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Recalling governors is all the rage this year

But the odds are stacked against their success

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Recall elections were once a rarely used, “break glass in case of emergency” tool to remove politicians from office. But now, several factors have conspired to make this the most active decade for recall elections in U.S. history — and there may be more to come in the next several months.

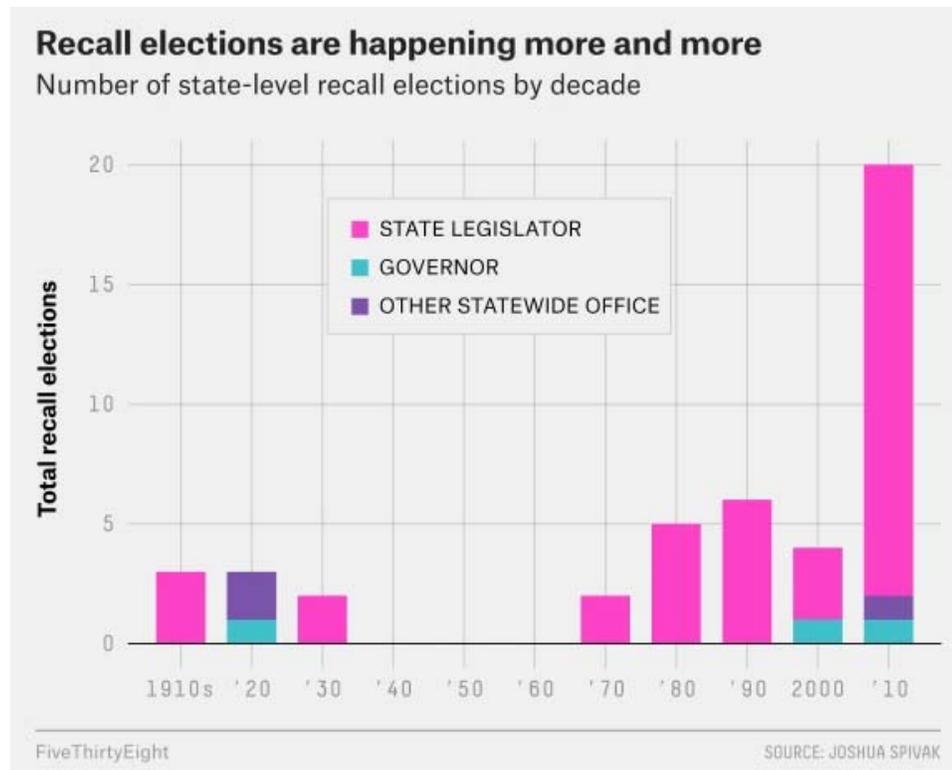
Out of 19 states (plus the District of Columbia) that allow for the recall of state officials, efforts are currently underway to recall governors in at least five. In New Jersey, Colorado and Oregon, elections officials have given organizers the OK to collect signatures to get a recall on the ballot. In Alaska, a group to recall Gov. Mike Dunleavy has formally registered with the state and is currently circulating a petition to receive official approval. There’s also a fifth effort underway in California, but multiple observers of California politics told FiveThirtyEight they don’t consider it to be serious; after all, recall attempts are more like a fact of life in the Golden State, as there have been 49 attempts to recall a California governor in the last 106 years. And a sixth state may soon join the ranks, as opponents of Nevada Gov. Steve Sisolak say they’ll kick off a formal recall effort in the fall.

However, it would be a historically rare occurrence if any of these recalls qualify for the ballot. Only four gubernatorial recall efforts have ever done so: in 1921 in North Dakota, in 1988 in Arizona (though the election was canceled after the governor was impeached), in 2003 in California and in 2012 in Wisconsin. And it’s rarer still for governors to then go on and lose their recall election: It’s only happened twice in all of American history.

Given this, five gubernatorial recall attempts is a notably high number. But recalls have gotten more common in recent years — especially at the beginning of this decade. **According to Joshua Spivak, a senior fellow at Wagner College’s Hugh L. Carey Institute for Government Reform who runs a blog on recall elections, 20 of the 45 state-level recall elections in U.S. history have taken place in just the last 10 years.**

Devised as a Progressive-era reform around 100 years ago, recalls were originally intended to punish politicians who had committed crimes or other misdeeds. But they’re much more often used to express unhappiness with the officeholder’s politics. That’s certainly the case with these recalls: In four of this year’s gubernatorial recall efforts, conservatives are trying to recall Democratic governors for supporting “leftist, radical, progressive bills,” in the words of the spokeswoman for the campaign against Colorado Gov. Jared Polis. GOP opponents of Oregon

Gov. Kate Brown cited her support for a cap-and-trade program and a bill granting driver's licenses to undocumented immigrants as grounds for a recall. In Colorado, recall petitions cite the state's new oil and gas regulations, efforts to circumvent the Electoral College and a "red flag" gun-control law. But it's not just conservatives attempting recalls. In Alaska, Democrats are targeting Dunleavy for massive cuts to the state budget, including 41 percent of state funding for the University of Alaska system and \$334,000 from the state court system in retribution for its rulings in favor of state-funded abortions. (Under pressure from constituents, Dunleavy announced last week that he would roll back some of the vetoes, including reducing the cuts to the public university system.)



Unsurprisingly, then, intense partisanship is frequently cited as a reason for the increase in recalls this decade. Critics contend that many recalls are just attempts to redo an election after a result the other side didn't like; for example, they have recently been a popular tactic among Western Republicans as their influence in states like California and Nevada has declined. As political scientist and FiveThirtyEight contributor Seth Masket noted in 2013, "if you have these tools lying around, they're simply too tempting for a member of an aggrieved minority party to ignore." But partisanship is probably not the entire story. **As Spivak put it, "Increased partisanship may be a factor, but then again, it's not like we haven't had previous very partisan moments in American politics."**

Shaun Bowler, a political scientist at the University of California, Riverside, who studies recalls, believes a more precise explanation for the recent popularity of recall elections may be the decrease of civility in politics and a rise in anti-incumbent sentiment. "There is this general decline in regard for politics/politicians," Bowler wrote in an email, "and the politicians

themselves encourage that.” **Spivak, on the other hand**, told me that he thinks better technology is actually the number-one reason. The internet has simultaneously made recall campaigns cheaper and made it easier for them to raise money. Social media helps angry voters find each other; smartphones and spreadsheets make coordinating their efforts far simpler. And citizens can even download a recall petition, print it out and sign it (or get their family and friends to sign it) on the spot.

Another reason recalls may be on the rise is that power brokers are increasingly willing to put their muscle behind them. National organizations (e.g., labor unions or the National Rifle Association) have underwritten recent recall campaigns with seven-figure investments. This year, the Alaska effort is being chaired by “heavy hitters” like a wealthy coal executive and Alaska’s last living founding father. And in Colorado and Oregon, leaders of the state GOP have even supported the recall efforts, which is historically unusual. In Oregon, the state party itself initiated one of the two recall attempts of Brown and has aggressively promoted it online.

Will these factors help any of the five gubernatorial recall attempts advance to an actual election? It’s certainly a tall order for petitioners — they must collect a huge number of signatures in a short amount of time. It looks least likely in Colorado, where organizers must collect more than 10,000 signatures a day by Sept. 6 despite being grossly underfunded. The task is less daunting in Oregon, where the non-party-led recall effort said it had collected 70,000 signatures (about a quarter of the required number) in just two weeks, with two and a half months to go. And last month, recall organizers in New Jersey claimed they had collected 300,000 signatures in about three months, an impressive number but behind the pace they need to collect 1.5 million signatures in 320 days.

Numerically, it looks likeliest in Alaska, where petitioners have almost three years to collect only 28,501 signatures to submit a recall application, then 71,252 more to actually force a vote. Organizers say they have already reached the first goal — and in only two weeks to boot — but they will continue to gather signatures until Sept. 2. However, the effort will probably face a legal challenge. Alaska is one of only eight states that require a specific reason to recall elected officials, and it is unclear whether the Dunleavy recall effort meets one of the four criteria: lack of fitness, incompetence, neglect of duties or corruption. **According to Spivak**, only one state-level recall election has ever taken place in a state that requires specific grounds for recall.

So this year’s recalls face long odds of success. But even a failed recall attempt can have lasting impacts. Some recall targets have complained that the revolts poisoned the political waters around them, damaging their relationship with voters. Political science research also suggests that elected officials may react to attempts to recall members of their party by moving toward the center. In other words, recalls may be effective at scaring politicians into taking less controversial stances in an effort to avoid the ire of opposing activists. On the other hand, they may also backfire on the side organizing the recalls. Noting that even successful recalls in Wisconsin and California did not stop Democrats and Republicans, respectively, from continuing to lose ground in those states, Spivak posits that the general electorate may see recall attempts against “overreaching” politicians as an overreach of their own.