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Polls Open for Wisconsin Recall Vote

By MONICA DAVEY

SAYNER, Wis. — Polling stations opened Tuesday morning in Wisconsin as voters cast ballots to decide whether to remove six Republican state senators, the latest chapter in what has been one of the most polarized, vitriolic political years in the state in memory.

Republicans hold a 19-to-14 advantage in the State Senate, so the election could tip the balance in favor of Democrats in the upper chamber, but the vote is being more widely seen as a referendum on the policies of the state's Republican governor, Scott Walker, and as a potential preview of the 2012 presidential election in Wisconsin, which is expected to be a crucial swing state.

The recall campaigns — against six Republicans on Tuesday and against two Democratic state senators next week — have drawn frenetic get-out-the-vote efforts by local and national groups that have set up camp in affected cities and towns, filled radio and television airwaves across the state (and even into Minnesota) and led to what is expected to be some \$30 million in spending by campaigns and outside groups, placing some of these among the costliest state legislative races ever to take place here.

“This is off the charts for Wisconsin, wildly off the charts,” said Mike McCabe, the executive director of the Wisconsin Democracy Campaign, which has tracked the spending and says it has come from numerous sources, including union groups that want to see the Republicans removed and, on the other

side, conservative groups like the Club for Growth Wisconsin and Americans for Prosperity. “This gives whole new meaning to the word ‘unprecedented.’ ”

These elections, oddly timed during the state’s sleepy vacation season, were fueled by the anger that has split the state since Mr. Walker and Republican lawmakers took over control of the government this year, and pursued an aggressive agenda — in particular, cutting collective-bargaining rights for public workers as a way, they said, to solve the state’s budget gap. At stake on Tuesday is dominance of the State Senate; Democrats would need to win three seats to grab the majority and slow Mr. Walker’s ability to set the state’s direction.

Within Wisconsin, where the recall efforts took root during a fierce standoff in the Legislature over the collective-bargaining cuts, the signs of anger are everywhere. Complaints of stolen campaign signs have cropped up in many Senate districts. Claims of dirty tricks (including reports of misleading campaign literature and gift-card offers in exchange for votes) are rampant. And Mr. Walker, who has become a focus of this state’s division and who may himself face recall next year, has been greeted with dueling contingents of protesters and supporters in even the most traditionally polite setting, the opening festivities last week in West Allis for the State Fair.

More surprising, though, is the level of interest beyond the state’s borders. These state legislative races (which might, in a normal year, go mostly ignored outside the state capital) are being seen by some as an early measure of what is ahead for both political parties in 2012 and one gauge of public opinion of the set of states, including this one, where Republicans scored sweeping victories in statehouses in 2010.

Here, state officials and other experts are reluctant to make predictions about the recall outcomes given little history to use as a model, a peculiar array of variables and a confusing, staggered set of election dates that included primaries with Republican-leaning candidates who ran as Democrats as a strategy to help Republican incumbents.

Since the state began allowing recalls of state-level politicians in 1926, only four such elections —

which allow a new challenger to oppose an incumbent before a term's end — were held before this year, and only two of the incumbents were ultimately thrown out.

Still, leaders in both political parties are professing optimism. “Enthusiasm and momentum are on our side,” said Mark Miller, the Democratic minority leader in the State Senate, who suggested that Democrats had the ability to capture all six of the Republican seats in question.

Scott Fitzgerald, the Republican majority leader in the Senate, said he had confidence that Republicans would maintain their majority in the chamber. “No question about it,” Mr. Fitzgerald said.

In a way, the senators facing recall, after residents gathered thousands of signatures on petitions, were picked less for individual acts than for fitting one of two categories.

The six Republicans voted in favor of the cuts to collective-bargaining rights earlier this year, have served in office for at least a year (a technical requirement of the state's recall provision) and were, in some cases, viewed as coming from districts where Democratic voters had gained in numbers of late.

The two Democrats (a third Democrat already survived a recall effort last month) fled Wisconsin along with the rest of the Senate's Democrats in a maneuver to try to block a vote on the collective bargaining measure, served for at least a year and were, in some cases, viewed as coming from districts where Republicans had gained in numbers.

Senator Dan Kapanke, from a district in the La Crosse area that President Obama won in 2008, is viewed as one of the most vulnerable of the Republicans, in part because his district includes lots of public workers who would presumably be most affected by Republicans' cuts to benefits and collective bargaining rights. Mr. Kapanke seemed not to help himself when he told a Republican group this spring (in an address that was secretly recorded and described in local newspaper accounts) that Republicans had to hope government workers “kind of are sleeping” on Election Day.

“We're competing against every left-wing group you've heard of — and everyone you haven't,” Mr.

Kapanke's campaign manager, Jennifer Harrington, said the other day.

Even once Tuesday's votes are counted, however, control of the Senate might not be known. Unless one party or the other wins most of the races, all eyes will turn to the recall elections of Senate Democrats next week. Senator Jim Holperin, a Democrat who represents towns like this one, Sayner, in the state's far Northwoods, is seen as the most vulnerable Democrat.

The outcomes of the recall elections seem likely to help decide the future of another, larger recall effort. Democrats have pledged to remove Mr. Walker, but signatures cannot be gathered for such an effort until at least next January, when he will have served a year in office. A victory by Republicans in the Senate would most likely temper such talk, while victories for the Democrats would encourage more of it.

Even beyond the elections, this state's partisan gulf seems to have seeped into nearly every layer of government. Law enforcement authorities have investigated reports that a dispute between justices on the State Supreme Court turned physical during discussions over the state's cuts to collective bargaining, and a lawsuit has been filed to stop those cuts from taking effect. And last week, a state facilities worker was charged with a misdemeanor after being accused of popping a protester's balloon with a knife at the State Capitol, a place that has seen regular, continuing protests since the collective bargaining cuts were first announced.

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