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Governor Who Took On Unions May Face a Closely Watched Recall Election

By [MONICA DAVEY](#)

MILWAUKEE — Thousands of volunteers have raced to collect signatures near busy intersections and malls all over Wisconsin, at makeshift “drive-through” operations in parking lots, during Green Bay Packers viewing parties and [New Year’s Eve](#) pub crawls, and even at a fold-up table inside Milwaukee’s airport just off Concourse C.

By a state deadline on Tuesday, these volunteers, many of them Democrats and union supporters, say they will submit at least 720,000 names on petitions to recall Gov. [Scott Walker](#), the Republican who curtailed collective bargaining rights for public workers, leading to a face-off in this state.

Only two governors in the nation’s history have lost their jobs in recalls, but Mr. Walker himself acknowledges that, presuming there are no major flaws in the petitions, a recall election appears likely. That puts his removal, which would have a vote in late spring or early summer, within the realm of possibility.

Politicians and political operatives far beyond Wisconsin will be watching closely, not just for what the recall effort may imply for other states’ leaders who are considering cuts to workers’ benefits and union powers as a way to solve budget problems, but also as a sign for the presidential race. Wisconsin was

one of several pivotal Midwestern states that gave Barack Obama solid victories in 2008 but then elected Republicans, including Mr. Walker, in significant numbers in 2010. Money from outside the state is certain to pour in from both sides for the recall vote.

In an interview in which Mr. Walker reflected on what he described as his “very surreal” first year in office, he spoke of the outside forces. “I think there’s a real sense that the government unions don’t want anybody — Republican or Democrat — doing this,” Mr. Walker said of his moves to limit benefits and bargaining rights for public workers. “And they’re going to try to make an example of me.”

Although recall organizers, calling themselves [United Wisconsin](#), say they expect to submit thousands more signatures than the 540,208 required for a new election (or one-quarter of the voters for governor in 2010), Mr. Walker said he believed he could ultimately hold onto his job. “I look at it optimistically and say that means there’s still a majority of voters in the state who opted not to sign a recall petition and hopefully a majority of whom want us to still keep moving the state forward.”

Around Wisconsin, where control of the governor’s office and both chambers of the Legislature flipped to Republican from Democratic a year ago, people complain that the tone of political discourse has turned uncharacteristically feverish, polarized and ugly — with the recall effort, which formally began in November, as only the latest evidence.

Scores of problems have been claimed: intentionally scribbled-on petitions, physical altercations about petitions, fake names on petitions, and a slew of screamed bad words (not to mention at least one egg) exchanged over petitions. Some Democrats say they began carrying cameras in case they needed to document untoward acts. And Republicans launched a [“Recall Integrity Center” Web site](#) where people could report “shady tactics” from the other side.

“One of the worst things that’s happened in this state is how divided it’s become over this, even inside some families,” said Marlene Ott, who was gathering recall signatures last week inside the airport. Several people holding boarding passes spotted her portable stand and stopped to sign. But another passer-by, clutching the hands of two young girls, called out angrily, “This is disgraceful, absolutely

disgraceful!”

“Why,” the man, Henri Kinson of Whitewater, asked afterward, “should my granddaughters pay for these entitlements they’re calling rights?”

The move against the governor is only part of the turmoil here. Separate recall drives are under way against the Republican lieutenant governor, [Rebecca Kleefisch](#), and four Republican state senators, including Scott Fitzgerald, the majority leader, who helped pass Mr. Walker’s collective bargaining plan after Senate Democrats left Wisconsin to prevent a vote. Last summer, the same issue led to nine recall elections, which resulted in two Senate seats changing hands and a narrower Republican majority of 17 to 16.

Carol Carlin, a retired teacher whose signs beckoned people to park in the driveway of her Milwaukee County house and add their names to recall petitions, said the psyches of public workers had been devastated by Mr. Walker’s cuts. “People don’t want to become teachers when you are absolutely treated as the leeches on the system,” she said.

Mr. Walker has said his cuts to collective bargaining were needed to solve a \$3.6 billion state budget deficit and defends the move as one element of a plan to turn the state’s economic climate around. But his critics’ complaints now reach beyond the union issue, to questions about his handling of the environment, about a criminal investigation focused on people who worked for Milwaukee County during his tenure as county executive, and about his promises of 250,000 new jobs in the state during his four-year term.

In recent consecutive months, the state has been losing jobs, government estimates show, and since Mr. Walker took office, fewer than 20,000 new private sector jobs have been reported.

Recall movements around the country have increased in recent years, but they are by no means simple. Officials with the Wisconsin Government Accountability Board, which oversees elections here, have estimated that a recall will cost at least \$9 million, starting this week with a review of petitions that will

require 50 temporary workers, extra office space, extremely tight security and at least 60 days of study for omissions and duplicated names. Legal challenges are also possible before a new election is assured.

Among the biggest hurdles facing Democrats: they have not settled on a candidate. Under Wisconsin's rules, Mr. Walker would appear on a recall ballot against an opponent. There would not merely be, as in some of the other 18 states with recall laws, an up-or-down vote on retention and then another election later.

Several names, including those of Mayor Tom Barrett of Milwaukee, who lost to Mr. Walker in 2010, and Kathleen Falk, a former Dane County executive, have been mentioned, but a Democratic primary appears possible. At least some of the most widely known Democrats, including Russell D. Feingold, a former senator, have said they are not running.

In 2008, Mr. Obama won here by almost 14 percentage points, and a Republican presidential candidate has not won Wisconsin since 1984. But overwhelming Republican victories in 2010 and a State Supreme Court election in 2011 in which a justice seen as aligned with the Republicans held onto his job by a nearly even split of the state has raised new questions for races in the fall, including a United States Senate seat left open by the retirement of Herb Kohl, a Democrat.

"It's an early skirmish, a dry run, a fight of proxies and laboratory for experimentation," Mordecai Lee, a former state legislator who teaches at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, said of the recall's significance for the presidential election.

On both sides, the recall could create a testing ground for larger national themes about collective bargaining and unions, and build volunteer and political operations (not to mention a list of some 720,000 recall signers) long before fall.

Facing the possibility of joining the ranks of Gray Davis, a California governor recalled in 2003, and Lynn Frazier, a North Dakota governor recalled in 1921, Mr. Walker said he wished he had approached

the collective bargaining issue differently — not in terms of his position, but in the way he laid the groundwork about the need for change to voters. “I never realized,” he said, “how much national money and attention would come in on this particular issue.”



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