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In some states, GOP sees the recall as its way back to power

James Anderson, Associated Press

DENVER (AP) — Republicans frustrated by losing their grip on political power in some Western states have begun deploying a new weapon: the recall.

Once reserved for targeting corrupt or inept elected officials, the recall has become part of the toolkit for Republicans seeking a do-over of election results. One GOP strategist in Colorado has put a name to it — “recall season.”

To be sure, Democrats also have used recalls, most notably in Wisconsin, where they tried unsuccessfully to oust then-Republican Gov. Scott Walker in 2012 over his actions to weaken public sector unions.

But Republicans have been mounting recall efforts against Democratic state lawmakers and governors at an unprecedented rate over the past two years in a handful of Western states, at the same time their political fortunes in those states have been declining.

In 2018, they recalled a freshman state senator in California as a way to temporarily undo a Democratic supermajority.

The same year in Nevada, two Democratic lawmakers and an allied independent fended off recall attempts.

In Oregon, Republicans are pursuing a recall of Democratic Gov. Kate Brown, who was re-elected last year, after GOP lawmakers walked out of the Senate to try to block votes on climate change and education bills.

Colorado, where Democrats control both houses of the legislature and the governor’s office, is seeing its highest level of recall activity since 2013, when two Democratic lawmakers lost their seats for supporting gun control legislation and a third facing recall resigned.

Recall campaigns are targeting Democratic Gov. Jared Polis, two Democratic state House members and two Democrats in the state Senate. Recall committees have been formed for other lawmakers, and the GOP’s top-ranking officials have encouraged the efforts.

U.S. Rep. Ken Buck, newly elected as chairman of the Colorado Republican Party, told supporters earlier this year, “We need to teach them how to spell R-E-C-A-L-L.”

Colorado recall proponents accused their targets of overreach on issues of gun control, climate change, taxes, sex education and the electoral college — issues that many of the Democrats ran on during their successful campaigns.

Karen Kateline, a talk show host working on the Polis effort, insists that she and other Republicans aren’t abusing the original misconduct intent for recalls.

“Nobody is putting the brakes on these people,” she said of Democrats.

“It’s our constitutional right to recall,” insisted Nancy Pallozzi, a Republican from the Denver suburb of Lakewood, who is leading an effort against state Sen. Brittany Pettersen. “We can’t wait for new (GOP) candidates to be vetted for the next election. Three more years for the governor? And three more years for Brittany? No.”

Democrats see the recalls as a blatant attempt to undo the results of the most recent elections, which produced a Democratic wave in several Western states.

Matt Harringer, spokesman for the Democratic Legislative Campaign Committee, has a simple label for the Republicans pursuing the recall attempts — “sore losers.” The committee, which gets involved in state legislative races, has dedicated \$135,000 to help fight the Colorado recall attempts.

“Republicans are definitely on the decline in the West, and Colorado is the leader of that,” Harringer said. “We don’t think there’s a huge appetite to recall legislators who are doing what they said they would do.”

Nevertheless, Republicans see it as a worthy strategy. The Colorado Republican Party started months ago offering training sessions for what GOP consultant Ben Engen calls “recall season.”

Proponents can use the process to time an election and shape the electorate on their own terms, when most voters aren’t paying attention, said Engen, a Denver-based consultant who conducted some of those sessions.

For example, a petition drive can be timed to produce a special recall election during the winter holidays — taking advantage of lower turnout by unaffiliated voters who have helped turn Colorado, once a swing state, into Democratic-leaning territory, Engen said in an interview.

“There’s a drop-off in turnout from presidential to midterm elections, and the same thing between midterms and off-year elections,” Engen said. “Initiators of a recall can use the timing to maximize that enthusiasm gap.”

To Democrats, that’s essentially an admission that Republicans are using the recall not as a vehicle to oust corrupt officials, but rather as an attempt to game the system and flip seats they otherwise could not win in a regular election.

“The strategists see that a recall may be the best chance of winnowing down the electorate in such a way as to sneak through a seat,” agreed Jason Bane, a Denver-based Democratic operative. “They need something that goes under the radar for it to work.”

In 2018, California Democratic Sen. Josh Newman lost his seat in a recall election, ending Democrats’ supermajority. Recall proponents’ stated reason for the recall was Newman’s support for a gas tax increase, although he was one of dozens of lawmakers in both legislative houses to vote for it. Ironically, California voters reaffirmed the gas tax increase, which is now in effect, just months after voters recalled Newman in a lower-turnout primary.

“What made me a target of the recall wasn’t my vote per se, but was the opportunity to instead redo an election just months earlier, and on more favorable terms,” said Newman, who plans to run for his old seat in 2020, when turnout will be far higher.

Previous success, as in California and Colorado, has emboldened Republicans to keep trying.

In Nevada, a group of conservatives say they're preparing a recall effort against first-term Democratic Gov. Steve Sisolak, who signed a law, passed by the Democratic-controlled Legislature, adding restrictions to the recall process.

Oregon Republican Party Chairman Bill Currier filed paperwork to recall Brown based on what he called the governor's failure to honor the will of the voters and her "politically-motivated agendas." Currier did not return multiple inquiries seeking elaboration.

K.C. Hanson, chairwoman of the Oregon Democratic Party, called the recall effort a political stunt meant to undermine the results of the November 2018 election, which also gave Democrats a legislative supermajority.

"The GOP is embracing inflammatory rhetoric and pursuing a fool's errand by trying to recall a governor that voters re-elected by a wide margin less than a year ago," she said. "Clearly, the GOP is scared of what's on the horizon for 2020."

Recalls were first staged in a handful of states in the early 20th century, an era of progressive political reforms, to remove public officials for corruption or ineptitude. Today, 19 states allow statewide recalls, 11 of them for any reason.

Until recent years, they have rarely been used as a political tactic to flip legislative seats or target governors over policy disagreements, said Joshua Spivak, who tracks recalls nationwide and is a senior fellow at Wagner College in New York.

"Voters in general see this as not playing by the rules," he said.

New Mexico is among the majority of states that does not have the recall. This year, a Republican state lawmaker sought to change that.

Rep. Bill Rehm insists the intent of his proposal was to honor the standard that recalls should be reserved for performance in office, not politics.

"I don't want it used as a political tool. And I don't want the public to use it as a threat," he said. "The public should have a way to get rid of me if I'm not performing."

The Democrats who control the New Mexico legislature were not persuaded. Rehm's bill did not get a hearing.

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Associated Press writers Susan Montoya Bryan in Albuquerque, New Mexico, Michelle Price in Las Vegas and Sarah Zimmerman in Salem, Oregon, contributed to this report.

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