Much can be learned in post-recall Wisconsin

Recall reaction

Jessica Bertoni, left, of Eau Claire and Carla Stabenow of Augusta react Tuesday evening to hearing that GOP Gov. Scott Walker had won the recall election. Area Republicans gathered at Fanny Hill had much to celebrate Tuesday, with their party's candidates winning five out of six seats up for grab in Wisconsin.

By Eric Lindquist
Leader-Telegram staff

At a time when Democrats and Republicans almost never see eye to eye on anything, both sides agree on one major reason for Gov. Scott Walker's resounding victory in Tuesday's contentious election: Wisconsinites hate recalls.

In the aftermath of Walker's better-than-the-original sequel win over Democratic Milwaukee Mayor Tom Barrett, that message came through loud and clear from party leaders, political analysts and, most important, voters.

"I'd love to say that all seven percentage points of the margin were because people love Gov. Walker, but some of it was definitely from people voting against the upheaval and against the whole idea of running a state via recall," said Brian Westrate, chairman of the Eau Claire County Republican Party.

"Many people were opposed to the idea of a recall. That was certainly something we heard over and over," said former Democratic Rep. Jeff Smith, a spokesman for Eau Claire County Democrats. "I had people tell me they would vote for Walker even though they preferred Barrett for that reason."
That bipartisan sentiment was borne out by exit polling done Tuesday by Edison Research of Somerville, N.J., in which nearly a third of people who voted for Barrett indicated recalls are appropriate only when there is official misconduct. Nineteen of 20 Walker voters said recalls are never appropriate.

John Frank, a political scientist at Chippewa Valley Technical College, went so far as to say the strong anti-recall feelings likely drove some people to the polls who normally wouldn't bother to vote. They were motivated by the belief that rejecting the recall might prevent the state from ever going through the rancorous process again, he said.

Several Eau Claire voters made the same point Tuesday in interviews with the Leader-Telegram, and Westrate said he expects to see bipartisan legislation tightening the state's recall procedures as a result.

"I think both sides realize that we can't let this happen again," Westrate said. "Hopefully the recall as a tool to replace regularly scheduled elections has been put to bed."

Interpretations vary

Still, that's generally where the consensus ends and the spin begins when it comes to post-election analysis.

Local Democrats pointed more toward the power of money, college students being out of school and the compressed election cycle to explain what to them was a terribly disappointing outcome, while pleased Republicans gravitated toward reasons such as the majority of voters siding with Walker's reforms and believing the state is heading in the right direction.

"I think it ultimately came down to time and money," said Bob Salt, chairman of the Dunn County Democratic Party. "Barrett had four weeks and $4 million to get his message out, and the governor had 15 months and $30.5 million to tell people why his plan was working."

Not only could Democrats not match the GOP's robocalls and paid staffers, Salt said, but Barrett faced another seemingly insurmountable challenge: Most voters had made up their minds before he even entered the race.

Westrate maintained that voters sent a message they support Walker on the issues that launched the recall in the first place — balancing the budget in large part by cutting benefits and ending collective bargaining for most public workers. He suggested Democrats and unions never acknowledged the inequality of the weak economy forcing private sector workers to endure pay and benefit cuts while public sector workers generally continued to get raises.

"It is unreasonable for public sector workers, after going through the worst recession since the Great Depression, to expect that it won't affect them except for not getting even bigger raises," Westrate said.

Frank cautioned observers to avoid overanalyzing election results that likely can be explained mostly by a nearly universal political truth: Incumbents almost always win re-election.
"It's usually theirs to win if they run a decent campaign," Frank said, noting that incumbents beat challengers more than 90 percent of the time.

Future indicator?

For that reason, he advised would-be pundits to avoid jumping to the conclusion that Tuesday's recall results — including wins by Lt. Gov. Rebecca Kleefisch; two of three GOP state senators, including Terry Moulton of the town of Seymour; and another Republican seeking an open Senate seat — mean Republican presidential candidate Mitt Romney will defeat President Barack Obama in Wisconsin in November.

Not only is there no anti-recall factor, but the incumbent factor is reversed, which helps to explain why Tuesday's exit polls showed Obama leading Romney by seven percentage points in Wisconsin and even getting the support of 17 percent of Walker voters.

"Wisconsin is a swing state. We don't knee-jerk either way, and that's why we get what appears to be an anomalous result," Frank said. "We support the people who we think are going to do the best job. This is a huge compliment to Wisconsin voters."

It also explains why Wisconsin, as one of only about nine such purple states, is likely to be a major political battleground again this fall.

"It means we're going to see a lot of ads," Frank said.

Alec Kirby, an associate professor of history and government at UW-Stout in Menomonie, agreed that Tuesday's win isn't necessarily a harbinger of another Republican wave in fall.

"Five months is an eternity when it comes to elections," he said, noting national elections tend to focus more on national issues and no GOP presidential candidate has carried Wisconsin since Ronald Reagan in 1984.

Yet, while past performance isn't a guarantee of future results at the polls, success does provide a psychological boost and can re-energize volunteers who otherwise might be suffering from election fatigue, Westrate said.

"It's so much easier to get people revved up after a victory," he said.

One lesson Smith hopes state Democratic leaders take from the recall outcome is that they need to focus more on getting their message to voters in rural parts of the state. Barrett won the state's two most urban counties — Milwaukee and Dane — by more than 200,000 votes but lost the rest by nearly twice that margin.

"The Democratic leadership always seems to base success on Milwaukee and Dane counties, but there are 70 other counties in this state," Smith said.

Balance of power
Though the Democrats were unable to win the big prize — the governor's office — in the recall, Smith said he was pleased that Democrat John Lehman's apparent upset win over Sen. Van Wanggaard, R-Racine, gave Democrats a nice consolation prize: a 17-16 majority in the Senate.

"That's huge," said Smith, of the town of Brunswick, who plans to challenge Rep. Warren Petryk, R-town of Pleasant Valley, this fall in the 93rd Assembly District. "One of the great problems we have right now is that Republicans have chosen to make compromise a dirty word, and this will bring back balance of power and force them to come back to the table to compromise."

Walker also has been promising to reach out to Democrats — even scheduling a beer and brats gathering for Tuesday to promote more collegiality — since his recall victory.

However, Frank and Kirby pointed out that the shared power arrangement is only assured through this fall's elections — a period in which the Legislature isn't even scheduled to be in session — and then Republicans will have a chance to regain total control.

"The Democrats were hoping for a tsunami," Kirby said, "and all they got was a gentle rain."

Lindquist can be reached at 715-833-9209, 800-236-7077 or eric.lindquist@ecpc.com.