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Fueled by Protests, Angry Wisconsin Voters Show Up to Fight

By MONICA DAVEY

WAUKESHA, Wis. — Union supporters and Democrats unleashed their fury over [Scott Walker](#), the Republican governor, and his efforts to diminish collective bargaining rights at the ballot box on Tuesday.

Angry voters managed a task some had said was impossible: they locked a veteran State Supreme Court justice, who is considered conservative, in a razor-thin race with an opponent who is much less well known. (The opponent declared victory on Wednesday.)

And voters rejected a Republican lawmaker for Milwaukee County executive — yet another contest that had been transformed, at least by some infuriated voters, into a referendum over the state's new Republican leadership.

Democrats here trumpeted the outcome as the beginning of the end for Mr. Walker and the Republicans who swept into control of the state in November. "What the vote showed is that people really woke up to Walker's agenda," State Senator Chris Larson, a Democrat, said on Wednesday. "And I'd say they're only getting warmed up."

But while anti-Walker forces certainly turned out in remarkable numbers on Tuesday, others did too: a

similar number of conservative-leaning voters. State officials had predicted a 20 percent turnout for the usually sleepy springtime election, but more than 30 percent of voters statewide wound up casting ballots (some polling places ran out of “I voted” stickers).

And although the Supreme Court race was officially deemed nonpartisan, the vote appeared to reflect an almost evenly split philosophical divide — give or take a few hundred votes — among more than 1.4 million voters. The race was so nearly perfectly split, in fact, that a recount seemed likely.

And so the Republicans were busy trumpeting the outcome, too.

“The Democrats and the unions threw everything they had at that election and the silent majority of voters turned out and beat them back,” said Scott Fitzgerald, the Republican leader in the State Senate. “I’m very pleased with these results.”

What seems beyond debate, though, is that Wisconsin voters have rarely been quite so split, so worked up, so mad.

And that means a new level of uncertainty and volatility here, as state political leaders brace for highly unusual efforts to recall 16 state legislators — an even number of Democrats and Republicans — over their roles in the fight over cuts to collective bargaining. That uncertainty will also mean presidential hopefuls will have a more difficult time gauging their odds next year in Wisconsin.

“The way it looks right now, both sides are so motivated and so turned out that it would be very hard to forecast how a vote would go down the road,” said Charles H. Franklin, a political scientist at the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

The Milwaukee County executive job needed to be filled because Mr. Walker gave it up to become governor in January. Chris Abele, a political newcomer who used some of his own wealth to finance his bid, easily beat Jeff Stone, a Republican in the State Assembly.

That race was also supposed to be nonpartisan, but critics of Mr. Stone regularly noted that he had

voted in favor of Mr. Walker's bill to curtail collective bargaining rights.

But the Supreme Court contest — once imagined as a dull race with an all-but-certain outcome — captured the greatest interest Wednesday.

As unofficial counts from the last voting districts trickled in, the margin between Justice David T. Prosser, who has served on the court for 12 years, and JoAnne Kloppenburg, an assistant attorney general, remained extremely slim.

By midafternoon, The Associated Press reported that its count showed Ms. Kloppenburg with a 204-vote lead with all precincts counted, and she declared victory.

The state has no automatic recount provision in such cases, but a candidate may request a recount, and many here said they expected as much. Justice Prosser's representatives did not immediately respond to requests for comment on Wednesday.

Whatever the final outcome, anti-Walker forces and Republicans were each claiming victory in the race, at least for the show of voter strength.

Incumbent justices have lost election bids in this state, but it is rare. Throughout a bitter campaign, with heavy advertising financed by conservative and liberal groups, each candidate claimed to be impartial and nonpartisan when it came to the courtroom, while also suggesting that the other was anything but.

Until several weeks ago, when the fight over collective bargaining and Mr. Walker's agenda boiled over in Madison, Justice Prosser had been expected to win easily.

But as the fight in Madison grew, Justice Prosser, who is seen by many as part of a 4-3 conservative majority on the Supreme Court and who once served as a Republican legislative leader, became a focus of those irked by Mr. Walker.

Critics accused of Justice Prosser of rubber-stamping Mr. Walker's perspective broadly, and suggested

that he might one day cast a deciding vote in favor of the legality of Mr. Walker's bill to cut collective bargaining rights to public employees in the state — legislation that is already the subject of litigation.

Some who demonstrated in Madison over the bill said they viewed Ms. Kloppenburg as a liberal alternative who would surely reject the collective bargaining and benefits cuts if she were ever to address their legality on the court.

In fact, Justice Prosser and Ms. Kloppenburg have not said publicly how they would vote on the matter.

But some voters on Wednesday said it did not matter, that the fight had grown larger here than a single bill or even a single judicial race.



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