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A recall of Walker could backfire on Dems

There are risks both political and practical

By JOSHUA SPIVAK

With the final recall elections over in Wisconsin — at least for this summer — the big question is whether Democrats will try to recall Gov. Scott Walker next year. Despite the bravado, looking at the evidence, there are some strong reasons that may cause the Democrats to shy away from a Walker recall.

The first problem is simply practical. There is a reason there have been only two gubernatorial recalls in U.S. history — North Dakota in 1921 and California in 2003 (though Arizona would have had one in 1988 if the governor hadn't first been impeached).

It is hard to get a recall on the ballot, and Wisconsin's rules make it even harder. The state boasts one of the hardest signature requirements to get a recall on the ballot in the country.

First, it requires a fairly high number of signatures (25% of the number of votes for the governor's office in the last election). It could be higher — for example, Louisiana requires the signatures of one-third of all the eligible voters in the district — but it is clearly a healthy amount. It is combined with an extremely tight deadline to hand them in: 60 days. Only four states limit the gathering period to 60 days. Most of the others fall between 90 and 180 days.

Compare this to California. There, you needed only signatures amounting to 12% of the votes in the last election, in 160 days.

Certainly a recall against Walker is doable, but it will be expensive, it will be a scramble and, as we saw with the results on Tuesday, it might not succeed.

But this practical problem is compounded by a more serious political one. Would the recall backfire against the Democrats in the presidential election? There is a chance that it could. Here's why:

There are three time periods when you can have the recall. One is as a special election (which is anytime), the second is on the same day as a primary and the third is on the same day as a general election.

The problem with a special election is that it costs a lot of money to hold. We don't have hard numbers on Wisconsin just yet, but the Gray Davis recall cost somewhere in the neighborhood of \$66 million, and that was without a primary vote. Miami-Dade just dropped \$12 million to \$15 million to replace its mayor.

The cost of the recall is generally not a great defense for a sitting official. Sometimes it works, but frequently it fails. However, if Walker survives, then the cost of the recall could become a great weapon for the Republicans in November. It plays directly into their overarching theme of profligate Democrats.

Since Wisconsin is a swing state, the Democrats probably would hesitate to hand any new weapons to the Republicans.

Holding a recall on the primary date (which looks like it will be moved back to April) could be an advantage to the elected officials. But 2012 will have a potentially hotly contested Republican nomination battle. There will not be one on the Democratic side. So Republicans will be motivated to come down for other reasons, thereby putting the Democrats in a precarious position from the start.

A general election would be the best time for a recall from the Democrats' perspective. It would fit right into a presidential race, and in fact it would completely negate any advantage that incumbency might have for Walker — no extra voters are coming out for the recall, and the issues surrounding the recall may very well be subsumed into the general election fight.

It would end up being almost a standard gubernatorial race, but one where the Democrats have a built-in voter advantage (the party has won the state in every presidential race since 1984).

However, November is a long way off, and the Republicans are well aware of the negative consequences of holding a recall on election day. You can be certain they would do everything in their power to prevent it. It is not too hard to do — look at the so-called fake Democratic primaries in the senatorial recalls. That pushed off the recall date by a month. It will be extremely difficult for the Democrats to time this recall properly.

The talk of taking out Walker is a big rallying point for the Democrats and a way to mitigate any pain felt from their failure to capture the state Senate.

But make no mistake about it, a gubernatorial recall would be a massive undertaking, one that could cause the party grief come November.

Joshua Spivak is a senior fellow at the Hugh L. Carey Institute for Government Reform at Wagner College. He blogs at recallelections.blogspot.com