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Romania latest example of recall election trend

by JOSHUA SPIVAK

There has been a global boom in the number of recall elections and it shows no signs of slowing

Romania's President Traian Basescu is set to become the latest major elected official to face a recall election. While the United States has gained the most notoriety for trying to kick out elected officials via the recall, we have seen interest in the recall explode on a global level. And because of trends in democratic systems, this desire for a more powerful political device shows no signs of slowing down.

Basescu has been caught in a fierce fight for office. A new left-wing Romanian parliament has voted to remove Basescu from office. On July 29, voters will get to decide his fate. Thanks to a court ruling, an absolute majority of Romanian voters must cast their ballots in order for the recall to succeed.

While Basescu's situation may be an extreme example of the power of the recall, it is by no means out of the ordinary. In the last year we've seen the United Kingdom seriously debate adopting a recall law for members of parliament. The proposed UK law would actually be somewhat similar to the Romanian one – as in Romania, the House of Commons would have to approve the recall, and then it would go to the voters to gather signatures. If enough are handed in, then there would be an election.

But the UK is not the only one taking a hard look at the recall. There's also been discussion in the city of Moscow, and states and provinces in Canada, India and Australia. The last two years has also seen amazing growth in the use of the recall. We have seen ousters in the Philippines and Germany. Last year, the US saw 151 elected officials face a recall election, a total that may be topped in 2012. And this year saw Wisconsin governor Scott Walker survive a recall vote – only the third governor in US history to face a recall. The Walker recall was noteworthy for the costs associated with the event. Campaign spending in the recall of Walker, his lieutenant governor and 15 other state legislators topped \$137.5m in less than two years.

What explains this boom in recalls, a device that has been around for centuries, but has been mostly ignored throughout that time? Most pundits like to cite voter anger, which is obviously a necessary precondition to getting a recall on the ballot. But voter anger does not explain this new found appreciation for the device. Voters around the world have been plenty angry before. As surprising as it may seem, politicians were just as venal and undoubtedly even more corrupt in the past than they are today. And if times are tough now, they were a lot tougher in the 1930s.

But there have been a few critical changes that have helped propel the recall to the fore. Technology has made it easier to get a recall moving than ever before. The internet, email and social media allow unconnected voters to be drawn into a fight over a politician's alleged misdeeds. Smartphones, spreadsheets and demographic data can maximise signature-gathering efforts. Even basic items like printers and word processing programs have made it simpler and cheaper to make high-quality fliers and other basic documents over the past several decades.

Recalls also succeed because they work – more than 50 per cent of the officials to face a recall in the US last year lost their seats.

The growth of the recall mirrors a different phenomenon – the devolution of legislative power in representative democracies. Initiatives and ballot measures have become increasing popular tools for non-elected officials to write laws, as they allow voters to decide for themselves on the pressing issues of the day. At the same time, regular polling of the electorate allows elected officials to be in near constant knowledge of the voters' positions on issues – and without question, it greatly effects how they vote. What the recall does is take these actions one step further, allowing voters to call a politician on to the proverbial carpet for misdeeds or, as in Wisconsin and Romania, unpopular policy.

It is helpful to consider the two basic theoretical models for elected government: One is called the trustee model, where an elected official is elected for his superior knowledge, wisdom, and experience and asked to vote or rule based on his own best judgment. The other is the delegate model, where the elected official is asked to represent the wishes of his constituency. Both of these models have their positives and negatives, but in recent years the delegate model has gain prominence. The recall serves as thumb on the scale of the delegate model.

Despite the claims for the great man in politics, voters like responsive elected officials. As a general rule, the populace probably does not believe that elected officials are smarter, better or more capable than themselves. They want office-holders to support issues they care about. And if the elected official deviates, they want to be able to kick them out. Whether this is a better system of government than a trustee model is a matter for debate. We will get a chance to see what Romanians think on July 29. But for the rest of the world, the recall is an example of the direction that democratic governments have been moving in.

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