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Senate President Leroy Garcia is latest target of recall campaigns in Colorado

By BENTE BIRKELAND

Colorado is ground zero for an increasingly prevalent political strategy for opposing parties across the county: recall efforts against state officials. There have been six attempts to unseat Colorado politicians in the last few months.

It all goes back to last November when Democrats swept into power gaining control of the state legislature and every major statewide office. Republicans have blasted Democrats for moving too far to the left on gun control, stricter oil and gas regulations, and a new law that would join a compact to pledge the state's electors to the winner of the national popular vote.

The target of the latest recall campaign is Pueblo's Leroy Garcia, the Democratic senate president.

"We felt it was really time to do something. Leroy Garcia had turned his back on his constituents," said Susan Carr, one of the volunteers organizing the effort.

In order to even get the recall question on the ballot the group will need to collect 13,506 valid signatures. The group has a few tables set up in an old warehouse in downtown Pueblo.

While Garcia took a more moderate stance on some issues like gun control voting against a so-called red flag law, for Carr, that wasn't enough.

"Three more years. Three more years is a long time. We just didn't feel we could afford to wait three more years," she said.

That's when Garcia will be term limited.

Garcia is a Marine and the first Latino Senate President. He was born in Pueblo and is now raising his family there. On a hot summer day recently, Garcia went door to door dropping off flyers.

"How are you doing, sir? Are you Dennis by chance?" Garcia said as he walked up to an unaffiliated voter's door. "My name is Leroy Garcia, I'm your state senator. I wanted to drop this off for you and your family. I don't know if you're aware, sir, they are in the process of recall signature gathering."

“Yeah well, I don’t sign those. I don’t believe in that. If we elected you I think you should stay there,” said the man at the door.

“Thank you” Garcia said.

Garcia won in November with more than 70 percent of the vote against a libertarian challenger. He thinks this recall would be a waste of taxpayer dollars and an abuse of the process when it’s over a policy difference, not an ethical breach.

Along with Garcia and two other state senators, Gov. Jared Polis is also facing a recall effort and so are governors in a handful of states including Oregon, Alaska and New Jersey.

“There is some degree the desire that ‘hey, this could work’ and there’s good reason to feel it worked. It’s worked plenty of times,” said Joshua Spivak, a senior fellow at Wagner College in New York. He writes the Recall Elections Blog. He has seen a recent uptick in recall efforts. He said it’s a way to get voters angry and keep them interested.

And it has worked in Colorado before — in Garcia’s district over gun control legislation. In 2013, two state senators one from Pueblo and another from Colorado Springs, were ousted for backing a high-capacity magazine ban and universal background checks.

The biggest hurdle is getting the signatures, and Spivak said most efforts never reach the ballot. But if they do, his analysis shows voters remove elected officials 60 percent of the time.

“That’s a good reason to try it in most people’s minds who are launching it. That said, there’s a serious challenge with that you could get people riled up and maybe you’re getting the wrong people riled up,” he said. “Maybe this will blow up in your face.”

Even though no one has been recalled this year in Colorado, opposition to those efforts has energized the left. An effort to recall Democratic Rep. Tom Sullivan over gun laws fizzled after Democrats poured in a lot of national money supporting him. Sullivan’s son was murdered in the Aurora Theater shooting in 2012.

Chair of the Colorado Democratic Party, Morgan Carroll, said she takes these recall efforts seriously but said Democrats in office are just doing what they told voters they would do.

“So if it can just become a favorite gimmick, you know, when you’re a sore loser and you’ve lost a campaign, it’s wasting taxpayer dollars. It’s wasting people’s time,” Carroll said.

The efforts are also dividing the right. Some Republicans feel it distracts from bigger national priorities, like keeping Colorado’s competitive Senate seat in 2020. That’s one race that could determine which party controls the U.S. Senate.