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My Party Should Respect Secret Union Ballots

By GEORGE MCGOVERN
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As a congressman, senator and one-time Democratic nominee for the presidency, I've participated in my share of vigorous public debates over issues of great consequence. And the public has been free to accept or reject the decisions I made when they walked into a ballot booth, drew the curtain and cast their vote. I didn't always win, but I always respected the process.

Voting is an immense privilege.

That is why I am concerned about a new development that could deny this freedom to many Americans. As a longtime friend of labor unions, I must raise my voice against pending legislation I see as a disturbing and undemocratic overreach not in the interest of either management or labor.

The legislation is called the Employee Free Choice Act, and I am sad to say it runs counter to ideals that were once at the core of the labor movement. Instead of providing a voice for the unheard, EFCA risks silencing those who would speak.

The key provision of EFCA is a change in the mechanism by which unions are formed and recognized. Instead of a private election with a secret ballot overseen by an impartial federal board, union organizers would simply need to gather signatures from more than 50% of the employees in a workplace or bargaining unit, a system known as "card-check." There are many documented cases where workers have been pressured, harassed, tricked and intimidated into signing cards that have led to mandatory payment of dues.

Under EFCA, workers could lose the freedom to express their will in private, the right to make a decision without anyone peering over their shoulder, free from fear of reprisal.

There's no question that unions have done much good for this country. Their tenacious efforts have benefited millions of workers and helped build a strong middle class. They gave workers a new voice and pushed for laws that protect individuals from unfair treatment. They have been a friend to the Democratic Party, and so I oppose this legislation respectfully and with care.

To my friends supporting EFCA I say this: We cannot be a party that strips working Americans of the right to a secret-ballot election. We are the party that has always defended the rights of the working class. To fail to ensure the right to vote free of

intimidation and coercion from all sides would be a betrayal of what we have always championed.

Some of the most respected Democratic members of Congress -- including Reps. Marcy Kaptur of Ohio, George Miller and Pete Stark of California, and Barney Frank of Massachusetts -- have advised that workers in developing countries such as Mexico insist on the secret ballot when voting as to whether or not their workplaces should have a union. We should have no less for employees in our country.

I worry that there has been too little discussion about EFCA's true ramifications, and I think much of the congressional support is based on a desire to give our friends among union leaders what they want. But part of being a good steward of democracy means telling our friends "no" when they press for a course that in the long run may weaken labor and disrupt a tried and trusted method for conducting honest elections.

While it is never pleasant to stand against one's party or one's friends, there are times when such actions are necessary -- as with my early and lonely opposition to the Vietnam War. I hope some of my friends in Congress will re-evaluate their support for this legislation. Because as Americans, we should strive to ensure that all of us enjoy the freedom of expression and freedom from fear that is our ideal and our right.

Mr. McGovern is a former senator from South Dakota and the 1972 Democratic presidential candidate.