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Recall drives could make history

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Rarely have multiple lawmakers faced such action

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By Craig Gilbert of the Journal Sentinel

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March 6, 2011 | (615) COMMENTS

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As improbable as the last three weeks have been in state politics, Wisconsin is about to embark on another wild ride into the political unknown - a series of legislative recall campaigns on a scale the nation has rarely, if ever, seen.

"I don't think there's a precedent for what's going on in Wisconsin," said Gary Moncrief of Boise State University, an expert on legislative politics. "I don't think there's ever been a case where pretty much everyone has been subject to a recall attempt at one time on both sides. That's really amazing."

Formal recall campaigns have now been launched against 16 state senators - eight Republicans and eight Democrats. That's everyone in the 33-member Wisconsin Senate who is legally eligible to be recalled this year.

Even though state law is designed to make recalls difficult and rare, some political insiders expect the petition drives now under way to succeed in forcing multiple lawmakers to face recall elections this summer.

Much like the ongoing budget fight, the recall battles could play out on a national stage. The two parties and groups across the political spectrum will be invested in the outcome, with Wisconsin now serving as the state testing ground in a broader struggle over government spending, unions and the public workforce in the run-up to the 2012 election.

"A lot of effort is going to be expended by both sides. You'll see national money. It's going to generate a lot of passion on both sides," said Mark Jefferson, executive director of the state GOP. "We're having a serious debate in this state about some very serious issues."

In the end, the success of this year's recall campaigns - and possibly a second round next year - will hinge on the depth and breadth of grass-roots anger and frustration in Wisconsin, feelings that polls suggest now run at feverish levels.

"You can't pull off a recall unless there is legitimate and real unrest," said state Democratic chair Mike Tate. "The barrier is too high. You can't manufacture it."

Should one or more state lawmakers be driven from office, the recall rage could alter the legislative calculus in Madison, influence similar policy fights in other states and leave more scars on the Wisconsin body politic.

"Recall is an extreme measure," typically spawned by "extreme circumstances," said University of Iowa professor Caroline Tolbert, an expert on the "direct democracy" reforms - recall and initiative and referendum - that grew out of the Progressive movement around the turn of the 20th century.

Scholars interviewed last week could cite only three times in American history when more than one state legislator has been recalled at roughly the same time over the same issue: two in Idaho in 1971 over a pay raise, two in Michigan in 1983 over a tax vote and two Republicans in California months apart in 1995 over their collaboration with Democrats.

Moncrief said the leading historical example of a broad-based, successful recall effort at the state level occurred 90 years ago in North Dakota, when the governor and two other statewide officials were driven from office.

What's happening in Wisconsin is uncharted territory, said Thad Kousser

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