

Analysis of Wisconsin's Recall Election Results

Many people are describing Scott Walker's recall win as big. A win can be described as big because of the depth (the margin) of the win, but can also be labeled as big because of its breadth—the degree to which the victory is across the board.

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In terms of depth, the Governor's victory Tuesday night was solid. But if we were to measure the victory by its breadth, it would more properly be labeled as striking. Walker winning 53% is not an overly huge margin. Winning 60 counties, however, is highly impressive. The Barrett vote was so highly concentrated in just two counties that, while he managed to stay within seven percentage points, he only carried 12 of the state's 72 counties.

This result paints a challenging picture for legislative Democrats hoping to hold on to the State Senate and win the state assembly.

Consider this fact: Scott Walker on Tuesday night won 53% of the vote. Yet under the new redistricting map he won 66 of the 99 assembly districts and 23 of the 33 state senate districts. In other words, he received 53% of the vote but won 67% of the districts. Some may assert this is due to the map being "gerrymandered," but they would be wrong.

The true answer lies in Walker's breadth of victory and Barrett's heavy dependence on Dane and Milwaukee counties. Thirty percent of the statewide vote for Barrett came out of Dane County and the City of Milwaukee. Yet those two population centers make up only 19 assembly districts. Put another way, the Democratic areas of the state are so concentrated that it makes it hard for the Democratic party to win a majority of districts even though Wisconsin is a 50-50 state.

The cities of Madison and Milwaukee continue to vote more and more Democratic. This means the rest of this "purple state" is not really purple—it is red. There is not much real estate left in Wisconsin that is actually purple.

The state now basically has six blue areas (Dane and Milwaukee counties, the cities of Racine and Kenosha, part of the City of Green Bay, and the far northwest corner) and a high number of red areas. Only a few areas, mostly counties in western Wisconsin, can truly be considered purple.



This poses a significant long-term challenge to legislative Democrats. In legislative races, having breadth of support is everything. The successful party needs to be able to win in many locations. There simply are not enough seats in Milwaukee, Madison, Racine, Green Bay and Kenosha for Democrats to win the majority. The Democrats need to win in areas that Scott Walker carried both in 2010 and in the recall.

As they prepare for statewide races, Democrats pin their hopes on Madison and Milwaukee. For the sake of their legislative chances, they need to start paying more attention to the remainder of the state.

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