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## Wisconsin's rallying cry: Throw the bums out

**In this once-tranquil state, activists are gathering signatures to trigger recall elections of 16 state senators – 8 Republicans and 8 Democrats. It's been political warfare since the union law's passage.**

Nicholas Riccardi, Los Angeles Times

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Reporting from La Crosse, Wis.

In Wisconsin, the new normal is perpetual political warfare.

Ever since a Republican governor and GOP-dominated Legislature pushed through a law to curtail the collective bargaining rights of most public employee unions, this normally get-along state has engaged in all-or-nothing partisan combat.

Activists are gathering signatures to trigger recall elections of 16 state senators — eight Republicans and eight Democrats. Analysts and political professionals in both parties agree that the Republicans are more threatened.

Democrats could even retake the Senate if they oust three Republicans without losing any of their own seats.

The Republican Party has filed a public information request to obtain emails from a University of Wisconsin professor who has written critically about the conduct of Gov. Scott Walker. The GOP accuses Senate Democrats of abdicating their responsibilities by fleeing the state to try to prevent a vote.

Unions are threatening boycotts of businesses that don't display signs saying they support workers.

National groups are pouring money into a previously obscure state Supreme Court election set for Tuesday, in which the Republican incumbent is suddenly threatened by resurgent Democrats who believe that swinging the court majority to their party would give them an edge when Walker's law inevitably is challenged before the high court.

The state was abruptly flooded last week with ads supporting Justice David Prosser, a sign that

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conservatives fear he could lose. Even Sarah Palin entered the fray, urging Wisconsinites via Twitter to "please remember to vote for Justice Prosser on April 5."

"People are really angry," said Scott Becher, a former Republican legislative staffer who is now a public policy and communications consultant. "This is just completely off the Richter scale. I don't know when this is going to end."

Polls show that Walker's law is unpopular in the state. Across Wisconsin it has divided families and changed the dynamics of conversation.

"It gets to the point where, if you meet someone, you ask what their viewpoint is so you know whether to talk to them anymore," said Bruce Anderson, 58, a retired plant manager in Verona who supports the law.

The law's status remains uncertain. A judge has put the measure on hold, ruling that Republicans apparently did not obey the state's public meetings law when they used a parliamentary maneuver last month to pass it without Democrats present. All 14 Democratic senators had fled to Illinois to deprive that body of a quorum.

One of the current political battlegrounds is La Crosse, a normally amiable town on the banks of the Mississippi River. Amid the empty brick storefronts along 5th Street, one building has been bustling with activity as volunteers organize the recall against Republican Dan Kapanke, a second-term state senator who represents this town of 51,000 and the surrounding farmland.

On Friday, Democrats announced that in a little over three weeks — less than half the time allotted to them — they had collected enough signatures to trigger a vote to recall Kapanke. Under Wisconsin law, politicians cannot be recalled until at least a year after their election.

Kapanke wasn't surprised. "This is going to be ground zero," he said in an interview. "The unions are going to make their stand here."

The recall election would take place this summer.

Kapanke has received so many threats over his vote — and had nails left in his driveway four times — that he has canceled his regular constituent office hours as a precaution.

Walker's measure, which was supported by every Republican senator, calls for state and local workers to pay more toward their retirement and health benefits, concessions that unions accepted.

But it would also bar most public-sector unions from negotiating future compensation, prevent them from automatically collecting their members' dues, and require them to receive annual votes from their membership to stay in business. Critics contend it is an attempt to neutralize one of the Democratic Party's strongest backers. The law would not apply to police, state troopers or firefighters, whose unions are more likely to back Republicans.

The law represents the sort of high-stakes political move that has normally been foreign to this state, where Democrats and Republicans have prided themselves on working together. Kapanke, a jovial former seed salesman who owns a collegiate league baseball team here, is the sort of steadfast conservative who, for many in this Democratic-leaning district, represented that willingness to work across party lines.

No longer, said Bethany Poellinger, a 31-year-old medical administrator whose family has given up its season tickets to Kapanke's team, the La Crosse Loggers.

"He was kind of a stand-up guy," said Poellinger, an independent who voted for Kapanke during his last election. "But bottom line, he didn't represent his district." She signed the recall petition.

Even when Kapanke walks into a favored haunt here, like Marge's Restaurant, he greets some diners with the question, "We still friends?"

Everyone greeted Kapanke warmly, even those who don't like his vote. "He's all right. He's always done good by me," said Norm Deml, an 83-year-old retired mechanic and union member. However, he hopes Walker — who was elected in November and can't be challenged until this fall — gets recalled.

Other diners were happy with the steps Kapanke and his fellow Republicans are taking. "I'm 100% behind him," said Olen Nantz, 58. "He did what he knew was right."

"No," interjected Dale Cornforth, 70, who lives across the Mississippi in Minnesota but liked Kapanke so much he donated to his prior campaigns. Kapanke was pressured by GOP leaders to support the union bill, said Cornforth, adding that he would no longer donate to Kapanke.

Kapanke said that if the election were held today he would only have, "at best," a 50-50 chance of surviving. The odds will improve once the legislative session winds down and he can spend more time back home explaining how his vote can generate jobs, he said.

"You'll see people looking at Wisconsin more because we have the intestinal fortitude to put our budget in order," he said.

Though residents are clearly upset, some question recalling legislators over a single vote.

"The voters have already spoken," said John Wisand, 57, a lab technician who voted against Kapanke and Walker in previous elections. "You can disagree with his politics, but the people voted him in."

Others say it may be the only way to correct a political climate that has skewed to the extremes. Dan Slama, a computer consultant from the neighboring town of Onalaska, said that Kapanke and other Republicans should have negotiated with unions after workers agreed to the benefits concession.

"Politics in general is getting worse," said Slama, 31, an independent. "It's not just Wisconsin, it's everywhere. There is just no more middle ground anymore."

He signed the recall petition too.

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