



# Democrats hope union battle will garner Obama independents

By Alicia M. Cohn - 03/17/11 06:29 AM ET

Democrats believe the fight over public-sector unions represents an opportunity for the White House to move independents back to President Obama for the 2012 election.

Independents helped carry Obama to the White House, but defected to Republicans in the 2010 midterms. They also helped elect several Midwestern Republican governors who have taken center stage in the fight with public-sector unions.

Ground zero in that battle is Wisconsin, where GOP Gov. Scott Walker has lost support among independents since beginning his battle to eliminate collective bargaining rights for public-sector unions.

Walker, who won the independent vote in 2010, has seen his disapproval rate among Wisconsin independents jump to 59 percent, according to a survey by Greenberg Quinlan Rosner, a Democratic polling firm.

Most of the Republican candidates eyeing the White House in 2012 have offered support for Walker, ensuring the battle will be an issue with Obama in the presidential election next year.

Democrats say that gives them an advantage.

“This issue is not what independent voters signed up for,” said Anna Greenberg, senior vice president of Greenberg Quinlan Rosner.

“I don’t think it’s helpful to Republicans to be focused on issues that aren’t the concern of independent voters. It’s not on their agenda, but moreover it’s something that most of them object to.”

Polls suggest Obama has his work cut out for him to win back independents. A new poll this month by Reuters showed Obama’s approval rating among independents at 37 percent, a drop from 47 in February.

The independent vote will be important in some of the areas where the union fight is the most fierce, including the perennial swing state of Ohio, a crucial state for Obama to win

in 2012. GOP Gov. John Kasich, just elected last year, is pressing for the elimination of collective bargaining rights for workers there.

Around half of Ohio's voters don't identify with a party, making it difficult to win the state and its 18 electoral votes without carrying independents. Obama won 52 percent of the independent vote in 2008, becoming the first Democrat to carry Ohio since 1996.

Obama also carried the independent vote in Wisconsin and Indiana in 2008, and won 52 percent of the independent vote nationwide.

"The real question is, What do swing voters do in 2012?" said Paul Allen Beck, a political science professor at Ohio State University. He thinks who wins the vote will depend on the national economy, and whether any improvement in state economies is seen as being related to actions taken by GOP governors.

Beck said voters are ambivalent about the methods used to balance the budget and improve the economy, and most independents just want results.

National polling, however, indicates that most voters oppose bans on collective bargaining.

Unions will also be making a play for independent voters in 2012.

While Democratic lawmakers in Wisconsin and Indiana are playing it safe by taking a dramatic stand on the side of the unions, Republican candidates with a strong stance on the other side could face targeted opposition in both reelections and any potential bid for higher office. This could be especially true for those toeing the line in the sand by threatening the unions' right to collective bargaining.

"For [unions, collective bargaining is] crucially important, because without collective bargaining you can't have forced union dues ... which is the key source of monetary strength for unions in America today," said Chris Edwards, the director of tax policy studies at the Cato Institute. "So that's why the protests in Wisconsin are so big."

Labor historian Joseph McCartin, a professor at Georgetown University, said that even though Walker was able to push through a ban, the passion of the protests in Wisconsin might discourage lawmakers in other states from a similar fight. The ripple effect could tame the efforts of Republicans in states such as Florida, Kansas, Missouri, Idaho, Tennessee, South Carolina, Iowa, California, New York and Massachusetts, where bills have been introduced addressing specific union rights and reducing union power.

Walker's reputation among voters could still recover. Indiana Gov. Mitch Daniels, who significantly reduced the right of public workers to collectively bargain in 2005, shortly after taking office, took a dip in his approval ratings immediately following the change but has now regained his popularity in-state and remains a possible GOP presidential contender based on straw polls so far.

“The Democrats are running a risk that what the Republicans are doing is perceived as successful,” said Beck. On the other hand, “the Republicans are running a risk that this all blows up in their face.”