

In Ohio, Repeal Of Collective Bargaining Law Could Fuel Democrats For 2012

by Elise Hu

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Ohio voters have overturned Senate Bill 5, the controversial law that stripped public employees of their rights to collectively bargain, by a nearly two-to-one vote. The law, which was the centerpiece of Republican Gov. John Kasich's legislative agenda and passed by a GOP-dominated state legislature this spring, will no longer be on the books after Tuesday night's referendum vote.

"It's clear the people have spoken," Kasich said tonight. "We'll continue to work with local governments. People obviously didn't like the tools we offered here."

This was the most closely-watched off-year election in the nation, as the repeal vote is being viewed as an important barometer in the struggle between unions and pro-business budget cutters headed into 2012. After organized labor and their Democratic allies suffered a string of defeats in states like Wisconsin and Indiana earlier this year, the Ohio campaign was an all-out battle for survival.

This hard-earned and expensive victory for unions represents a momentum shift in their direction at a crucial time. Ohio will likely be a key electoral battleground in the coming presidential election, and supporters of the repeal say this win signals that the sweeping, Republican-led efforts to curb the power of public employee unions may have gone too far. The Columbus Dispatch reports:

Ohio Democratic Chairman Chris Redfern said public workers should not be scapegoated for the state's economic problems.

"That is the lesson John Kasich must remember after tonight, and if he doesn't, he'll be a one-term governor," Redfern said.

The state's voters showed they disliked Kasich's law, and polls indicate voters dislike Kasich, too. An October Quinnipiac poll measured the governor's approval ratings at 36 percent. While he did campaign across Ohio to support keeping the law, his opponents were the faces of police and firefighters, teachers and nurses. What does this mean? NPR's StateImpact Ohio explains:

[This shows] Democratic-leaning groups like unions can get organized and get out the vote, both important skills leading up to the 2012 presidential election, particularly in a swing state like Ohio. That energy and organization could also help Democrats get two other referendums on the November 2012 ballot and approved.

They could mean that the momentum behind Republican efforts to curb the power of public employee unions and enact education policy changes such as ending tenure and seniority-based pay has slowed.

They could mean that Kasich's approach of including both public safety workers and teachers in a single collective bargaining bill was flawed. (In Wisconsin, collective bargaining changes that

largely excluded police and firefighters passed.)