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'War on women' comes to Wisconsin recall – and could be decisive

Several bills signed by Republican Gov. Scott Walker have angered women's rights activists and have motivated women to get behind the effort to recall him.

By Kay Nolan, Contributor posted June 2, 2012 at 9:21 am EDT

Milwaukee

Edna Kunkel calls herself an “accidental activist.” A writer of technical and scientific manuals from Verona, Wis., she came of age at the height of the women’s movement, and she never expected to take to the streets in defense of those causes more than 30 years later.

In large part, Ms. Kunkel became a women’s rights activist in her 50s because of Wisconsin Gov. Scott Walker. On one April day alone, the Republican signed a slew of laws on subjects ranging from education to abortion that many activists say amount to a “war on women.”

“Who is making this stuff up? Why is this happening now?” she recalls thinking.

Those bills did not trigger Governor Walker’s June 5 recall election. But what began last year as a backlash to the governor’s landmark antiunion bill has in many respects become a test run for the national elections to come in November, and the alleged “war on women” that has played out on the presidential stage has also taken shape here.

In that way, Wisconsin could be a window on how the issue will play out nationwide in the fall. For one, it has made Walker’s battle to fend off his recall harder, with polls showing women viewing him far less favorably than do men. Moreover, it has kindled the fire of women like Kunkel, who are becoming politically engaged – some for the first time – as they see his reforms as unraveling the rights they fought so hard to win.

Walker’s name became especially linked with the alleged Republican “war on women” on Good Friday in early April. That’s when news came out that the previous day, Walker had quietly signed four bills.

One bill repealed Wisconsin's 2009 Equal Pay Enforcement Act, which had allowed women and minorities to sue for employment discrimination at the state level. Another ended a 2010 ban on abstinence-only sex education in public schools. The remaining two banned insurance companies participating in the federal health-care reform law from covering some abortions and required an exam by a physician when a patient seeks an abortion-inducing drug.

Activists suggest that those bills were only the tip of the iceberg. Walker's highly controversial move to end collective bargaining rights for public workers exempted law-enforcement personnel and firefighters, who are overwhelmingly male, while affecting wage-and-benefit negotiations for teachers and public health nurses, who are mostly female, they note. They add that a newly enacted Voter ID law creates more difficulties for women than men and that Walker's budget cut all state funding (\$2 million) for Planned Parenthood, the nation's leading provider of abortions, which also provides other services to low-income women.

The Walker administration vehemently denies any such "war on women," saying, for example, that it is merely shifting funding from Planned Parenthood to other, less controversial health providers. Walker adds that no group of public workers is exclusively male or female, making it unfair to cast antiunion measures as anti-women.

Still, the perception continues, sparking protests. At an April 28 rally in Madison, Wis., for Unite Women, a new, Facebook-driven national women's-rights group, Democratic state Sen. Chris Taylor declared: "Call it what you may, but when Governor Walker repeals equal pay protection for women, it sure feels like a war on women."

Polls suggest that women have increasingly turned against Walker even as men continue to strongly back him. In 2010, when Walker first faced Milwaukee Mayor Tom Barrett in a gubernatorial vote, women preferred Mayor Barrett 51 to 48 percent – though male voters pushed Walker to victory. Now, the two candidates are facing off again in the recall vote, and women favor Barrett 52 to 42 percent, according to a Marquette University poll released May 30. By contrast, men back Walker 58 to 36 percent in the May 30 poll.

"The gender gap is very real," says Charles Franklin, who runs the poll.

Karen Teegarden, the suburban Detroit-based founder of Unite Women, observes that the movement has drawn the most energized response from states like Wisconsin, where GOP-driven measures have sparked controversy. And as a child of the women's movement herself, the 50-something notes that her generation has particularly moved to action.

At the April rally in Madison, the majority of the approximately 700 people who showed up in rainy, 40-degree weather clearly were middle-age or older. The

leader of a group calling itself the Raging Grannies told protesters, “Fifty years ago, we were marching for the right of women to have some control over their own bodies. We fought that fight, all these grannies up here. We did not think we were going to be spending our old age doing it again, but we are not giving up this fight.”

This rallying cry has echoes throughout Wisconsin. At a noisy primary election gathering in Milwaukee for Barrett, Joan Blaschke of Brookfield, Wis., stood out from the crowd in her elegant black-and-white suit and diamond jewelry – this at a gathering where many wore T-shirts and baseball caps sporting labor union logos.

Ms. Blaschke is a late convert to the Democratic cause, but she says Walker’s recent actions so appalled her that she volunteered to help his opponent. “I voted for George Bush,” she said, but now that she’s taken a closer look at national politics, she has decided, “I don’t think I like any of the Republican ideas.”

Blaschke, a retired teacher, says she paid little attention to the women’s movement in the ‘70s, but adds, “I’m feeling it now. I think there’s just going to be such a trickle-down effect.”

As for Kunkel, who had never before dabbled in political causes, she was motivated by reading the Unite Women Facebook page, which told of efforts around the country like those in Wisconsin to move toward abstinence-only education in schools and to add restrictions on birth control and abortions.

Within days of visiting the site, Kunkel had started a Wisconsin Facebook page for Unite Women group and volunteered to organize the Madison protest rally.

“My world is based on science. We know that, numerically, women are the majority, but in terms of politics, we’re still a minority,” she says. “The way women gain their biggest voices in general is to speak and act collectively.”

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