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## Colorado Republicans look to undo losses with recalls

*Conservatives' efforts to unseat governor and two state senators are part of a national recall trend*

By DAN FROSCHE

Less than a year after Colorado voters gave the governorship and control of the legislature to Democrats, some Republicans are hoping they have already had enough.

Conservative activists in recent weeks have launched efforts to recall Gov. Jared Polis, who took office in January, and two Democratic state senators they believe could be vulnerable. The GOP has been struggling to regain power in a once closely divided state that has been shifting left.

Recall organizers are betting that voters, particularly in rural and swing areas, may be easier to rally after Mr. Polis and state Sens. Pete Lee and Brittany Pettersen helped pass new laws restricting oil-and-gas drilling and a red-flag law allowing authorities to confiscate a gun from someone deemed a danger.

“People here are tired of being slapped in the face,” said Tom Good, a GOP activist leading the recall effort against Mr. Polis.

“The governor is focused on governing for all of Colorado,” a spokeswoman for Mr. Polis said of the recall effort.

In a joint statement, Ms. Pettersen and Mr. Lee vowed to beat back the recall attempts, saying that organizers of the efforts did not represent most people in their districts.

Under Colorado law, recall supporters must gather 631,266 signatures by Sept. 6 to trigger a recall election for Mr. Polis. They must also get signatures equivalent to a quarter of the number of votes cast in the last general election in Ms. Pettersen’s swing district in the Denver suburbs and Mr. Lee’s district in historically conservative Colorado Springs.

While Republicans have lost a number of key races in Colorado over the last few elections, including control of the state senate last year, they have been using recalls more frequently. In 2013, they successfully recalled two Democratic state legislators for their support of gun-control legislation. A third resigned to avoid a threatened recall election.

Robert Preuhs, a political-science professor at Metropolitan State University of Denver, said the chances of activists getting enough signatures to trigger recall elections this year are slim. Mr. Polis won with 53% of the vote, while Ms. Pettersen and Mr. Lee garnered 58% and 62%, respectively.

Nonetheless, a recall effort has other potential benefits for Republicans, Mr. Preuhs said. “One is to remind Polis to moderate as much as he can over the next few years, and the other is to really rally the core GOP voter to make sure they are engaged and energized with the ultimate goal to boost turnout in 2020,” he said. “It’s a signal that this is not a completely blue state yet.”

Nineteen states allow recalls of elected state officials. Of those, 11 allow recalls for political differences as opposed to malfeasance, as is happening to Mr. Polis and the two state senators in Colorado, said Joshua Spivak, a recall expert at Wagner College in New York.

While still rare, recalls at the state level are being used more frequently, according to Mr. Spivak. Between 1913 and 1993, there were 16 recall elections involving state officials. Between 1994 and 2018, there were 29.

This year, in addition to Colorado, Republicans have launched recall efforts against Democratic governors in Oregon and New Jersey.

Most recall efforts never make the ballot at all, Mr. Spivak said, but when they do, the target loses their seat about 60% of the time.

Earlier this year, Colorado conservatives attempted to recall newly elected Democratic assemblyman Tom Sullivan, whose son was killed in the 2012 Aurora theater massacre and who sponsored the red-flag bill. The effort drew the attention of national gun-control groups, which pledged money to defend Mr. Sullivan, before it was withdrawn.

Mr. Sullivan said he is now considering legislation that would make it more difficult to launch recall campaigns, which under Colorado law can begin as soon as five days after the first legislative session following a state legislator’s election.

“I think it’s outrageous that they are able to weaponize our constitution against us,” Mr. Sullivan said.

Kristi Burton Brown, vice chair of the Colorado Republican Party, started the recall effort against Mr. Sullivan. She said the state party wouldn’t get involved with the more recent recall efforts unless they trigger an election. But she said she viewed the moves as a reflection of how embattled Republicans feel in Colorado.

“The grass roots should do what the grass roots wants to do,” she said.