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Colorado recalls show risk of supporting gun control

By COLLEEN SLEVIN and MIKE BAKER

DENVER (AP) — Democratic voters in Colorado helped remove two state senators of their own party who voted for tighter gun control — an ouster that was both intensely local and a national test of what can happen to lawmakers who support gun restrictions in battleground states.

The well-organized activists who sought to recall Senate President John Morse and Sen. Angela Giron got the backing of gun-rights groups such as the National Rifle Association. It turned out they didn't need much assistance because voters were already so incensed by passage of the gun-control package.

Democrats, who maintain control of the Legislature, said the losses were purely symbolic. But they could be a sign of things to come in 2014, both in Colorado's governor's race and in scores of other political contests around the country.

After last year's mass shootings, Colorado was the only state beyond Democratic strongholds New York, California and Connecticut to pass gun-control legislation. Gun-control measures died in Congress, as well as Minnesota, Oregon, Washington and Delaware.

Outspent by about 5-to-1, recall supporters cited a big anti-recall donation from New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg to make one of their main points — that Democrats controlling the state Legislature were more interested in listening to the White House and outside interests than their own constituents.

That feeling was particularly strong in Pueblo, an industrial city in southern Colorado where Democrats tend to be more conservative on social issues and voters of all persuasions tend to embrace gun rights.

Victor Head, the 28-year-old plumber who launched the recall effort in Pueblo, said people in his hometown did not need any encouragement from the NRA to turn out against Giron.

Voters don't like their gun rights "being messed with regardless of party," said Head, who asked a friend to film campaign videos in his backyard.

Political analyst Floyd Ciruli said Democrats seem to have been upset about what they saw as government overreach not just on guns but on other parts of the Democratic agenda. Polling showed individual gun laws, such as limiting ammunition magazines to 15 rounds, had some support, but the size and speed of the gun package and other Democratic bills may contributed to the senators' fate, he said.

About 40 percent of voters turned out in Pueblo, an impressive figure given that there were no mail ballots.

"There's definitely a protest going on out there," Ciruli said.

Bloomberg downplayed the vote as a low-turnout, off-year election and said the NRA would not go unchallenged in future recalls.

"We're committed to backing elected officials across the country who are willing to face these attacks because they agree with Americans about the need for better background checks," he said in a statement.

Morse, a former police chief in a Colorado Springs suburb, will be replaced by Republican Bernie Herpin, a former member of the Colorado Springs City Council. George Rivera, a former deputy police chief, will take over Giron's seat.

Republicans hope to build on their victories next year, when Democratic Gov. John Hickenlooper will be up for re-election. The governor initially shied away from pushing for gun-control measures after the Aurora theater shooting, which happened in the middle of the 2012 presidential campaign. But he later reversed course just before the Newtown, Conn., massacre.

A poll last month by Quinnipiac University showed that Hickenlooper's position on guns and his decision to halt the execution of a death row inmate were unpopular with voters.

This week's recall effort was "a shot across the bow to prove that Colorado isn't a colony of Michael Bloomberg or John Hickenlooper," said former Rep. Tom Tancredo, a potential Republican gubernatorial candidate.

The effect of the recalls on other states isn't clear. Only 10 other states allow state lawmakers to be recalled for any reason, but social media and email lists have made it easier to build support among angry voters. Recalls tend to attract fewer voters, making it easier to oust lawmakers than in regular elections if there are enough motivated voters, said Joshua Spivak, a recall expert at the Hugh L. Carey Institute for Government Reform at Wagner College in New York City.

In Washington state, activists are working to collect signatures for a background-check initiative that would first go to the Legislature and then to the ballot.

Christian Sinderman, a political consultant for that initiative, said a state recall election cannot be construed as a national referendum.

"If anything, the Colorado experience tells us we're doing the right thing to seek a popular vote," Sinderman said.

Dan Gross, president of the Brady Campaign to Prevent Gun Violence, said the recall effort in Colorado was an anomaly, but activists must be aware of the risk that lawmakers may be spooked by the results and shy away from supporting gun legislation.

Gun-control proponents are sensitive to the power of the NRA and its ability to target districts.

"The unfortunate reality of the Colorado experience is that the NRA bullying tactics can still work," Sinderman said.

Both polling and the pace of signature gathering suggest there is deep public support for background checks, he added. The Colorado vote was simply a speed bump in the process.

Gun-control supporters, he said, were "making far more progress now locally and nationally than a setback like this would indicate."