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## NATIONAL AND WORLD COMMENTARY

### E. J. DIONNE: THE MIDWEST'S SURPRISING NEW CLASS POLITICS

By E. J. Dionne, Washington Post Writers Group

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COLLEGEVILLE, Minn. --

The battle for the Midwest is transforming American politics. Issues of class inequality and union influence, long dormant, have come back to life. And a part of the country that was integral to the Republican surge of 2010 is shifting away from the GOP just a few months later.

Republican governors, particularly in Wisconsin and Ohio, denied themselves political honeymoons by launching frontal assaults on public employee unions and proposing budgets that include deep cuts in popular programs.

Democrats in the region are elated at the quick turn in their fortunes. A few months ago, they worried that a region President Barack Obama dominated in 2008 was turning against him. Republican triumphs in Wisconsin and Ohio, and also in Indiana, Michigan and Iowa, all pointed to trouble for the president.

Now, for reasons having more to do with decisions by GOP governors than with anything the president has done, many voters, particularly in the white working class, are having second thoughts.

"We certainly addressed the issue of Reagan Democrats," said Mayor Tom Barrett of Milwaukee, referring to the blue-collar voters who began drifting Republican in 1980. Barrett lost to Gov. Scott Walker in November by a margin of 52 percent to 46 percent, but recent polls suggest he would defeat Walker if the election were rerun. In Ohio, Republican Gov. John Kasich, who won narrowly in 2010, has seen his approval rating drop to as low as 30 percent in one poll.

In telephone interviews last week, Democratic politicians across the Midwest avoided premature victory claims.

"I don't think we'll know until November of 2012," Gov. Mark Dayton of Minnesota replied when asked if the Republican moves against public employee unions would turn out to be a major error.

It's a political irony that Republicans clearly believed unionized public employees were so unpopular that taking them on would play well with voters.

"It was part of an intentional strategy on the part of the right-wing Republican ideological machine to split private-sector workers from public-sector workers," said Dayton, a Democrat who beat back the 2010 Republican tide. After decades involving "a giant transfer of wealth to the very top," Dayton said, the campaign against public unions was "a way to distract attention" by creating "a fight over who is getting a dollar an hour more or less." The effort, he added, "has not worked as well as they thought it would."

Sen. Sherrod Brown, a Democrat from Ohio, said even union sympathizers were surprised at the degree to which the Republicans' approach "blew up in their faces" and that "the poll numbers of support for collective bargaining for public-sector workers are stronger than even most labor supporters expected."

Another surprise: the extent to which Democrats, long wary of being accused of "class warfare," are now more eager than ever to cast the GOP as the party of the privileged.

Barrett recounted a parable making the rounds among Wisconsin Democrats, telling of a room in which "a zillionaire, a tea party person and a union member" confront a plate of 12 cookies: "The zillionaire takes 11 of the cookies, and says to the other two, 'That guy is trying to steal your cookie.'"

Still, Democrats are aware that the flight from the Republicans is also a reaction against ideology. Dayton saw the GOP's heavy-handed methods in Wisconsin as playing badly in a region proud of its tradition of consensus-building and good government.

And Brown said that while joblessness was the most important issue in last year's election, one of the most effective Republican arguments was the claim that "Obama was governing by ideology." That charge has been turned on its head because "now, they are so overdoing governing by ideology."

Sen. Al Franken said he saw this reaction against ideology playing out in Washington's budget battle as well, citing the example of leading Minnesota business people, including Republicans, who have been appalled at cuts in effective job training programs.

The first electoral tests of the new class politics will come in Wisconsin. David Prosser, a conservative state Supreme Court justice, is facing a surprisingly tough challenge in an April 5 election from JoAnne Kloppenburg, who has strong backing from anti-Walker forces. Later this year, several Republican state senators could face recall elections.

The tests for the longer run will be whether echoes from the heartland's struggles over economic justice are heard as Congress debates budget cuts -- and the extent to which Obama, who has already benefited from fights he did not pick, decides to join the battle.

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