

What are recall elections and how democratic are they?

Recall elections are a phenomena normally only experienced in the United States. After declaring their independence, 11 of the 13 original colonies wrote new constitutions, and many of these documents showed the new spirit of democracy. A few states wrote the recall into law as a method of controlling their elected representatives. The states which adopted the recall were mainly concerned with the power of the representatives who served the states in the national government's congress.

Recalls are, in essence, elections held outside the normal electoral cycle for a particular elected position. They highlight the question over the role of elected officials, namely whether the official should vote according to his own opinion, or perform as a delegate and vote according to the wishes of his constituency. This is because recall elections are in effect called by the constituents of a particular county or state. They allow the public to “recall” (or remove) people from office which they believe are not acting in the best interests of the population before the end of the term in office. This is done by gathering a petition of signatures. If there are enough signatories, an election is called, in which the result can go two ways: either the elected official is kept in office, or he is replaced by an alternative. As with normal elections, other people can stand against the incumbent in a recall election. However, even though 26 states authorize the recall in some form, Gray Davis was only the second governor in U.S. history to face a recall vote, where Arnold Schwarzenegger won.

Until now, recall elections seem to sound like the perfect countermeasure to politicians who are elected into office and then proceed to vote in relation to their own opinions and never listen to their constituents until the next election. However, there are setbacks to recall elections. The biggest question is about the extent to which they complement US democracy.

The largest problem with them is the actual method by which they are initiated. During this signature gathering period, rival candidates who want to get into office may go around spreading rumours about the incumbent and gathering signatures to initiate a recall. There may in fact be nothing wrong with the current official. This is in fact the exact opposite to the whole point of recalls. This “buying out” is of course unacceptable, but it happens.

Secondly, there is an inherent problem with the actual election process. Misinformation and lack of information are the two largest causes of low turnout to recalls – people often do not notice that they can firstly authorise the recall

even before having to decide on a successor. Also, the sheer number of candidates that normally put themselves forward for recalls makes the ballot paper huge and unwieldy, and means that people can sometimes get confused – in fact, in the 2003 Californian recall election, there were 135 candidates on the ballot paper.

Finally, the method by which the winner is decided can be deemed to be unfair – no one person needs a majority to win; just a simple 1 vote lead over the second placed candidate can get someone into office. Combined with the short amount of time between announcing a recall and the actual event, which leaves little time to get to know the candidates better, this can lead to controversies and a new official who does not have the support of the majority of the population.

In conclusion, the recall election system of the United States was set up at the time of the Declaration of Independence by people who did not want to repeat the history of British rule on future generations by disallowing elected officials to become tyrannical. The system is generally well intended, but its implementation leads to a process which is deeply undemocratic and which allows money and special interests to determine the outcome of the election of an important official.

Ruben Arakelyan