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In Arizona, sponsor of immigration law now faces a recall

By MARK LACEY

MESA, Ariz. — It has been a rough year for Russell Pearce, the president of the Arizona Senate, as he has sought to solidify his state's reputation as the nation's incubator for hard-edged conservative policies.

He has seen fellow Republicans defy him and the Republican governor issue a raft of vetoes to keep his agenda in check. Now, so many critics in his suburban district have signed a recall petition that he will have to defend himself in a special election.

"It's time for him to go," said Randy Parraz, a labor organizer from outside Mr. Pearce's district who has been leading the effort to oust him.

On Wednesday, Mr. Parraz, a Democrat, gathered with other members of Citizens for a Better Arizona outside the State Capitol to announce that Maricopa County had validated 8,239 signatures from Mr. Pearce's constituents, more than the 7,756 required to force a recall election.

Mr. Pearce won his previous contests by wide margins, and his political allies dismiss the recall as little more than an annoyance for such a proven campaigner. "The best way to view it is as a gnat on the rump of an elephant," said John Kavanagh, a state representative and Pearce ally.

But those trying to oust Mr. Pearce say he is vulnerable if the right candidate challenges him — preferably, they say, a Republican with ties to the Mormon Church, which counts Mr. Pearce as a member and is influential in his district east of Phoenix.

Even without Mr. Pearce, though, Arizona would remain a bastion of Republicanism, since the party controls all the top statewide offices, both United States Senate seats and both chambers of the Legislature.

Recall supporters have shied away from making it about illegal immigration, although that is Mr. Pearce's signature issue. He was behind the ballot measure that passed in 2004 requiring photo ID to vote and denying state services to illegal immigrants.

Senate Bill 1070, the legislation now tied up in the federal courts that would have police officers question people about their immigration status, was also Mr. Pearce's brainchild.

Recently, he pushed an effort to deny birthright citizenship to the offspring of illegal immigrants, but enough fellow Republicans backed away at the behest of the business community that a frustrated Mr. Pearce found himself without the votes.

Mr. Pearce also was caught up in a controversy over trips and game tickets that he and other politicians received from the Fiesta Bowl, forcing him to amend his financial disclosure reports. The bowl has been found to have misspent money by, among other things, illegally reimbursing employees who made campaign contributions to politicians.

Mr. Pearce's gruff manner, hard-charging style and aversion to compromise are what propelled him to the top of his party. Those same qualities are considered the reason for his growing cadre of critics.

Mr. Pearce did not respond to a request for comment last week, but in recent weeks he has criticized detractors, labeling recall supporters "far-left anarchists," "radical, radical extremists" and a "profit-over-patriotism crowd."

To counter such charges, recall organizers invited to the microphone Mary Lou Boettcher, 78, a retired Mesa schoolteacher who considers Mr. Pearce hostile to the public

schools. "I am not an anarchist," she said. "I had flags all over my house for Flag Day. I'm not a liberal, either. I've been a Republican my whole life."

Mr. Pearce's political allies have used the recall as a battle cry to raise money on his behalf. Team America, a political action committee, issued a recent e-mail plea for donations, including from corporations, for a group called Citizens Who Oppose the Pearce Recall. State lawyers are currently reviewing whether corporate money is allowed in a recall campaign.

There has been just one successful recall in Arizona's history, of a judge who was removed in the 1920s, although Evan Meacham, the governor in 1988, was close to a recall vote when he was impeached and convicted of obstruction of justice and misuse of government funds.

The tactic of using recall campaigns to go after politicians appears to be on the rise. This year alone, Gov. Jan Brewer has been a target, as have several other Arizona officeholders, including a sheriff from Tucson and a councilman from Phoenix. There are also recall efforts under way in California, Nebraska and Wisconsin, among other states.

Joshua Spivak, a senior fellow at Wagner College's Hugh L. Carey Institute for Government Reform and founder of the Recall Elections Blog, said that of the 20 state legislators who had faced a recall in the last century, only two were leaders of their chambers like Mr. Pearce.

In 1994, opponents of gun control led a recall against David Roberti, who was the Democratic president pro tem of the California Senate. In 2008, advocates of tax cuts led a recall against Andy Dillon, then the Democratic speaker of the Michigan House. Both survived by wide margins.

Some states allow recalls only in cases of abuse of power, but that is not the case in Arizona, where anyone can be a target for any reason.

Mr. Pearce's critics oppose his policies, like his cuts to education and the recent failure to extend unemployment benefits, and say he has damaged the state's reputation. Among the distractions from the real issues of the state, they say, are bills to force presidential candidates to prove their citizenship and to expand gun rights to college campuses, both of which were done in by Mr. Pearce's fellow Republicans.

After the recorder's office finishes reviewing the remaining recall signatures, the matter will go to the secretary of state and then the governor, who will schedule a vote either this November or next March.

Mr. Pearce remains defiant in the face of the recall threat. "I stand for what I stand for, and I've never varied," he said Thursday night on local television.