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Viewpoint: How to save money on recall elections *Recalls are on the rise, but their costs do not have to be*

By JOSHUA SPIVAK

After years of being a seldom-used electoral curiosity, recalls are now in the spotlight. Although the threat to recall 16 state senators in Wisconsin is getting national attention, there also has been a steady stream of local recalls that have made mayors and city officials wary. From a policy angle, local governments should consider several steps to ensure that recalls remain a viable option but don't become a drain on local coffers.

Despite pundit analysis, recalls are not just in fashion because of the voter anger that grew out of the latest economic crisis. Recalls have become more common over the last three decades. For example, there have been only 20 recall elections of state legislators in U.S. history — with 13 ending in removal. But, 65 percent took place in the past 28 years. Recalls are even more frequent on the local level. In the last two years alone, Miami-Dade County, Fla., became the largest local government to remove an elected official, when 88 percent of voters chose to kick out Mayor Carlos Alvarez in March. Omaha, Neb.'s mayor barely survived a recall in January, as did Akron, Ohio's in June 2009.

Any observer with a grasp of history realizes that these last 28 years have not been a time of unprecedented electoral divisiveness. What has happened is that revolutionary changes in technology — such as easier dissemination of information, better organization of signature-gathering efforts and fundraising— have helped recalls flourish.

All of those facts raise an important issue. It is not the basic question of whether to have a recall; voters like the option, and elected officials have to live with that ever-present threat. The issue is budgetary. Recalls are costly. Omaha spent \$355,000 on its recall; Akron spent close to \$200,000. The cost in Miami-Dade County will be much higher, as it involves two separate elections, one to recall the official and one to replace him.

There are some basic changes that could save money on recall campaigns. One area to look for savings is the signature requirement. Most states require between 15 percent and 25 percent of either the eligible voters or the voter turnout for the last election to recall state-level officials. Local offices frequently have lower requirements. For example, Miami-Dade County requires only 4 percent of total registered voters to sign the petition. Even if the signature requirement is proportionality higher, it is usually tied to voter turnout in the last election. Because many mayors are elected in off-year elections, that total could be quite small. For example in Akron, the recall proponents needed only 3,179 signatures to get on the ballot.

A proposed new recall law in Pennsylvania clearly contemplates the problem, as it suggests a 25 percent requirement for state officials and 35 percent for local ones. Another approach would be to set the requirement based on total registered voters rather than on voter turnout.

A different modification could cut down costs without making a recall harder to get on the ballot: get rid of the two-vote requirement in jurisdictions that have it. California and others

have a replacement vote held concurrently with the recall, but other places, like Miami-Dade County, have two separate elections. For cost savings, those two elections should be combined into one. That change actually would benefit the incumbents, because they would be able to campaign in the recalls as if they were regular elections, with straight-up opponents to compare against. Nevertheless, the cost savings could be considerable.

Voters clearly like the option of pulling what William Howard Taft called the “hair trigger.” Local governments should be cognizant of the cost of recalls, and promote easy ways to minimize costs without depriving the voters of having a reasonable and easy-to-use recall process.

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