

Idaho makes little use of the recall

By Randy Stapilus/Ridenbaugh Press

Idahoans may be famous for their skepticism of government but they've made little use of the recall. It's available, as Coeur d'Alene people well know. We'll return there in a moment, and why their recent failed try is something relatively new.

Idaho is one of 19 states allowing; from the constitution: "Every public officer in the state of Idaho, excepting the judicial officers, is subject to recall by the legal voters of the state or of the electoral district from which he is elected." (Members of Congress are not, as activists learned in 1967 when they tried to recall Senator Frank Church.) The numbers needed for petition signatures and votes at election are significant, but no particular reason is required; in some states like Washington, specific causes are needed, and not only the voters but judges have to agree that they are legally strong enough.

Thousands of officials at any one time are subject to recall, and considering the critics they inevitably accumulate, the remarkable thing may be that recalls are so rare. There may be a feeling it should be used sparingly, that regular elections are where changes ought to be made. In this season's Wisconsin recall elections, exit polls showed 10 percent of the voters thought recall elections are never appropriate, and 60 percent thought only clear misconduct was reason enough.

No statewide official in Idaho has ever been recalled. An attempt some months back to recall Superintendent of Public Instruction Tom Luna fell far short. Just two Idaho legislators, Aden Hyde and Fisher Ellsworth, have ever been recalled, both in 1971; a recent effort targeted at Boise Republican Senator Mitch Toryanski failed. The last county official recalled (in my memory and that of a long-time Idaho Association of Counties staffer) was Latah County Commissioner Mark Solomon in 1994.

Those successful recalls turn out to have been about the same thing: Elected official pay. Hyde and Ellsworth had supported a legislative pay increase. Solomon and two fellow commissioners (who narrowly survived their recall election) had converted the commission from part-time to full-time (with a pay raise). Little wonder Idaho elected officials get so nervous about raising pay for their offices.

Turning then to the partisan hotbed Coeur d'Alene, where (in the central city district) Democrats can be competitive, but also home to a highly energetic and vocal collection of Republican activist groups, a half-dozen or so. Some Coeur d'Alene city elections, formally non-partisan, have turned into partisan battles. In 2009 Council member Mike Kennedy, a Democrat, won on election night by five votes over Jim Brannon, a Republican. Not only a recount but a court case (reducing the margin to three votes) lasted a year.

That was the backdrop for this month's recall effort, targeting Kennedy, Mayor Sandi Bloem and two other council members; recall backers failed to get enough valid petition

signatures to force the election. The ostensible rationale was a council upgrade (using no tax funds) of a part of the city's waterfront, but there was much more to it. This was a partisan battle of partisan sides, and it may be the first serious Idaho recall effort (unless you count Luna's) waged in that context. Republican state Representative Kathy Sims was one of the leading activists. Jeff Ward of the Reagan Republicans remarked in a blog post, "Many of us are quite disappointed that we do not have a recall campaign to wage in August or November."

Less partisan Coeur d'Alene voters may be less disappointed.