

Poll shows that Ohioans see SB 5 as egregious overreach

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By Joe Hallett

Foolhardy as it is to hold the funeral before there is a corpse, it's at least prudent to begin making arrangements for the burial of Ohio Senate Bill 5.

If the results of last week's Quinnipiac University poll are accurate — and they typically are — Ohio voters are poised to give the law an abbreviated life, rendering it to the graveyard of political overreach.

By a 25 percentage-point margin, Ohioans are turning thumbs down on State Issue 2, a result which would repeal Senate Bill 5. The new law's impending death on Nov. 8 is bittersweet: to be mourned for the needed public-employee collective-bargaining reforms that would be lost and to be celebrated for the repudiation of the mean-spirited union-busting measure it became.

At this juncture, only a massive infusion of cash for late-inning TV ads could give Issue 2 a fighting chance of winning approval, and there was no evidence late last week that Republican donors were willing to throw good money after bad.

From the outset, Senate Bill 5 was botched. Eager to assert the GOP's total control of state government, Senate Republicans rolled out the bill less than a month after Gov. John Kasich's Jan. 10 inauguration.

The Senate-passed version included needed reforms, a number of them consistently shown by Quinnipiac polls to be popular with Ohioans: requiring public employees to contribute more for their health insurance and pensions; eliminating automatic pay increases based on longevity and implementing a performance-based system, rather than just seniority, for determining pay and layoffs.

And while many Ohioans might agree that public-employee unions had grown too strong and fat, Senate Bill 5 took away any semblance of bargaining power for unions in their dealings with government employers. Strikes were banned, as was binding arbitration for police and firefighters. In the event of an impasse in negotiations, new "management rights" gave the government body authority to implement its own last offer, with no recourse for the unions.

Even though the GOP controlled 23 of the 33 seats in the Senate, the bill barely passed, 17-16. That outcome should have signaled that it needed to be moderated.

But House Republicans did exactly the opposite by largely diminishing the employee unions' funding mechanism. At that point, Senate Bill 5 became a threat to the survival of the unions and portended to financially punish their political beneficiary, the Ohio Democratic Party.

Dale Butland, a Columbus-based Democratic consultant, gave voice to what his party perceived as the GOP's true motivation: "The long-term fundamental goal was to defund the Democratic Party and ensure one-party rule in this state."

When the unions and Democrats collected more than 1 million signatures for a referendum to repeal Senate Bill 5, the Republicans had an uh-oh moment.

"Apparently, everybody in Ohio knows a cop or a teacher," said Peter Brown, assistant director of the Quinnipiac University Polling Institute.

Meetings involving representatives of the governor and legislature with union leaders failed to yield a compromise to keep the repeal off the ballot. The ensuing all-out war has cost both sides untold millions, divided Ohioans and diminished the already-low approval ratings for Kasich, who unwisely was made the face of the "yes on Issue 2" campaign.

It shouldn't have come to this. With big enough majorities in both legislative houses to ultimately impose their will, Republicans had the leverage to get many of the concessions they rightly say are crucial for the sustainability of public services. Giving union leaders upfront input into Senate Bill 5 might have kept it off the ballot.

Ohio voters appear ready once again to make a statement politicians from both parties never seem to hear, especially when their party controls everything. The voters' message: "We want measured and fair public policy and won't tolerate one party or the other jamming its agenda down our throats."

That lesson will survive Senate Bill 5. Will it be heeded?

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