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GUEST COLUMN:

Even with legislation, a wave of recalls is unlikely

by JOSHUA SPIVAK

Following revelations about potential misuse of government spending by former premier Alison Redford, the Canadian Taxpayers Federation has called for the adoption of the recall for Alberta MLAs [Members of the Legislative Assembly], something that the Wildrose Party included in their platform in 2012. The recall idea has caught fire over the last several years as the UK and states in India and Australia have all debated recall laws, and governments in Romania, Warsaw, Poland, Lima, Peru and the U.S. state government in Wisconsin had been completely taken over by recall campaigns in recent years. But looking at how the recall works in the U.S. shows that MLAs probably do not have that much to fear from a new law.

Recall has taken the U.S. by storm — Over the last three years, at least 426 elected officials in faced recall votes or resigned in the face of a campaign. In that time, 18 state legislators faced recall elections — in the past 103 years of U.S. recall history prior to that, only 21 legislators have ever faced a recall vote. Wisconsin Gov. Scott Walker is set to be only the fourth governor in U.S. history to face a recall vote.

This recall explosion has been credited or blamed on voter anger over the downturn in the economy and a increasingly bitter partisan divide, but in reality, the use of the recall appears to have been growing for at least 30 years. This may be due to the technology revolution. Campaigning, fundraising and, critically for the recall in the U.S., signature gathering have become easier thanks to the digital revolution. Thanks to the Internet, email and social media, previously unconnected voters can easily be drawn into a fight over a politician's alleged misdeeds. Smartphones and spreadsheets and demographic data at a political consultant's fingertips can maximize signature-gathering efforts.

But despite this expansion, if Alberta adopts the law, it probably won't see a wave of recalls. The Wildrose Party plan was proposing an extremely high barrier to get on the ballot — the signatures of 33 per cent of registered voters in 60 days. The CTF is asking for an even higher total — 40 per cent. Only one U.S. state has a limit anywhere near that, Louisiana, and it has never had a recall of a state-level officials. To put into context, despite the fact that California is 8.5 times the size of Louisiana, voters would need more valid signatures to recall the governor of Louisiana than was needed to recall California Gov. Gray Davis (who was famously replaced by Arnold Schwarzenegger in 2003).

Canada's own limited experience with the recall backs these figures up — British Columbia's recall law has a 40 per cent signature requirement. The province has yet to hold a recall election.

This is not to say the recall won't have an impact. If a recall does get on the ballot, politicians have a lot to fear — recalls have a high success rate. Of the 426 recalls cited, 266 officials lost their seats (209 in an election, 57 by resignation before the vote). When you consider the fact that political scientists estimate that incumbents in the U.S. win 75 to 85 per cent of re-election runs, this is a big turnaround. Recalls also will not simply be for criminal

action or gross incompetence. Most recalls are started due to political, policy or personal pique reasons.

The plan to adopt a recall could prove popular with voters — it certainly has in the U.S. in the past. No state that has adopted the recall has ever gotten rid of it. And politicians have to tread lightly around making major changes to a device that specifically targets them. But the high barrier for getting a recall qualified for the ballot, combined with the history of the recall in the U.S., shows that this is a reform that might be more talk than action.

Joshua Spivak is a senior fellow at the Hugh L. Carey Institute for Government Reform at Wagner College in N.Y., and blogs at <http://recallelections.blogspot.com/>