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History says Pearce has little to worry about from recall effort

By JOSHUA SPIVAK

As the recall threat against Senate President Russell Pearce heats up, Arizona voters may be joining their counterparts in the rest of the country in looking to kick out an elected leader. Activists in Wisconsin are seeking to remove 16 state senators, Miami-Dade County kicked out its mayor and the mayor of Omaha, Neb., just barely survived a recall vote.

However, an examination of recall efforts against legislative leaders in other states could give Pearce some comfort.

First, the use of recalls against elected officials has increased in recent years. The U.S. Conference of Mayors recently released a documentary titled "Recall Fever" highlighting this trend. Most blame the economy or heightened political strife, but in reality, use of the recall has been on the rise for at least three decades. For example, there have only been 20 state legislators who have faced a recall vote since the recall was reintroduced on the state level by Oregon in 1908. Thirteen of those 20 recalls, or 65 percent, have taken place since 1983.

The expansion is in large part due to technological advancements. Historically, recalls have floundered at the basic signature-gathering stage. Now, thanks to the growth of the signature-gathering industry plus the use of the Internet and cell phones to advance fundraising goals and assist in spreading information, getting voters motivated has never been easier.

In the case of Wisconsin, technology has also turned what used to be a simple local issue into a national one, allowing much greater participation from political parties and increased individual fundraising efforts. This development could be particularly dangerous for someone like Pearce, who has taken controversial stands on hot button political issues such as immigration.

Once a recall gets on the ballot, however, there is a good chance of success. Both governors who have faced recalls have been removed, as have 13 of the 20 legislators. Probably the biggest reason for this success rate is that recalls are typically conducted via a special election. Voter turnout is often dramatically lower for special elections, as voters have to be aware that a special election is occurring and care enough to take the time to vote for just one race.

Of course, those most likely to turn out are often highly motivated by frustration and want to remove the elected official. This part is where Pearce benefits by being a legislator in Arizona. State law dictates that recall elections are to be held on the next regular election date after the recall signatures are verified. This is a big help for an incumbent like Pearce as an increased number of voters are likely to show up to the ballot box, rather than just those who want to remove him from office. This has worked to incumbents' advantage before. In the past two recall efforts of state legislators, in 2008 in California and Michigan, both candidates faced a recall vote on primary day. They both survived.

Arizona has a long and colorful history with the recall.

The state's inclusion of a judicial recall provision caused President William Howard Taft to veto its Constitution, resulting in a major campaign issue fight with ex-President Theodore Roosevelt. In 1988, the state was also poised to be the second state to vote to recall a governor. The recall of Evan Meacham was scheduled for May 17, only to be canceled by his impeachment and conviction.

And, one local jurisdiction may have a claim to a recall record. In 1994, Pima County recalled its assessor, Alan Lang. He received only 7.5 percent of the vote, less than Miami-Dade Mayor Carlos Alvarez's 12 percent as one of the worst showings ever in a recall election.

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