

## Linda Chavez: GOP has to explain itself better

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The vote in Wisconsin to limit public-employee bargaining rights is a turning point in American politics. On Wednesday, Republican state senators passed a stripped-down version of pending legislation to limit collective bargaining without a single Democrat present in the chamber. Democrats may challenge the vote in court, but for now, it looks like a huge defeat for public-employee unions.

Did Wisconsin Republicans overreach? It's too early to tell, but polls are not going in their favor right now. A New York Times/CBS poll found that 60 percent of Americans oppose weakening public employees' bargaining rights, while Rasmussen reports that 52 of Wisconsin voters oppose such efforts.

Nonetheless, public-employee unions are not popular with the public - they're not even popular with private-sector union members. Rasmussen, for example, found that 44 percent of Wisconsin voters in private-sector union households think that public-employee unions have too much power.

The Wisconsin bill does not - as critics claim - take away collective bargaining rights, but it does limit them. The bill requires public employees to vote on union representation every year and to pay their dues directly to the union rather than having them deducted by the state employer. It also restricts certain public-employee unions from bargaining over benefits and other nonwage issues, and it limits pay increases from exceeding changes in the consumer price index.

If Republicans are going to win over the public, they will have to better explain their position. First, Republicans should emphasize choice. Individuals should have the right to choose union representation - but in many instances, unions are a bigger impediment to choice than employers are.

The Wisconsin bill would put the issue of representation to state employees on a yearly basis, which may be too frequent. But shouldn't employees have the right to vote on the issue at some point in their careers?



Once a union has been certified to represent the employees, future workers are excluded from ever deciding whether they still want union representation unless they win a decertification election. And the rules to decertify the union are stacked against employees who want change. They can occur only during limited windows in the union contract and, in most instances, require at least 30 percent of workers to sign a petition asking for a decertification election, which can be intimidating in a union shop.

If Republicans want to win public opinion on this issue, they should make the case for periodic elections in the workplace, not a single election that may have occurred years or even decades before current employees joined the work force.

Second, Republicans should question why anyone should be forced to join - or pay dues to - an organization against his or her will. Unions should be voluntary organizations whose members willingly pay dues because they believe the organization provides a service they support. But in most places (except the 22 so-called right-to-work states), once the union wins the right to represent workers, individuals who work in a job covered by a union contract must pay dues.

Although Supreme Court rulings have given workers the right to ask for a portion of their dues back if the union is using the money to support political or other activity not related to collective bargaining, the burden is on individuals to fight for their money. The Wisconsin bill levels the playing field by requiring public-employee unions to collect their dues directly from members.

Why should unions be different from other organizations? You're free to join the AARP, AAA or the ACLU, but those groups have to solicit your membership, and you'll pay dues only so long as you believe you're getting your money's worth.

Unions argue that if dues weren't mandatory, many workers would become freeloaders benefiting from the union's activities on their behalf while not paying the freight. But the real issue is accountability. Unions aren't accountable to their members if dues are mandatory as a condition of employment.

If Republicans don't do a better job educating the public about these issues, they may win the legislative battle but will lose at the poll that matters most: Election Day.

*Linda Chavez writes for Creators Syndicate.*

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