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## Why Was Obama Missing-in-Action in Wisconsin?

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For the past eight months, Wisconsin has been ground zero in the battle over liberal vs. conservative values. The state's workers, their families, and their allies have been fighting for their lives against an assault led by Republican Gov. Scott Walker. Throughout their struggle, President Barack Obama has been sitting on the sidelines, failing to use his bully pulpit to encourage the burgeoning movement to protect working families from the corporate- and Tea Party-sponsored attacks.

Obama's silence could be felt on Tuesday in the outcome of the special recall elections through which Democrats and liberals sought to turn back the tide of Republican reaction. Had Obama gone to Wisconsin and campaigned for Democrats, or even made a few public statements endorsing the Democrats seeking to unseat six of Walker's right-wing state Senate allies, the liberal Democrats might have turned a narrow defeat into a spectacular unprecedented victory.

What's particularly puzzling is that Obama had much to gain by taking sides in the Wisconsin battle. Has he become so conflict-averse, so wedded to bipartisan conciliation, that he won't invest his political capital to help Democrats challenge ultra-conservative Republicans in a battleground state that he'll need to win next year if he wants to keep his White House job?

Earlier this year, Walker and the GOP-dominated legislature passed a state budget that included deep cuts to schools, state-subsidized health insurance and other critical services, while cutting taxes for big business. The cuts led to lay-offs of government workers, which weakened the state's already struggling economy by eroding consumer demand. Walker also led the charge to eliminate state employees' collective bargain rights, a move that a majority of Wisconsin voters oppose. (Indeed, in 1959 Wisconsin became the first state in the country to give its public employees the right to unionize.)

Walker's attack on workers' rights and government services catalyzed an incredible grassroots opposition movement that earlier this year brought as many as 150,000 protestors to Madison, the state capital, on a regular basis, and put the national spotlight on the Badger State.

To translate that outrage into real political gains, the progressive and liberal activists decided to try to oust six Republican state Senators who supported Walker's agenda. Had they defeated three of the six GOP Senators in Tuesday's special recall elections, they would have gained control of the state Senate and been able to challenge Walker's assault on working families.

On Tuesday, two Democrats ousted incumbent Republican state senators. Jessica King defeated Sen. Randy Hopper of Fond du Lac, and Rep. Jennifer Shilling of La Crosse defeated Sen. Dan Kapanke of La Crosse. But Republicans held onto the four other seats, leaving the GOP in control of the legislature.

The election loosened the GOP's grip on the state Senate from a 19-14 majority to a 17-16 margin. (Some observers still hold out hope that moderate Republican State Senator Dale Schultz, who earlier this year voted against Walker's attack on unions, might join the Democrats and thus form a pro-labor coalition.)

"We went on their turf and we won on Republican turf," Mike Tate, the Democratic Party chairman, [told](#) the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, referring to the party's two victories. "We will not stop, we will not rest... until we recall Scott Walker."

The Democrats and their progressive allies took a big risk in targeting these six Republican incumbents who supported Walker's corporate-funded, Tea Party-endorsed agenda. Their districts had been gerrymandered to give Republicans an electoral advantage. Last year, Walker beat his Democratic opponent in each of the six districts. But in 2008, Barack Obama beat John McCain in all six districts, thanks to an impressive grassroots mobilization effort and a huge turnout of Democratic voters. That fact, plus the growing anger among Wisconsinites over Walker's attack on workers' collective bargaining rights, suggested that the recall effort was worth pursuing.

On Tuesday, the Democrats [increased their margin](#) in five of the six districts. And in two districts, the incumbent Republicans' margin of victory was exceedingly narrow. In Senate District 14, which Walker won with 57% of the vote last year, Republican Luther Olsen beat Democrat Fred Clark by a slim 52% to 48% margin -- 26,554 to 24,365 votes. In Senate District 8, where Walker last year took 54% of the vote, Republican incumbent Alberta Darling held onto her seat by defeating Democrat Sandra Pasch by a 53% to 47% margin -- 39,471 to 34,096 votes.

Conservative groups spent millions on Tuesday's elections to defend the embattled Walker and beat back the liberal grassroots movement that triggered enormous passion and excitement in Wisconsin and around the country. Much of the money donated to the Republican incumbents' campaigns came from out of state, [including](#) funds from the right-wing Koch brothers, big backers of the Tea Party.

More than \$35 million was spent on the recall races, according to the Wisconsin Democracy Campaign, which tracks political

money -- almost as much as the \$37 million spent in last year's statewide gubernatorial race. Much of the money came from right-wing issue groups like Americans for Prosperity, the Club for Growth, Wisconsin Family Council, American Federation for Children (a Washington D.C.-based conservative group chaired by Michigan billionaire Betsy DeVos), and Wisconsin Manufacturers & Commerce. They targeted their independent expenditures on TV and radio ads. Wisconsin Club for Growth spent between \$3 million to \$4 million on issue ads in support of Republican candidates in the state's recall elections.

In the six candidate campaigns, the Republicans outspent the Democrats by \$3.3 million to \$2.1 million as of July 25.

The Democrats drew significantly on union contributions as well as groups like Emily's List and Progressive Change Campaign Committee, but they were outspent. They tried to make up for this handicap by relying on a passionate army of grassroots volunteers. The Democrats' ground operation looked a lot like Obama's 2008 field operation. The Wisconsin Democrats recruited thousands of volunteers -- teachers, firefighters, nurses, prison guards, social workers, environmentalists, community activists, feminists, union members and others -- to make phone calls, knock on doors, organize house meetings, and mount an impressive election day get-out-the-vote effort. Union members from New York and other states traveled to Wisconsin to help out. Liberals and progressives from around the country made phone calls from their home phones to Wisconsinites to encourage them to vote for the Democratic challengers.

The money from outside the state indicates that both Democrats and Republicans viewed the Wisconsin recall fight as a dress rehearsal for the 2012 election.

So where was Obama, the former community organizer, while Wisconsinites were mobilizing a heroic effort to defend Democratic values and defeat the Tea Party wing of the Republican Party that has undermined the president's agenda from the day he took office? Had Obama used his bully pulpit to endorse the Democrats, praise the grassroots organizers, and encourage voters to come to the polls, it is likely that enough additional Democrats (2190 in district 14; 5,376 in district 8) would have come to the polls to turn the narrow Republican victories into Democratic triumphs.

Obama garnered 56% of the Wisconsin vote in 2008 and won the state's 8th and 14th Senate districts by 51% and 52% margins, respectively. With all the money, shoe leather, and enthusiasm put into Tuesday's recall campaigns, overall turnout reached about 44% in the six contested district -- close to the 49% in last year's governor's race. Although analysts haven't crunched the precinct-by-precinct numbers yet, it is likely that, as is typical in most elections, young people, low-income people, and people of color voted in much lower numbers than wealthier, white, and older voters, giving the GOP an advantage.

Could Obama have made a significant difference in raising turnout among those and other traditionally Democratic voters? Despite his declining poll numbers, Obama is still a powerful and charismatic figure with a loyal following among union members, young people, African Americans, Latinos, environmentalists, and liberals.

In 2009 and 2010, Obama was a frequent visitor to Wisconsin, a key swing state that he must win next year to stay in office.

The battle in Wisconsin is a microcosm of the larger fight for America's soul. Will corporate America and the Tea Party have a stranglehold on our democracy, slashing spending on schools, health care, and other basic services, and undermining workers' rights and unions that have been the bulwark of the nation's middle class?

In December 2008, 240 workers illegally occupied the Republic Windows and Doors factory in Chicago after their employer abruptly told them that it was shutting down the plant. Asked his opinion of the workers' take-over in his hometown, President-elect Obama [said](#), "When it comes to the situation here in Chicago with the workers who are asking for their benefits and payments they have earned, I think they are absolutely right. What's happening to them is reflective of what's happening across this economy."

By quickly endorsing the workers' protest (which was organized by their feisty union, the United Electrical Workers), Obama showed the kind of bold leadership that progressives have been hoping for. He used his bully pulpit to endorse the workers' protest and to put pressure on the company's management and Bank of America (its lender) to forge a solution. Following Obama's lead, local politicians sided with the workers. The Chicago cops didn't arrest the workers, despite their flagrant violation of the company's private property rights. The protest garnered national media attention, triggering donations and support from around the country. Emboldened by Obama's support, the workers pledged to keep their sit-down strike going. Eventually they reached a solution, the factory remained open, and the workers kept their jobs and their union contract.

To win re-election, Obama needs to rekindle that "Yes, We can" attitude and leadership -- on jobs, values, and the positive role of government -- that inspired so many Americans three years ago.

Had Obama staked a similar claim in this year's Wisconsin battle, and helped the Democrats capture one or two more state Senate seats, the pundits would have viewed the outcome as a repudiation of the Tea Party and Republican triumphs in the debt ceiling debate, and given Obama credit for fighting for the liberal values he espouses.

Even if he didn't step foot in Wisconsin, Obama could have indicated that he was aware of the Wisconsin battle and espoused his support for the progressives and Democrats. He could have affirmed his belief in collective bargaining, criticized Walker's right-wing assault on basic services, attacked the avalanche of corporate and right-wing money pouring into Wisconsin, praised the state's grassroots activists waging a battle for economic justice and fairness, and encourage Democrats to vote in those six critical elections. The organizers and voters would have been inspired by Obama's words. They would have returned the favor by supporting Obama's re-election campaign next year.

Instead, Obama was silent.

No doubt Obama's political advisors warned him to stay out of the Wisconsin battle, fearing that if the Republicans prevailed, pundits would use Wisconsin outcome as a sign of Obama's weakness and a precursor of his damaged re-election chances.

But weighing in on fights like Wisconsin is exactly the kind of choice that Obama's supporters expected him to make when they worked and voted for him in 2008. That campaign was about "audacity," "hope" and "change" - and grassroots organizing. For the last six months, Wisconsin has been ground zero is the most exciting grassroots movement in the country. But the former

community organizer from Chicago chose to sit on the sidelines.

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