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Power to the people? Remembering the year in recalls

Recalls were once again one of the biggest stories of the year

By JOSHUA SPIVAK

After recalls suddenly grabbed hold of the nation's attention in 2012, anyone could have been excused for thinking they might have gone back to being little used, frequently ignored weapons this year. But 2013 proved such expectations wrong. Despite a sharp drop in their total number, recall elections once again managed to place themselves on centerstage in American politics.

Unlike in Wisconsin in 2012, the most prominent recalls of 2013 did not appear to be stark Democrat versus Republican fights. Instead, it was a hot button political issue — the fight over gun control — that allowed recalls to push their way into the spotlight.

Colorado, for instance, saw some of its most expensive state legislative elections in history: Two Democratic state senators — including the State Senate president — were kicked out and a third resigned, over the state's new gun control laws.

From a political standpoint, the fights in Colorado were about sending a message. Removing the officials would not have resulted in a change in the gun laws, nor would have removing two officials given Republicans control over the chamber. The practical value was so questionable that the recall was originally opposed by the state party leaders and, in the early going, appeared to be ignored by the NRA, too. While these groups eventually got involved to the tune of hundreds of thousands of dollars, it was local people who pushed the recalls forward. On the other side of the issue, millions of dollars were given to support the pro-gun-control senators, including big contributions by a group heavily financed by New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg.

Colorado may have helped inspire other attempted recalls on both sides of the gun control issue, including attempts against a sheriff in Oregon, an Idaho school board member who promoted arming teachers, and various instances in California. Only one of the other gun-control-centered recalls actually got to the ballot, though — Exeter, a small rural town in Maine, tried to remove four City Council members after they tried to ask the Attorney General to handle concealed gun permits. The town of 6,000 people received heavy press coverage for the attempt, but all four council members easily survived the recall election.

But gun control wasn't the only issue sparking recalls. Officials were thrown out for San Bernardino's bankruptcy, firing city managers and police chiefs, school board votes, and, for three officials in Onaway, Michigan, a decision on where to locate a public stove.

For angry citizens, actually getting a recall on the ballot proved to be a tougher hill to climb this year. While there were close to the same number of attempts this year as last (478 in 2013 versus 509 in 2012), the actual number of recall elections or resignations in the face of a recall dropped to at least 107. In 2012, there were at least 168, and, in 2011, 151.

There are a number of reasons for the drop — by far the most unlikely of which would be that voters actually liked their politicians a little more in 2013. The causes include: A change in a Michigan law that resulted in the state's recalls dropping from 25 to 13; laws in some jurisdictions that prevent recalls from being held against officials until the official has served in their job from two months to one year; administrative and judicial officials throwing up more roadblocks to get recalls on the ballot; and, possibly, a natural drop off in voter attention after a dramatic and exhausting presidential election year.

But once a recall was on the ballot, it more often than not worked. Of those 109 recalls, 73 succeeded (51 removed in a vote and another 22 resigned) — a 68 percent success rate. That kind of success won't go unnoticed, and so in 2014, we can expect the recall will continue to make a mark on the political world. Already, there are at least 25 recalls scheduled for next year, starting on January 2.