

Oakland Tribune

Tuesday, Dec. 13, 2011

Technology, grumpy voters made this the year of the recall

By JOSHUA SPIVAK

Following the Occupy Oakland debacle, Mayor Jean Quan faces a well-organized recall effort. As the first mayor elected under the city's ranked-choice voting system, Quan is widely considered vulnerable to being the first Oakland mayor to ever face a recall. But the use of the recall should not be a surprise — across the country, the recall has taken off as never before.

A look at the record shows how 2011 has been the year of the recall. Just this year alone, Wisconsin held a record nine recalls against state senators and is poised to hold one against the governor.

Arizona's Senate majority leader was ousted in a recall, as was a Michigan state representative. The recall has also had a major impact on localities, with cities larger than Oakland going after their leaders.

In March, Miami-Dade became the largest locality in U.S. history to recall a mayor and Omaha's mayor barely survived one. In November alone, 30 elected officials across the nation faced a recall vote. Earlier this year, voters in Hercules recalled two of their city councilmen.

Voter anger is being credited for what the U.S. Conference of Mayors has called "recall fever." Undoubtedly, the continued recession has played a large role. But this focus ignores larger historical trends that show that the recall has been growing for at least 30 years.

For example, there have been 32 state legislative recall votes in U.S. history; all but seven of them have taken place since 1981.

So what has driven the recall to the fore these last three decades, and what, if anything does it mean for the Quan recall? The answer is the technological revolution.

Technology has transformed campaigning, fundraising and especially signature gathering. Historically, the difficult and expensive task of gathering and defending petitions in court has stopped most recalls. Technology has sliced those costs down to a more manageable size.

Thanks to technologies — from social media to smartphones to the spreadsheet — organizing and running signature-gathering efforts are easier and cheaper.

The recall's close cousin, the initiative, has also helped propel the device. We've seen the growth of a signature-gathering industry. Recall petitioners have aped these methods to get ahead.

Arguably just as important, we now have an ability to disseminate news and opinions quickly, cheaply and efficiently, thanks to the Internet and email.

All of this means that getting a recall on the ballot is easier than ever, which is bad news for the embattled Oakland mayor. And here's worse news for her. There's a strong tactical reason to use the recall — it works.

As with most special elections, voter turnout for recalls is generally lower and the more motivated party — i.e. the recall proponents — appear to have an advantage.

Note that of those 32 state legislators who faced the recall, 17 were kicked out of office — and the only reason the total isn't higher is that seven of the nine Wisconsin state Senators

survived. From the 30 recalls in November, 18 of the officials were kicked out of office. And Miami-Dade's mayor saw 88 percent of the vote go against him.

Mayor Quan's problem is exacerbated because she was elected on the ranked-choice voting system and was named as the first choice candidate on less than a quarter of the ballots. This indicates a possibly soft level of support for her — a deadly weakness in a recall.

The Quan recall campaign still has a way to go. But it can take heart from the lessons of their peers throughout the country — the recall frequently works.

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