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Stateline

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Polis recall effort in Colorado follows a larger trend

by SOPHIE QUINTON

DENVER — The Democrats who control Colorado’s legislature pushed through a raft of their priorities this year, including tighter oil and gas regulations, a gun control measure and a comprehensive sex education law.

Now angry conservatives are pushing for recall elections that could yank key Democrats out of office. They’re circulating petitions against two state senators and Gov. Jared Polis. And earlier this year they tried and failed to force a recall election of two Assembly members, one of whom resigned.

“Governor Polis and the Democrat legislature are governing against the will of the people,” said Karen Kataline, a talk show host and spokeswoman for Dismiss Polis, the campaign against the Colorado governor. She said voters don’t want to wait for the 2022 gubernatorial election to challenge him.

The recalls have been brought by “grifters, extremists and sore losers looking for opportunity,” said Curtis Hubbard, spokesman for Democracy First Colorado, a political action committee created to help Democrats fight the recall campaigns. He said his group aims to convince voters that “if you disagree with someone on policy, the time to address that is the next general election.”

Recall campaigns against state lawmakers appear to be on the rise nationally. Twenty-six legislative recall elections have been held since 1994, said Joshua Spivak, a senior fellow at the Hugh L. Carey Institute for Government Reform at Wagner College in New York. That’s two-thirds of all such recalls since 1913.

Three state lawmakers beyond Colorado have been threatened with a recall this year, according to Ballotpedia, a nonprofit website that tracks elections. Two were Democratic state senators, Dawn Addiego of New Jersey and Richard Pan of California. A third was Republican state Rep. Gary Knopp of Alaska.

Conservative activists this year also are gathering signatures to recall New Jersey Democratic Gov. Phil Murphy. Only three governors have faced a recall election, two in the past 20 years. California Gov. Gray Davis, a Democrat, lost his in 2003, and Wisconsin Gov. Scott Walker, a Republican, won his in 2012.

Growing partisanship has made both Republicans and Democrats willing to embrace once unthinkable political tactics, such as recalls, said Howard Schweber, a professor of political science at the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

“As ideological positions become more extreme, the fact that the other party is in office becomes more intolerable,” he said. That aversion isn’t irrational, as partisanship can lead the party in power to enact more extreme policies, he said.

“So the stakes really are higher, in terms of who controls the state legislature.”

Recalls also may be on the rise because technology has made it easier to organize them, Spivak said.

“What you need for a recall is generally motivated, angry voters to get the signatures, or you need money,” he said. “Now thanks to social media, thanks to emails, you’re able to get that.”

Of the 19 states that allow residents to attempt to recall elected state officials, 11 — including Colorado — allow residents to circulate petitions for any reason, according to the National Conference of State Legislatures, a research and policy organization based in Denver. The remaining states require evidence of malfeasance.

“The recall in the U.S. is generally not about crime,” Spivak said. “It’s about, usually, a policy issue.”

State law generally requires residents to gather a certain number of signatures within a specified time frame for election officials to schedule a recall vote.

A political tactic

Hyper-partisanship has led to a slew of recall efforts in recent years.

One high-profile attempt came after Wisconsin Republicans in 2011 approved a law that gutted collective bargaining rights for state employees. Angry union members and Democrats helped gather enough signatures to trigger recall elections of the governor and six state senators, all Republicans.

Activists who backed the legislation, meanwhile, forced recall elections of three Democratic state senators who fled the state Capitol in a bid to stop the bill.

Two of the Republican senators who faced recall elections that year lost their seats to Democratic challengers. Walker kept his seat.

Whether recalls become more common, Schweber said, depends on whether they pay off for organizers.

“If they succeed there will likely be more of them; if they fail they will likely fall by the wayside.”

The failed attempt to recall Walker, he said, was a “bruising defeat” for Democrats, and might suggest that recalls have their limits as a political tactic.

In Nevada, petitions for the recall in 2017 of three Democratic state senators failed to gather enough signatures to trigger an election. If they had, the off-season vote could have given Republicans control of the upper chamber.

This year’s recall petitions outside Colorado target the Republican assemblyman in Alaska who formed a majority coalition with Democrats; the California Democrat who supported a bill that restricts medical exemptions to vaccines; and the New Jersey Democrat who changed her party affiliation after being elected as a Republican, according to Ballotpedia.

Activists are willing to mount such recall campaigns even if the odds are long.

Terry Beck, a New Jersey motorcycle club member and an avid supporter of President Donald Trump, has been using Facebook to organize a campaign to recall Murphy. Beck said she fears his left-wing agenda will destroy the state.

She’s particularly upset, she said, about the Murphy administration’s move to limit state and local law enforcement cooperation with federal immigration officials. “That was my No. 1 reason on the petition.”

Beck helped three other activists file a petition in March to recall the governor. By next February they need to gather almost 1.5 million signatures. Beck said volunteers have collected about 300,000 so far, and she’s confident they’ll collect the required number. “I really feel we have a very good shot at it.”

New Jersey tends to lean Democratic in statewide elections: Murphy was elected in 2017 by almost 14 points. His office declined to comment on the recall campaign.

‘Leftist, radical, progressive bills’

After Colorado Democrats in 2013 passed gun control legislation that infuriated Republicans, gun rights proponents gathered enough petitions to trigger recall elections that year for two Democratic state senators. Both lost their seats to Republican challengers.

Most Colorado recall petitions this year cite the oil and gas regulations; the sex education legislation; a “red flag” law that allows judges to temporarily remove firearms from people considered dangerous to themselves and others; and a pledge for Colorado to join the National Popular Vote Interstate Compact, under which states would assign their electoral votes to the presidential candidate who wins the popular vote.

One recall petition, which began circulating in April against Democratic Rep. Rochelle Galindo, only mentioned the oil and gas bill. Galindo resigned about a month after organizers began gathering signatures, citing unspecified allegations.

Kataline of Dismiss Polis said the drive to recall the governor was spurred by “an enormous flood of leftist, radical, progressive bills” voters didn’t expect.

No recall efforts in the state have been endorsed by the Colorado Republican Party, communications director Kyle Kohli said in an email. However, the state party chairman, U.S. Rep. Ken Buck, denounced the Democratic legislative agenda in a March speech reported in The Colorado Sun. “We need to teach them how to spell r-e-c-a-l-l,” Buck said.

Asked about the Dismiss Polis campaign, the governor’s office said Polis was focused on governing.

“The Governor will continue to reach across the aisle,” press secretary Conor Cahill said in an email to Stateline, “and hopes that, by tackling key issues for Coloradans, we will continue to bring people together and focus on what unites us.”

Recall organizers in Colorado have a tough task ahead of them. In 60 days, petitioners must gather valid signatures equal to 25% of the votes cast in the last election for that office.

That means the Dismiss Polis campaign must gather over 600,000 signatures by early September. It’s aiming to do so with volunteers. “This is a very grassroots effort,” Kataline said.

The campaign has raised about \$20,000 so far, mostly in small donations from rural Coloradans. Resist Polis PAC, an independent expenditure committee working with Dismiss Polis, has about \$32,000 on hand.

Meanwhile, Democrats in the state formed two political action committees this spring to fight the recall efforts. Both have received donations from the Democratic Legislative Campaign Committee, an organization based in Washington, D.C., that works to elect party members to state legislatures.

“One of the things we learned after 2013 was we needed to be much more aggressive in calling out these sham recalls,” Hubbard of Democracy First Colorado said.

Money from national groups such as the gun violence prevention organization Everytown for Gun Safety helped Democratic state Rep. Tom Sullivan convince voters not to sign the petition circulated against him this year.

Sullivan said he and his allies knocked on thousands of doors and made thousands of phone calls to local voters.

The recall petition didn’t surprise Sullivan, who sponsored the red flag law and has been a prominent gun control advocate since his son, Alex, was killed in the 2012 Aurora movie theater massacre. “The father of a murdered child terrifies them,” he said of his opponents. “And I’m not going to back down.”

The vice chairwoman of the Colorado Republican Party, Kristi Burton Brown, who led the campaign to recall Sullivan, called it off in June.

Her petition was filed as a private citizen, said Kohli, the state party spokesman, rather than as a party official.

John Straayer, a retired political science professor at Colorado State University, said he doesn't think the recall campaigns will get very far. "I think they're wasting their time and money."

He chalks the recall campaigns up to increasing partisanship and tension over the state's swing to the left.

"That doesn't sit well with the Republicans. They want their state back."