

# Ohio Turns Back a Law Limiting Unions' Rights

By [SABRINA TAVERNISE](#)



COLUMBUS, Ohio — A year after Republicans swept legislatures across the country, voters in Ohio delivered their verdict on a centerpiece of the conservative legislative agenda, striking down a law that restricted public workers' rights to bargain collectively.

The landslide vote to repeal the bill — 63 to 37, according to preliminary results from Ohio's secretary of state — was a slap to Ohio's governor, John R. Kasich, a prominent Republican who had championed the law as a tool for cities to cut costs. The bill passed in March, on a wave of enthusiasm among Republicans fresh from midterm victories. A similar bill also passed in Wisconsin.

The vote gave a new lease on life to public-sector labor unions in Ohio, which had been under tremendous pressure to repeal the bill. Failure would have brought not only the loss of most of their bargaining rights, including the right to strike, but would also have called into question what had long been their central strength — their ability to organize and deliver votes.

Labor leaders said their victory contained an important message for Republicans.

"Attacking education and other public employees is not at all what the public wants to see," said Karen M. White, political director of the National Education Association, the nation's largest public-sector union. "It should resonate with politicians that they've gone too far."

At a news conference Tuesday night, congratulated the victors and said he would assess the situation before proposing any new legislation.

"It's time to pause," he said. "The people have spoken clearly. You don't ignore the public. Part of leading is listening and hearing what people had to say to you."

Labor's victory in this important swing state comes a year ahead of the presidential election, and policy makers and political strategists will be scouring ballot initiatives for clues to voter sentiment in 2012.

The election in Ohio provided an opportunity for the president's network of supporters, Obama for America, to test its organizational ability and revive its enthusiasm after a bleak year for Democratic

activists. Volunteers for the president's re-election campaign fanned out across the state for weeks, urging voters to stand against the new law limiting collective bargaining.

The issue did not break entirely along party lines. The opposing side of the argument did not receive as much outside help, with the Republican presidential nominating contest still under way. Even when Mitt Romney, a leading Republican presidential candidate, visited Ohio on a recent day, he said that he was not sure where he stood on the issue. A day later, he said that he stood against the labor unions.

Some analysts cautioned against reading too much into the result as a predictor of voter sentiment for 2012. The bill has been highly controversial in Ohio, even among groups, such as firefighters and the police, that traditionally vote Republican, and a vote cast to repeal the law does not translate directly into a vote for President Obama.

"This is not a purely partisan issue," said Gene Beaupre, a political science professor at Xavier University. "It has merits on its substance."

The real question, he said, will be how independents voted, as they will likely turn the tide in this battleground state.

Republicans who watched the campaign said it was doomed from the start. It was a frontal assault on one of the most sacred principles for Democrats: The right of organized labor to strike and to collectively bargain. Defeating it would have required near universal Republican support, which was not there because a portion of voting Republicans, for example firefighters and police officers, strongly opposed it.

"This really is a core value, and the bill was out of step with that value," said one Republican strategist who asked to remain anonymous because he did not want to be seen as criticizing his party's position.

"To me it was a lost cause."

Wisconsin, unlike Ohio, does not have a referendum provision allowing the public repeal laws, but Wisconsin labor unions and their allies pushed for recall elections that enabled them to unseat two Republican senators who backed the new law.

Labor fought harder, observers said, because its stakes were higher. We Are Ohio, the group that opposed the law, poured about \$30 million into the campaign, said Melissa Fazekas, the group's spokeswoman, and had about 17,000 volunteers out over the weekend knocking on doors to persuade voters to come out and vote. The group that supported the bill, Building a Better Ohio, said it spent just under \$8 million.

"What we were actually fighting for was our livelihood," said Monty Blanton, a retired state employee and a union worker who said he spent 14 hours a day knocking in doors in southeast Ohio in the last month.

"We've been to places you had to get to with a four-wheel drive."

It is unclear whether the episode will cause Republicans to suffer at the ballot box. Bill Capretta, a registered Republican and a retired police officer in Columbus, said that he is bitter at the Republicans and that he would think twice about casting his vote for one.

While he said he did not think he would vote for Mr. Obama, whose health care plan he opposes, he expressed frustration with Republicans blocking his efforts.

"When you just say 'No, no, no,' because you want this guy to be a one-term president, I have a problem with that," he said.

Jeff Zeleny contributed reporting from Washington, and Steven Greenhouse from New York.