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The Republican Party's recall bonanza could backfire — badly

by JOSHUA SPIVAK

One year away from the next presidential election, throwing red meat to the party's base appears to be the focus of the political world, even at the risk of serious long-term blowback. While most of the focus has been on the federal side, Republican state party members are looking for ways to lash back at their poor showing in 2018.

In the last month, we have seen an unprecedented push by state-level Republicans to use the recall as a way to regain power in formerly red states that have or are rapidly moving to the Democratic column. So far, threats have been made against the Democratic Governors of Colorado, Oregon, New Jersey, Nevada and California, the Republican Governor of Alaska, as well as numerous Democratic state legislators.

What's most unusual about this latest push is that the GOP party leadership has taken a central role in the recall efforts in Colorado, Oregon and Nevada. In the few state level recalls that have taken place in US history, party leaders generally took a hands-off approach to recalls, especially in the early going. There is good reason for their hesitancy. Making a recall a clear partisan issue can doom it and potential lead to longer term problems for the party in the state.

But we've seen a very different dynamic this time around. Last year, the Nevada Lieutenant Governor's law firm spearheaded failed efforts to recall three Senators last year. Congressman Ken Buck used his election campaign for Colorado GOP Party Chairman to specifically call for recalls against the Governor and the numerous state legislators—so far eight have been targeted. And Oregon's has seen the GOP State Chairman serve as lead petitioner in the efforts to recall Governor Kate Brown.

Having the institutional party get behind the recall has its obvious advantages. Most notably, the party could overcome the most important hurdle—getting enough signatures. For example, to put Colorado Governor Jared Polis on the ballot would 631,226 signatures in 60 days. As a comparison, only once in US history has a recall gotten to the ballot with that many signatures required to be collected: California Governor Gray Davis, a state that was six times the size and allotted 100 more days to gather the signatures.

And the party can see a reason to make an attempt. Recalls work. From 2011-2018, which saw at least 861 recall votes nationwide, over 60 percent of the officials lost the election, and another 167 resigned. Almost all of those recalls were on the local level. On the state-level, since 1913, there have been 45 recall elections—three governors (a fourth was impeached before the vote,) a lieutenant governor, an attorney general and a commissioner of Agriculture and 39 state legislators. That is not a lot for over a century, but 29 of them have taken place in the latest 25 years. Most of the officials, 25 of the 45, were ousted, and that number would be much higher but for the fact that nine of thirteen Senators survived the recall in Wisconsin in 2011 and 2012.

All of this provides an impetus for Republicans to move forward and try and reverse a slide to irrelevance in these formerly red states. But it is worth noting that the value of a recall victory in many instances was temporary. Republicans successfully targeted party-switching independents in the California Assembly in 1995 and Democratic Governor Gray Davis in 2003. But their success was decidedly short-term. Rather than regain a hold in California, the Republicans are now an all but endangered species in the state.

The Wisconsin recalls of 2011 and 2012, backed by the Democrats, did not harm the Republicans in any real way. The Democrats did manage to briefly gain control of the State Senate, but they quickly lost that advantage. Walker managed to win reelection in 2014 and in 2016, the state voted Republican in a presidential election for the first time since 1984. Even though the Democrats have regained the Governorship, they are facing a difficult challenge in 2020. In Colorado in 2013, two Democratic state Senators lost their seats and another resigned rather than face the voters. Both Republican replacements lost their seats in the next election (where the Republicans managed to gain a one Senate seat majority.) But 2018 saw an overwhelming Democratic victory in the state, and the Republicans appear to be facing serious trouble in 2020.

After being on the receiving end of terrible results in 2018, and doing poorly in each of the states in the 2016 presidential elections, these state Republicans do feel the need to throw some red meat to the party faithful and give them hope in a long shot bid to return to power.

The reality is that a recall may be seen by the electorate at large very differently—as a desperate move by sore losers to rerun recent elections, with the idea that the newly angered party base will be more likely to turn out. The fact that each one of the Democratic Governors got almost or more than 50 percent of the vote (as opposed to Gray Davis, who received 47 percent,) suggests that the Republicans may need to take less of comfort in the historic success of the recall.

As 2020 nears, the leadership of the both parties has to navigate a desire for the base to have its primal scream and try to short circuit the other sides' control of government. With their push for recalls, Republicans on the state level have given into their bases desire for immediate change. Based on past examples, the party may come to regret this.

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