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Gun-Rights Supporters Score Big Win in Colorado Recalls

By ASHBY JONES

The gun-rights lobby dramatically showcased its strength this week by helping boot two state senators from office in the first-ever recall election in Colorado, a crucial state in the national debate over gun control.

The recall, which claimed the jobs of Senate President John Morse, from Colorado Springs, and Sen. Angela Giron, from Pueblo, was supported by the National Rifle Association. It targeted the two Democratic senators for their support for new laws that subjected private gun sales to background checks and banned magazines that hold more than 15 rounds.

Their ouster was a stinging defeat for New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg, who has supported gun-control measures in the wake of last year's massacre of elementary-school children in Newtown, Conn. The mayor gave \$350,000 to a Colorado committee formed to defeat the recall, according to public campaign-finance records.

Mr. Bloomberg's involvement may have spurred turnout among recall supporters, gun-right advocates said. In any event, the result is being read as a cautionary message that state politicians who tinker with gun rights do so at their own peril.

"It reminds voters that many states have embraced direct democracy, so there are mechanisms to deal with acts they don't like," said John Straayer, a political-science professor at Colorado State University.

In general, Coloradans have broadly supported gun rights, but the state is also home to serious cases of gun violence: the 1999 shooting at Columbine High School and the 2012 shooting at a movie theater in Aurora.

The NRA gave about \$360,000 to the recall effort, according to public records. "When you have billionaires like Bloomberg...trying to influence local elections, it's only going to breed anger and resentment," said NRA spokesman Andrew Arulanandam.

"When people understand the gun laws, they support them," said Christy Le Lait, the manager of the campaign to keep Sen. Morse in office. "I think you're going to see a lot of people now push back hard against this effort."

A spokeswoman for Sen. Giron's campaign didn't return calls seeking comment.

Mr. Bloomberg said, "This election does not reflect the will of Coloradans, a majority of whom strongly support background checks and opposed these recalls."

Colorado is one of 11 states in which voters can trigger a recall for purely political reasons; another eight require evidence of incompetence or misconduct, according to the National Conference of State Legislatures. Recall attempts against state legislators have led to elections only 38 times since the recall was introduced around the turn of the last century, and only 21 have succeeded, the NCSL said.

The use of recall elections is on the rise, said Joshua Spivak, a senior fellow at the Wagner College Hugh L. Carey Institute for Government Reform. "With email, cellphones, spreadsheets, and the like, it's easier than it's ever been to gather signatures, to organize," he said.

Mr. Spivak called the recall effort in Colorado "surprising but mostly symbolic." Though both senators will be replaced by Republicans, Democrats will still hold an 18-17 lead in the

state senate, and the gun laws passed in March will likely stay on the books for the foreseeable future.

California lawmakers are currently considering a package of bills that would give the state the tightest gun regulations in the U.S. In other states, it will be hard to gauge the recall's impact until early next year, when legislatures reconvene and look at new gun-control proposals.

Mark Glaze, executive director of Mayors Against Illegal Guns, said his priority moving forward is strengthening background checks. Washington, Oregon and Minnesota could be the next battlegrounds, he said, and "elsewhere where people understand that background checks do nothing to interfere with the Second Amendment."

Others are reading the tea leaves differently. Jennifer Kerns, the spokeswoman for the Colorado recall effort, said it was about more than just guns. "It's about government overreach, and sends a reverberating message across the country that people are sick of it," she said.

—Jacob Gershman contributed to this article.