

September 2022

## ***GOP Can No Longer Claim to Be the Party of Small Government and Local Control***

One of the bedrock principles of governance in Wisconsin has always been “local control”. In fact, local control is enshrined in Article XI of our state constitution: “Cities and villages organized pursuant to state law may determine their local affairs and government...” For many decades, Republicans have successfully branded themselves “the party of local control”. They love to throw around the phrase attributed to Thomas Jefferson that “the government closest to the people serves the people best”. It may have generally been true at one time that Republican politicians tended to defer to local governments on local issues. However, that is absolutely not the case today, especially here in Wisconsin, and it is high time that we explode the myth of the “small government/local control Republican”.

“Local control” was a frequent target of the Wisconsin Legislature’s Republican majority during the Scott Walker years. Republicans in Madison moved at an alarming rate to place mandates on and strip decision-making power from local authorities. From ending residency requirements for local government employees to restricting important protections for tenants; from prohibiting local family leave ordinances to barring municipalities from banning plastic grocery bags and the sale of certain sized sodas; from stripping certain authority and salary from the Milwaukee County Board of Supervisors to mandating changes to the way Racine Unified School Board members are elected; almost no function of local government has been safe. The nonpartisan Legislative Fiscal Bureau compiled a list of nearly 200 “unfunded mandates and items that would restrict local control” that were enacted by the Republican-controlled Legislature while Scott Walker was Governor, many of them aimed specifically at the state’s largest (and generally Democratic-voting) cities; the only thing that has kept that list from growing over the last several years has been Tony Evers in the Governor’s mansion. At the same time, these same Republican legislators have been quick to cry “tyranny” anytime the federal government enacts new mandates on states, especially when there is a Democrat in the White House. The hypocrisy is staggering.

The “We know better than you” philosophy of governing by the Republican majority must be kept in check. Voters consistently say that they trust local officials more than their state or federal representatives. We in the State Legislature should see our relationship with local governments as a collaborative

partnership, rather than a top-down dictatorship, all working together to solve the issues facing our communities and our state. Republicans talk a good game about local control, but their votes reflect a big government philosophy.