

Bill Kaplan: Once upon a time Vos stood with McCain

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Once upon a time Wisconsin GOP Assembly Speaker Robin Vos stood with Republican presidential candidate Senator John McCain (Arizona). Vos served on the 2008 Wisconsin Steering Committee for McCain's campaign. Moreover, there is a remarkable photograph of an awed Vos shaking McCain's hand at a campaign event at Bucyrus International in South Milwaukee (Journal Times).

McCain had a well-deserved reputation as a nonpartisan reformer and stalwart defender of democracy. A war hero, McCain was unafraid of the high and mighty. Importantly, he led on campaign finance reform with Wisconsin Democratic Senator Russ Feingold. Moreover, McCain was a forceful critic of gerrymandering, especially in Wisconsin.

In 2017, McCain posted: "Gerrymandering increases partisanship, paralyzes governance & weakens trust in democracy. SCOTUS should end this practice in #Gill v. Whitford." Many prominent Republicans, including presidential candidate Senator Bob Dole (Kansas), Governor John Kasich (Ohio) and Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger (California), joined McCain in urging the U.S. Supreme Court to end partisan gerrymandering in Wisconsin. Schwarzenegger said: "It's a rigged system. You have situations where you get 50 percent of the vote but only 35 percent of the seats. That is corrupt. That is incorrect. It's unfair to the people" (NYT).

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(However), "the U.S. Supreme Court saved Wisconsin's misbegotten (state legislature) maps when it ruled that federal courts have no power to intervene"

(Brennan Center for Justice). Then the conservative-led Wisconsin Supreme Court ratified the gerrymandered status quo. But now the Wisconsin Supreme Court has a liberal-moderate majority with the blowout election of Judge Janet Protasiewicz. She, like the aforementioned Republicans, called the election maps “rigged.” Akin to saying the sun rises and sets.

Polls and referendums show most Wisconsinites oppose gerrymandering. Protasiewicz’s double-digit victory means change is coming. She carried 27 counties, including rural counties won by Trump and the GOP. She was victorious in “12 Republican-held districts in the state Assembly, and six in the state Senate” (NYT). If Protasiewicz considers gerrymandered maps it “would probably mean that the boundaries will be redrawn, weakening the disproportionate power Republicans have wielded in the state legislature for years. So they’re using that disproportionate power in consideration of impeachment and removal” (Washington Post).

Vos, the longest serving speaker in Wisconsin history, has raised the threat of impeachment to try to blackmail Protasiewicz to recuse herself from any gerrymandering cases. But Vos is having second thoughts because of the strong negative political fallout. GOP Assembly members are avoiding press microphones and inquiries. Moreover, GOP state Representative Scott Johnson said: “The people spoke. I did not vote for ‘candidate’ Protasiewicz, and I certainly do not agree with Justice Protasiewicz... . However, I will NOT vote in favor of impeachment.” Vos then steamrolled the GOP-led Assembly to pass a partisan “overhaul of Wisconsin redistricting aimed at short-circuiting court challenges” (MJS). Meanwhile, Vos continues to pursue impeachment while feigning openness to change.

Vos once stood with McCain. But he does not stand tall like McCain. Does Vos want to go down in history as a political hack?

-Kaplan wrote a guest column from Washington, D.C., for the Wisconsin State Journal from 1995 - 2009.