

# Wisconsin Republicans take a shot at their foot

The Wisconsin GOP's recent lame-duck power play in the face of their decisive electoral defeat was not the death of democracy. But it was bad enough: petty, vindictive, and self-destructive. It was, as the saying goes, worse than a crime. It was a blunder. And for what?

In its arrogant insularity, the Wisconsin GOP has established itself as a national symbol of win-at-all-costs, norms-be-damned politics. Cut through the overwrought rhetoric and what did the Republican legislators actually accomplish? Not really a whole lot; certainly not enough to justify the political damage they've inflicted on themselves. They have managed to energize the progressive base, expose themselves as sore losers, and undermine crucial democratic norms. And in return ... they got extraordinarily little.

Let's break it down. Meeting through the night, legislators voted to restrict early voting, an unsubtle response to the massive turnout in the Democratic strongholds of Dane and Milwaukee Counties that helped Democrats sweep the statewide ballot on November 6. But the attack on early voting will likely be struck down by the courts. Indeed, their similar effort in 2016 was ruled unconstitutional.

They also blocked incoming Democratic Governor Tony Evers from withdrawing the state from a lawsuit against Obamacare. But whether Wisconsin is listed on the suit will have no effect at all on the pending litigation, which could threaten guaranteed coverage of preexisting conditions. The GOP then proceeded to dig itself a deeper hole by defeating legislation designed to provide some protection for people with preexisting conditions—should the lawsuit succeed—despite outgoing Republican Governor Scott Walker's repeated promises to enact such a measure. That issue contributed mightily to the party's losses in November, and the legislature's action ensures that health care will remain a liability for the GOP going into 2020.

More substantively, GOP legislators limited the new governor's ability to seek waivers from federal programs and codified Walker's new work requirements for Medicaid recipients. They also sharply limited the role of the newly elected Democratic attorney general, Josh Kaul, by giving the legislature control over lawsuits involving the state and by giving legislators the authority to hire private attorneys to defend state laws. The rest? A grab bag of legislative fixes, bureaucratic rules, and power shifts, some good, some odd, but all mostly small bore.

Truth be told, Republicans can mount a case for all of this, starting with precedent. Eight years ago, Democrats under former Governor Jim Doyle tried to use a lame-duck session to ratify state-employee union contracts that would have greatly limited Walker's flexibility. Republicans remember how the Democrats, desperate for a win, brought back a disgraced state representative named Jeff Wood to vote on the contracts. Wood was actually still serving a jail term for his repeated drunk-driving arrests and used his work-release privileges to cast a crucial vote. (The measure ultimately failed in the state Senate.)

Republicans could also argue that they were merely affirming the powers of a co-equal branch of government (something their counterparts in Washington might wish to emulate.) Their case, however, is weakened by their lack of concern for excessive executive powers prior to the November 6 election. Their big majorities in both legislative chambers may dissolve under the impact of another successful lawsuit. Wisconsin GOP's gerrymandering of the legislature has been so glaring that it offended judges all away up to the Supreme Corps and was turned back on a technicality. A corrected version is likely to be successful and the GOP in Wisconsin will end up with nothing but bad karma.

For the moment, the Trumpist style of smash-mouth, red-versus-blue, play-to-your-base politics is ascendant. What's happening now in Wisconsin, and similar moves in Michigan, will only escalate the cycle of hyper-partisanship. Polarization is likely to get worse before it gets better. And Wisconsin's GOP is opting for the sticky end of the stick.

I started with a saying and I'll end with another: "An eye for an eye will leave the whole world blind." It has to stop somewhere. I'd love for it to be in Wisconsin.

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## Yellow Vest's

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Of the \$39 billion that the French government is expected to raise this year from the fuel tax, less than a fourth is earmarked for measures that could help people of modest means transition to less-polluting transportation, said Daniel M. Kammen, a professor at the University of California at Berkeley

who specializes in energy policy. Much more of the fuel tax proceeds, Mr. Kammen said, could be used to lower the prices of electric vehicles, including taxis, to help make them more affordable for commuters in areas without public transportation. Or they could be used to develop more charging stations or subsidize big batteries to enable taxis to do long trips. "So while President Macron has highlighted the need for funds to invest in clean energy, that is not actually what was planned," Mr. Kammen said who made news last year when he resigned from Trump's Science Advisor panel over Trump's racism.

The violent blowback by the Yellow Vest movement — named for the roadside vest adopted by the protesters that signals drivers in despair — exposed several failures. Politically, the backlash came from those who could least afford to give up their cars — small-town and suburban residents priced out of big cities and unhappy with Mr. Macron on a host of other issues already. It did not help that Mr. Macron had **lowered taxes on the rich** in one of his earliest tax code changes. "This situation illustrates how equity and fairness considerations have to be built into the design of such policies," Alden Meyer, policy director at the Union of Concerned Scientists, said by email from the United Nations climate talks.

In 2017, Mexicans took to the streets to express outrage at fuel tax increases. During the recent US midterm elections, residents of Washington state again rejected a ballot measure aimed at introducing a carbon fee. Germany and Ireland recently backed away from carbon tax expansions. Australia's carbon tax was repealed after only two years following a sustained opposition campaign. California's Proposition 6 failed. It sought to repeal last year's decision to raise fuel taxes and vehicle fees to pay for roughly \$5 billion a year in highway and road improvements and transit programs. Other places have shown that it can be done. A carbon tax introduced in British Columbia in 2008 faced initial opposition, but smart investment of tax revenue — including an annual Climate Action Tax Credit for every citizen — and a robust communications strategy have since won it broad support. People need access to affordable low-carbon options if a carbon price is to be effective, which underscores the need for adequate investment in innovation and infrastructure, such as public transit or electric vehicle charging stations.

What France's experience has made clear is that fuel taxes work best as part of a more comprehensive plan that tries to offset the disproportionate pain felt by lower-income workers who can least afford the changes. Mr. Picard, the pastry chef, for instance, earns about \$1,450 a month, after payroll taxes. For him, the planned tax increase of 6 or 7 cents per liter of gas "is enormous," he said. "Imagine how violent this tax is for those people who earn less than me and who are not conscious of environmental needs," added Mr. Picard, who lives in Woincourt, a village of 500 people. These struggles are unfamiliar to Mr. Macron, a millionaire and former investment banker, but many who study climate change goals sympathize with the Yellow Vests and support making relief part of the package.

The gilets jaunes movement reminds us that we still have much to learn about how to craft climate policies that are both environmentally ambitious and politically durable. We would do well to heed this insight: time is not on our side, and we cannot afford more setbacks.

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