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Wisconsin Recall Attempt Might Backfire in Presidential Election

by JOSHUA SPIVAK

With the two Democratic recalls in Wisconsin next week losing some of their luster, the big question now is whether the Democrats will try to recall GOP Gov. Scott Walker next year. Despite the bravado, looking at the evidence, there are some strong reasons that might cause the Democrats to shy away from the Walker recall.

The first problem is simply practical. There is a reason that there have been only two gubernatorial recalls in U.S. history, North Dakota in 1921 and California in 2003 (though Arizona would have had one in 1988 if the governor hadn't first been impeached).

They are hard to get on the ballot. Wisconsin's rules make it even harder.

The state boasts one of the most difficult signature requirements to get a recall on the ballot. First, it requires a fairly high number of signatures (25 percent of the number of votes for the governor's office in the last election). It could be higher — for example, Louisiana requires the signatures of 33 1/3 percent of all the eligible voters in the district — but it is clearly a healthy amount.

The high threshold is combined with an extremely tight deadline to hand them in — 60 days. Only four states limit the gathering period to 60 days. Most of the others fall between 90 and 180.

Compare this with California. There, signatures amounting to only 12 percent of the votes in the last election were needed, and gatherers were given 160 days.

Certainly a recall against Walker is doable, but it will be expensive, it will be a scramble and, as we saw with the results Tuesday, the recall might not succeed.

But this practical problem is compounded by a more serious political one. Would the recall backfire against the Democrats in the presidential election? There is a chance that it could. Here's why:

There are three time periods when you can have the recall. One is as a special election (which is anytime), the second is on the same day as a primary and the third is on the same day as a general election.

The problem with a special election is that it costs a lot of money to hold. We don't have hard numbers on Wisconsin just yet, but the recall of California Gov. Gray Davis (D) cost somewhere in the neighborhood of \$66 million, and that was without a primary vote. Miami-Dade just dropped \$12 million to \$15 million to replace its mayor.

The cost of the recall is generally not a great defense for a sitting official. Sometimes it works, but frequently it fails. However, if Walker survives, then the cost of the recall could become a weapon for the Republicans in November. It plays directly into their overarching theme of profligate Democrats. Since Wisconsin is a swing state, the Democrats probably would hesitate to hand any new weapons to the Republicans.

Holding a recall on primary day (which looks like it will be moved back to April) could be an advantage to the elected officials. But 2012 will have a potentially hotly contested Republican presidential nomination battle. There will not be one on the Democratic side. So

Republicans will be motivated to come down for other reasons, thereby putting the Democrats in a precarious position from the start.

A general election recall vote would be the best time from the Democrats' perspective. It would fit into a presidential race, and in fact it would completely negate any advantage that incumbency might have for Walker — no extra voters are coming out for the recall, and the issues surrounding the recall might very well be subsumed into the general election fight. It would end up being almost a standard gubernatorial race, but one where the Democrats have a built-in voter advantage (the party has won the state in every presidential race since 1984).

However, November 2012 is a long way off, and the Republicans are well aware of the negative consequences of holding a recall on Election Day. You can be certain they would do everything in their power to prevent it. And it shouldn't be too hard to do — look at the so-called fake Democratic primaries in the Senatorial recalls. That pushed off the recall date by a month. It will be extremely difficult for the Democrats to time this recall properly.

The talk of taking out Walker is big rallying point for the Democrats and a way to mitigate any pain felt from their failure to capture the state Senate. But make no mistake about it, a gubernatorial recall would be a massive undertaking, one that could cause the party grief come November 2012.

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