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Colorado's Gun-Control Recall: The Canary in the Coal Mine for Reformers?

A 1994 California recall augured trouble for the Democratic Party. Can the gun lobby manage to recreate that magic?

JOSHUA SPIVAK | AUG 7 2013, 11:00 AM ET |

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Colorado Governor John Hickenlooper signs three gun-control bills into law on March 20, 2013/ (Reuters)

After nearly two decades of continual victories in state legislatures, gun-rights proponents have suddenly hit some turbulence. Despite [paralysis on the issue in Washington](#), mass shootings in Aurora, Colorado, Sandy Hook, Connecticut, and elsewhere have led five states to tighten their gun laws.

Four of those states are liberal bastions, but the fifth is the formerly red state of Colorado, home of not only Aurora but also the Columbine massacre. Unsurprisingly, the Centennial State is also where the gun lobby is looking to make a statement in return – with recalls [set to take place September 10](#) against two state legislators, including term-limited state Senate President John Morse, a Democrat.

WRITERS



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From a legislative standpoint, these recalls wouldn't have much practical effect. Even if both are successful, Democrats will retain control of the Senate. Furthermore, Democrats hold both the governor's office and the lower house of the state legislature, so gun-control policy is unlikely to change post-recall. This is more a symbolic recall. Proponents hope it will have national implications, scaring other officials in swing districts throughout the country away from gun measures. In fact, this won't be the first time gun-rights proponents have used this playbook -- we saw a near-carbon copy back in 1994. The aftermath of that recall two decades ago might show just what the gun-rights community can hope to accomplish.

In 1993 and 1994, Democrats passed a number of gun-control laws both at the federal and state level. The new laws were an issue in races throughout the country in November 1994 when Republicans swept the House and Senate, as well as many state-level races. But in California, gun-rights proponents moved faster -- setting up an April 1994 recall targeting term-limited state Senate President Pro Tem David Roberti, a Democrat who had been a big backer of the new laws and represented a relatively moderate district.

Just as in Colorado, where kicking out Morse and state Senator Angela Giron, who is also facing recall on September 10, defeating Roberti wouldn't have been enough to flip the Senate to Republican control, but the gun lobby felt it would be able to send a message with a successful recall before the 1994 elections. Despite a large effort backed by the NRA and others, however, Roberti convincingly beat back the recall, taking nearly 60 percent of the vote.

It was perhaps a pyrrhic victory. Roberti kept his seat but lost the Democratic primary for state treasurer to Phil Angelides. It's up for debate whether the recall effort helped or hurt Roberti's campaign -- he was considered an underdog against a deep-pocketed candidate going in -- but many observers agreed that the recall hurt Roberti in the state-wide race. Having drained his campaign coffers to win the recall, he was unable to fend off Angelides's attacks.

The loss aside, gun-rights groups can look back fondly on the Roberti recall (except, perhaps, for the lobbying group hit with a \$800,000 fine for hiding its backers): The race presaged a national and state-wide tidal-wave for Republicans. The 1994 midterms were one of the best elections the Republican Party has ever had, winning Congress for the first time in 10 years. President Clinton and Democratic House Leader Dick Gephardt felt that tackling gun control had played a large role in helping out numerous moderate Democrats. The results were so scarring for the Democrats that it effectively took gun control off the table for more than a decade and a half.

The Giron and Morse recalls could turn out to be an expensive and mainly symbolic vote against two officials, but their backers are certainly hoping for more. As in 1994, they are hoping that these recalls are a harbinger of electoral doom for gun-control advocates that will signal to other politicians that it's just not worth the trouble to limit guns -- even if you can win a recall. Whether the effort works will be clear soon enough.

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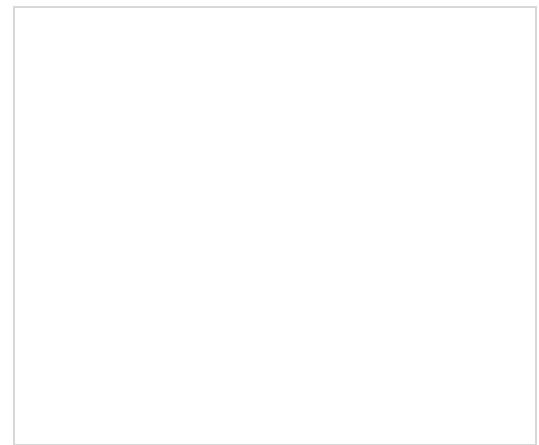
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