

# Campaigns & Elections

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## The Recall Boom

*From Florida to California, the recall is quickly becoming  
the weapon of choice for a restless electorate*

by JOSHUA SPIVAK

For the political world, 2011 will be known as the year the recall broke out. After more than a century in which just 20 state legislators across the country faced a recall vote, the past year has already seen nearly half that number. That includes a slew of high profile, multi-million dollar recall contests in Wisconsin in which two state senators were booted from office.

Politicians and political pros are taking notice of the power of the “grand bounce,” which shows no signs of slowing. The success of the recall in localities across the nation this year has the use of the device growing exponentially heading into 2012.

While recall efforts in Wisconsin were the only ones to gain any real national attention in recent months, the recall worked in cities and counties from Florida to California in 2011. The mayor of Miami-Dade County was kicked out of office, representing the largest locality to ever bounce an official. The city of Bell, California booted four scandal-plagued members of its city council. And while the mayor of Omaha barely survived a recall attempt earlier this year, voters in Dodge, Nebraska removed half of the city’s school board members via recall.

Other efforts are in the works in Arizona, Michigan and Wisconsin. Organized labor and progressive activists are already gearing up for a crack at Wisconsin’s Republican Gov. Scott Walker next year. In Michigan, recall petitions have started to circulate for a state senator and the state’s attorney general. And in Arizona, state Senate President Russell Pearce (R) is in court challenging the validity of petition signatures gathered by his opposition in an effort to keep a recall attempt off the ballot. That recall will probably take place in November.

The recall is nothing new, and everyone in politics has been aware of its power since California Governor Gray Davis (D) was kicked out back in 2003. Its history actually dates all the way back to America’s founding. The exclusion of the recall from the U.S. Constitution was hotly debated during ratification, and it has been available against legislators in some states since 1908. Most of its history, however, has taken place in the shadows.

The days of recall scarcity, though, are clearly over. The recall has become an acceptable method for political battle and its explosive growth has elicited criticism from nervous elected officials and by some organizations representing them.

Elected officials fault a toxic political environment, the toll of the recession and an angry electorate for the increased use of the recall. All plausible explanations, but the arguments ignore the fact that past instances of these very same problems never resulted in a massive use of the recall.

So what it explains its growth? The military has a great saying: “Amateurs talk strategy. Professionals talk logistics.”

Pundits might love to cite voter anger, but they fail to realize that of those 20 state legislative recalls prior to 2011, 13 of them have taken place since 1983.

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