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'Madness Abounds' as Fake Candidates Confuse Wisconsin Recalls

By TIM JONES

Wisconsin voters will choose among real and fake Democrats this week to challenge six Republican senators in recall elections that may derail the agenda of Governor Scott Walker.

The primaries are the opening skirmish in a state at political war. The six districts in tomorrow's races have Republicans running as Democrats, hoping to win the nomination and effectively render the Aug. 9 recall votes meaningless.

At a time when politics usually takes a break, voters will select candidates to run against Republicans who supported Walker's efforts to curb collective-bargaining rights for most public employees. On July 19, there will be two primaries and a full-fledged recall aimed at Democratic senators who fled the state in February in hopes of blocking the measure, which touched off weeks of protests across the nation.

"It feels like madness abounds in our state, like Wisconsin is 65,000 square miles surrounded by sanity," said Mike McCabe, executive director of the Wisconsin Democracy Campaign, a nonprofit that advocates openness in government.

"We're just living in a really weird time," McCabe added in a telephone interview from Madison, the capital.

State election law allows open primaries, which means that voters can participate regardless of partisan affiliation. It also allows members of one party to enter another's primary with what McCabe called "fake candidacies."

"There's nothing illegal about it," he said.

STEP RIGHT UP

The cross-party candidates have imparted a sideshow element to a fight that is unprecedented and carries clear implications for Wisconsin's governance. The August recalls may tip the balance of the Republican-controlled Senate to the Democrats, who need a net gain of three seats to control the chamber and be able to block Walker's legislative agenda.

The state's nine legislative recall elections compare with a total of 20 across the nation since 1913, according to Joshua Spivak, a senior fellow at the Hugh L. Carey Institute for Government Reform at Wagner College in New York. Wisconsin has had two.

"I'm sort of happy about this because this shows people that politics is about things that affect people's lives," said Mordechai Lee, a professor of government affairs at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. "On the other hand, I'm sad for Wisconsin because this is all the wrong kind of politics."

INTO THE COURTS

Walker, 43, was elected in November and used Republican legislative majorities to push curbs on collective-bargaining rights. The action triggered weeks of protests inside and outside the Capitol in Madison. He signed the bill March 11, and the state Supreme Court overruled a lower court decision June 15 that had blocked the measure.

The bill became the defining issue in the April 5 state Supreme Court race between Justice David T. Prosser Jr. and challenger JoAnne Kloppenburg. Prosser, who had indicated he would uphold the law, won by about 7,300 votes.

While Prosser and Kloppenburg spent a combined \$757,542, outside interests spent far more to influence the outcome. The Greater Wisconsin Committee spent almost \$1.7 million in support of Kloppenburg. Wisconsin Manufacturers & Commerce, Citizens for a Strong America, Club for Growth Wisconsin and the Tea Party Express spent a combined \$2.65 million on Prosser's behalf. The groups paid for television ads and other forms of campaign support.

CLEAN-CUT, CUTTING EDGE

Noncandidate groups set a state record for television spending, \$3.6 million, according to the Brennan Center for Justice at New York University.

"We've gone from clean-cut to really being on the cutting edge of the new form of American politics — battle to the death, win at any cost," Lee said in a telephone interview from his office in Milwaukee.

If any recalls succeed, that will encourage more, McCabe predicted, including one that has been started against Walker, who cannot be ousted until he has been in office a year.

"We could more or less have a permanent election season continuing through 2012," McCabe said. "It almost becomes a foregone conclusion about recalling the governor."

—Editors: Stephen Merelman, Mark Schoifet