suggested that Wisconsinites, by a two to one majority, **expected a compromise** on the bill, which this decidedly was not.

One question is how much this might hurt Republicans at the state level. As David Dayen **notes**, Democrats will have opportunities to fight back almost immediately, including in an April 5 election that could swing the balance of the Wisconsin Supreme Court, as well as in efforts to recall Republican state senators. Essentially all of Wisconsin outside of the Madison and Milwaukee metropolitan areas is **very evenly divided between Democrats and Republicans**, so there could be a multiplier on even relatively small shifts in turnout or public opinion.

Although most of the risks to Republicans are to the downside, Mr. Walker does have one favorable precedent to cite: that of Gov. Mitch Daniels of Indiana, who in 2005 **signed an executive order** ending collective bargaining for public-sector unions. Mr. Daniels' popularity suffered initially before subsequently recovering along with Indiana's economy.

Perhaps the more interesting question is what this could mean at the national level. As Mr. Ruffini **noted**, Republicans would rather lose in one state, Wisconsin, than all over the country, as Democrats did last year.

But there is no guarantee that the risk to Republicans will be confined to Wisconsin; national polls also suggest that the Republicans' position is somewhat unpopular.

It is questionable how much voters outside the state will care about the Wisconsin debate a year from now, given other issues like the health of the national economy, the debate over the federal budget and the war in Afghanistan. Two groups that may have longer memories are two core constituencies in the Democratic base: union households and voters who describe themselves as liberal. A **Pew poll** conducted earlier this month found that while there was little overall change in opinion of unions — the public went from having a favorable view of them by a 45 to 41 plurality to a 47

to 39 plurality, not a statistically significant increase — there were exceptions among these groups.

In particular, the number of liberal Democrats who said they had a *very* favorable view of unions jumped to 32 percent from 14 percent. Meanwhile, the percentage of labor household voters who held a very favorable view increased to 45 percent from 27 percent. There was no comparable change among conservative voters; the number of people who said they had a *very unfavorable* view of unions was roughly unchanged, both among the country as a whole and among different subgroups.

Wisconsin, then, could motivate these groups to vote — something that they usually do fairly reliably, but did not in 2010. (The share of union household voters in the electorate dropped to 17 percent in 2010 from 21 percent in 2008, according to exit polls.) Although self-described liberals almost always vote Democratic, between 35 and 40 percent of labor households have voted Republican in recent elections. If that fraction decreases to something like 30 percent at the same time that union turnout increases, that would hurt Republicans by a couple of percentage points nationally.

And, if the Pew poll is right, Republicans will have no particular counterweight to this; the Wisconsin dispute has motivated the Democratic base more so than theirs.

That does not mean that the Republican base will not have other issues to motivate them in 2012 — they will almost certainly have plenty. But the likelihood of an “**enthusiasm gap**” of the sort that was present in 2010 has diminished.