

Recall fever: As Scott Walker fights to keep his post, recall elections spread across U.S.

by ASHLEY PORTERO

It's uncommon for a gubernatorial or state legislative election to make national headlines. But the upcoming recall election of divisive Wisconsin Gov. Scott Walker, who could be booted less than two years into the job, has been closely tracked by the media and voters, who may be watching the results of the June 5 recall election with a looming thought on their mind — could that happen where I live?

The ability to remove an unpopular politician from office, driven by the sheer will of unhappy constituents, is a power that could certainly inspire exasperated citizens. However, that power is not universal. Only 18 U.S. states allow for the recall of state officials, while one other, Illinois, solely permits the recall of a governor (a recent development inspired by the fall of former Gov. Rod Blagojevich as the result of a corruption scandal.)

Wisconsin's recall will pit Walker, a Republican, against Democratic Milwaukee Mayor Tom Barrett, whom Walker defeated in the state's 2010 gubernatorial election. Walker, a Tea Party favorite, campaigned on a deeply conservative platform pledging to, among other things, cut collective bargaining rights for certain state employees in order to pay for a series of tax cuts. That provoked the ire of Democrats and public sector workers, who say the new governor penalized them in order to preserve tax breaks for the wealthiest Wisconsinites.

Walker has plenty of opponents. The organizers behind the recall effort, United Wisconsin, collected almost 2 million signatures in support of his recall in less than two months, more than three times the 540,000 needed. But, according to the latest available polling, he still has a seven-point lead over Barrett.

Even as Walker has become a figure widely reviled on the left, he has history on his side — at least when it comes to the success of gubernatorial recalls. Recall attempts are far more common in local jurisdictions (at least 29 states have the power to recall local officials, according to the National Conference on State Legislatures); on the state level, only two governors have been successfully recalled: Lynn Frazier of North Dakota, in 1921, and Gray Davis of California, in 2003.

Hostility To Walker Is Substantial

Still, according to those who study the recall process, Walker shouldn't get too comfortable. While he enjoys considerable support from conservative and Tea Party-affiliated Republicans, the rate at which his opponents were able to collect recall signatures — 300,000 in the first 12 days alone — shows the hostility plenty of Wisconsin residents feel toward their governor.

“Opponents in Wisconsin managed to collect more than 1 million signatures in less than 60 days. Compare that with Gray Davis, where it took them something like 160 days to collect 1.6 million signatures, of which only about 1.3 million were valid,” said Joshua Spivak, a senior research associate at the Hugh L Carey Institute for Government Reform at Wagner College who runs The Recall Elections Blog.

Spivak said Walker has two major advantages. First, incumbency: he's already the governor. Second, money: his campaign is flush with cash.

"I always thought [Walker's chances] were pretty good. This is probably going to be the most expensive race, after the presidency, in the country," Spivak said.

Because of a state election law allowing the governor to collect unlimited campaign contributions for months to fend off a recall challenger, Walker's campaign raised \$13 million in the first three months of 2012 alone. That brings his total fundraising haul since January 1, 2011 to \$25 million. Barrett's fundraising doesn't remotely compare: he raised about \$750,000 in the first 25 days of his gubernatorial campaign, after entering the race in late March.

Walker's haul doesn't all come from Wisconsinites, though. In fact most of it comes from somewhere else. According to an analysis by the Wisconsin Democracy Campaign, 57 percent of contributions to Walker's campaign — almost \$3 of every \$5 — originated from out-of-state donors. Much of that money has been donated by well-known GOP donors (including casino magnate Sheldon Adelson, who single-handedly kept Newt Gingrich's super PAC alive) and Republican-leaning special interest groups.

On Local Level, Recalls Generally Successful

All in all, as the June 5 election inches closer, many expect that Walker will ultimately keep his seat. While some say that could leave a sour taste in the mouth of those who champion recall elections, Spivak said that, even if Walker loses, it still serves as a reminder to millions of Americans that they have the power to effect real change.

"They may not like it when it's a guy they support, but [recalls] are generally successful."

In fact, 2011 was the year of the recall election; there were at least 150 recall attempts across the nation on the state and local level, 75 of which were successful.

In Wisconsin alone, nine state senators were recalled after the fallout from last year's collective bargaining debacle. Two of those senators were successfully ousted. In Arizona, Republican Senate President Russell Pearce, the author of the state's controversial immigration law, was recalled, while Miami-Dade County Mayor Carlos Alvarez was booted by his Florida constituents.

This may only be the beginning. As technology makes the recall process significantly easier, with the ability to organize efforts online and spread the word via Internet petitions, Spivak expects more Americans will be inspired to launch recall campaigns against elected officials they believe should not hold office.

"Whenever there's a recall, it makes people, even those who might be across the country, realize, 'Hey, I can vote this guy out. I can do something about this,' " he said.