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Recalls Now Cheaper, Faster

By JOSHUA SPIVAK

The threat to kick out 16 Wisconsin Republican state senators is an unprecedented use of the political recall.

Only once in the history of recalls have more than three state legislators faced a recall vote in the same term. But if Wisconsin law didn't ban recalls until after an official serves one year of their current term, many others, including Gov. Scott Walker, might also be under the gun.

This shouldn't be a surprise. Thanks primarily to technological changes, recalls are becoming far more frequent. And we can expect them to increase.

Wisconsin is just the latest, and most prominent, recall battle.

On Tuesday, the mayor was overwhelmingly tossed out in a recall in Miami — the largest municipality ever to kick out its mayor. Omaha's mayor just barely survived recall in January. Meanwhile, the notorious Bell, Calif., scandal led to the recall of its mayor and the entire city council.

Voters have even tried to shoehorn recalls at the federal level. Last year, court cases were used to push recalls of U.S. senators in New Jersey and North Dakota. Both cases were defeated, though the New Jersey effort has threatened an appeal to the Supreme Court.

This leads to an obvious question: Why, more than 100 years after the recall returned to the U.S. political stage, is it undergoing a renaissance?

Some cite unprecedented voter anger across the political spectrum. But this strange, ahistorical assertion glosses over many past eras of voter fury.

It also ignores important developments that suggest the recall is now coming into its own. Barring legal changes, its use is likely to continue to grow across the nation.

Recalls, in fact, have been gaining steam. There have been only 20 recall elections of state legislators in U.S. history — with 13 ending in removal. But 65 percent of these took place in the past 28 years.

In addition, cities are using the recall with greater frequency. And, in 2003, California became just the second state to recall a governor.

It's not that the past 28 years have been more divisive; rather, revolutionary changes in technology have allowed recalls to flourish. The Wisconsin recall threats are a clear example of this.

Consider one of a recall's basic issues: financial cost. Historically, the recall has been more of a threat than a weapon because of this barrier. Gathering signatures, defending them in court and running a campaign against an entrenched incumbent are all expensive propositions.

In the past, fundraising for these battles was strictly a local endeavor. Unless a deep-pocketed backer pushed the recall, money would be limited.

But that is no longer the case. Fundraising on a national level is now often a matter of good marketing.

Consider the "Joe Wilson effect." After the South Carolina congressman yelled, "You lie!" during President Barack Obama's address on health care reform to a joint session of

Congress in 2009, he was flooded with unsolicited donations. The all-but-unknown congressman from a relatively safe seat in a Republican state raised $1.8 million in one week. His opponent raked in $1.6 million.

Even without the heavy thumb of unions, corporations, PACs and political parties, the hurdle of raising cash is now considerably lower.

On a similar front, emerging communications technology has made organizing and running signature-gathering efforts significantly easier. Since the Internet has become ubiquitous, rumor campaigns and directed e-mails have become potent tools.

Local news stories now reach a far wider audience. Thirty years ago, few in California or Florida might have closely followed the goings-on in the Wisconsin Legislature. The Internet and 24-hour cable news channels have changed all that.

In some jurisdictions, apathy, not anger, has helped push recalls to the fore. With few exceptions, voter turnout has dropped precipitously in the past several decades. In these states and localities, the number of signatures needed to qualify a recall for the ballot is directly tied to the number of voters in the previous election. So a decrease in turnout means it takes a smaller portion of signatures from the overall electorate to qualify a recall.

The fact that California experienced the lowest voter turnout in its history in the 2002 gubernatorial election helped make the recall of Gov. Gray Davis in 2003 that much easier.

The recalls in Wisconsin and Miami are likely to get a lot of attention. But it is not just an unprecedented wave of voter anger today. After a century of existence, the recall is ready to come into its own.

Joshua Spivak is a senior fellow at the Hugh L. Carey Institute for Government Reform at Wagner College and the founder of the Recall Elections Blog.