

## How Scott Walker got his head start

by JOSHUA SPIVAK

It has been quite a ride for Wisconsin governor Scott Walker. He went from an also-ran in a 2006 gubernatorial primary to two-term Republican hero and a leading contender for the presidential nomination.

And he has the early 20th century Progressive movement to thank for his quick rise to the top of the Republican field.

While there has been plenty of talk that simply being a Midwestern governor from a quasi-swing state would have put Walker on the map, it's not as if that criterion has produced a plethora of recent nominees—the last one was Adlai Stevenson.

To find a Midwest governor who actually won, go back to William McKinley. Instead, it was Walker's 2012 recall victory that catapulted him to the top of the Republican field.

This is not an uncommon occurrence for recall targets. San Francisco mayor Dianne Feinstein survived a recall in 1983. By the next year she was on the short-list for the vice presidency and eventually was elected to the U.S. Senate. California state senator Jeff Denham won a recall vote in 2008; he's now in Congress. Dennis Kucinich eked out a victory in his recall race as mayor of Cleveland; he came back to be a prominent congressman. Even North Dakota's Lynn Frazier, the first governor to face a recall race, which he lost in 1921, went on to win three U.S. Senate terms.

There are good reasons that a recall could end up helping a targeted official, and it is the flip side of why recalls are frequently successful. The official may be hated by his or her opponents, but if the recall is launched for political reasons the official can gain strong sympathy points from supporters. The official also gets to show that he or she stood up to a powerful interest group, as well as gain a lot of name recognition for a “bonus race.”

All of these points helped Walker. But the unique nature of the Wisconsin recall provided multiple and unprecedented benefits to his future political career. For one, he became one of the centers of the political world for a long stretch of time.

The recall campaign started almost immediately after he was sworn in, and, due to the fact that Wisconsin law prevented a recall from starting until he had served one year, the recall turned into an 18-month-long fight. State senators actually faced recalls in 2011, but even those were widely seen as a referendum on Walker's governorship.

Therefore, the campaign received massive news coverage—far eclipsing what other governors would get for anything other than a scandal or a serious presidential campaign. A quick search of The New York Times (NYT) and The Wall Street Journal (WSJ) shows this. From February 5, 2011 to December 31, 2012, Scott Walker was mentioned in 422 New York Times and 667 Wall Street Journal stories.

Compare that to some of his fellow GOP governors who were elected at the exact same time from much larger states with far greater economic impact on the country. Ohio's John Kasich received mentions in 64 NYT and 167 WSJ pieces. Michigan's Rick Snyder saw his name in 105 NYT and 196 WSJ stories. Florida's Rick Scott was mentioned 214 times by the NYT and 152 times by the WSJ. And Pennsylvania's Tom Corbett appeared in 68 NYT and 117 WSJ articles.

It wasn't just the press that helped. The conservative movement wanted to back Walker as a test case for their proposals, and they were more than willing to open up their wallets. The result was among the most expensive non-presidential races in American history.

At least \$125 million was put down on the recall campaigns. The vast majority of that money was to support Walker, and Walker now has a top campaign donation Rolodex to use to raise funds for future races.

It wasn't just big-money donors, who now knew Walker and have already been willing to donate to his cause. Plenty of GOP-backed PACs raised funds for Walker. The result was that the most committed Republican voters across the nation received tons of mail and other solicitations to help Walker keep his seat. Boosting Walker may not have been the goal, but it was certainly an ancillary benefit for him.

On top of this, backing Walker and campaigning for him was an easy win for any Republican official. Walker gained the support of almost every Republican official of note in the country.

Arguably as valuable as all of the financial benefits was Walker's "choice" of opponents. Nearly every potential presidential candidate will be known for taking on one issue or interest group that could upset primary voters. But Walker focused on a different target, and, barring a successful battle with the IRS, he was not likely to find a better opponent for a Republican primary candidate. He went after unions, specifically those in the public sector.

There are few groups less likely to gain the sympathy of Republican voters. He was therefore able to appear as a champion of cutting spending, shrinking government and eliminating bureaucracy while facing off against government workers and GOP boogeymen such as the documentary maker Michael Moore. Walker's campaign staff could not have scripted it better.

Back in 2011, Scott Walker may not have been thrilled that he was facing a recall fight practically from the moment he took office. But four years later, he is reaping the benefits of being targeted for that recall.

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