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Sunday Dialogue: When to Hold Recall Votes

Readers debate what misdeeds justify an official's early exit.

The Letter

To the Editor:

After some one million Wisconsin voters signed a petition for a recall election, Gov. Scott Walker of Wisconsin is set to face a vote in early June.

Governor Walker has championed and signed into law draconian legislation that makes severe cuts to education, collective bargaining and women's rights. Recall elections, however, should be reserved for instances of nefarious activity, not unpopular legislation.

Gubernatorial recalls are extremely rare, and with good reason. Only two American governors have been successfully recalled — Lynn Frazier of North Dakota in 1921 and Gray Davis of California in 2003.

Governor Walker, like President Obama, took office amid a period of decreased tax revenues. Wisconsin, and every other state except Vermont, is required to balance its budget by law. With higher corporate, income and property tax rates than much of the country, Governor Walker chose to balance the budget through spending cuts. As a result, the state of Wisconsin will be a more competitive place to live and do business.

To be sure, Mr. Walker has significantly limited the collective bargaining rights of public employees in Wisconsin. Moreover, he enacted austerity measures that make harsh cuts to K-12 education and to the world-class University of Wisconsin system.

Most recently, he continued the nationwide assault on women's rights by signing the repeal of a law that protects equal pay for women in Wisconsin.

A loyal opposition — that is, those who oppose the current administration's policies while maintaining its legitimacy — is one of the greatest indicators of a healthy democracy. But recall elections prompted by unpopular legislation threaten the legitimacy of our representative democracy.

MIKE BROST

Eau Claire, Wis., April 23, 2012

The writer is a political science student at the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire.

Readers React

Mr. Brost says recall elections should be about “nefarious activity” rather than unpopular legislation or just unpopular officials. If the people of Wisconsin wanted a recall limited to a small set of misdeeds, they could have easily chosen to do so when they adopted the recall back in 1926.

Currently, 18 states provide for the recall of state-level officials (and Illinois has it for just the governor). Of those 18, 11 allow recalls for political reasons, and 7 states limit it to specific misdeeds. Almost all recalls in the United States — and there were 151 last year alone — take place in “political recall” jurisdictions.

Mr. Brost's argument that the recall should be limited to "nefarious activity" is an old one that has already found proponents in the Wisconsin State Legislature; their proposal would restrict recalls to a narrow set of misdeeds. They will have to appeal to voters to adopt a constitutional amendment limiting the recall.

Voters appear to like broad recall laws. This proposed amendment will apparently get Mr. Brost's vote, but good luck getting the rest of the state's populace to back it.

JOSHUA SPIVAK

Berkeley, Calif., April 25, 2012

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