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In My Opinion

## A costly way to get rid of politicians

By FRED GRIMM

They came not in droves; their numbers so scanty that each vote cost county taxpayers about \$21.70 a whack.

The turnout, in the second phase of Miami-Dade County's fit of electoral pique, came to 193,703, which was 15,609 fewer voters than had bothered back in the March 15 election that tossed Mayor Carlos Alvarez and, in District 13, Commissioner Natacha Seijas.

After only 17.27 percent of the county's 1.2 million registered voters showed for the recall, an even paltrier 15.9 percent remembered Tuesday's special election to fill the political vacancies. For all the smoke and thunder, Miami-Dade County's electoral revolt has been as lonely as it was angry.

The coming runoff campaign between Julio Robaina and Carlos Gimenez, already marked by ugly robo-calls, will surely get uglier. And further suppress turnout of an election-weary electorate, contemplating a third outing in less than four months. By the June 28 runoff, we may be down to the candidates' immediate families deciding the outcome.

Driving down the turnout does not translate into driving down the cost. The Miami-Dade Elections Department said each of these county-wide outings costs between \$4 million and \$5 million. The estimate for the recall was \$4.2 million. Miami-Dade citizens will have spent more than \$12 million to replace two public officials who would have been up for re-election next year anyway.

It seemed an expensive exercise, particularly for a mayor not accused of criminal corruption. But Joshua Spivak, of the Hugh L. Carey Center for Government Reform at Wagner College, told me Wednesday that recall elections rarely turn on corruption allegations. "What was Gray Davis accused of?" he asked.

California Gov. Gray Davis, recalled from office in 2003, was snagged by a budget crisis in the wake of the dot-com bust and a flap over electricity providers. The recall became an ideological exercise, pushed by a political enemy rich enough to underwrite the petition process. Sounds familiar.

Once a politician finds himself on a recall ballot, said Spivak, who blogs on recall-election law, he's toast.

"Usually, there's a low turnout. Most people who cast a ballot are voting for a negative reason." The Alvarez recall turnout was lousy, but 88 percent of the voting few wanted him gone. "This is how it works," Spivak said. "A small fraction of the voters making big decisions."

Spivak wrote his masters thesis in 1996 on recall elections, picking a quaint subject about a rarely used mechanism. Times changed. He said the nation now finds itself in the midst of what the U.S. Conference of Mayors has termed "recall fever," spreading across cities and several state legislatures, abetted by the creation of professional petition gatherers, Internet communications and a pervasive, bitter ideological divide spawned by a rotten economy.

It may be an expensive exercise, Spivak said. "But apparently voters like it."

Voters may like it, but not in droves.