



CASCADE POLICY INSTITUTE

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## Summary

Executives and CEOs are fired everyday, not just every two or four years, for malfeasance and irresponsible leadership. Public servants should be held just as accountable, and the recall helps us do that. Oregonians need not fear the ability to vote politicians out of office during special elections. To the contrary, we should view recalls for what they are: peaceful revolutions.

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## Peaceful revolutions and recalling politicians

*by Joseph Coon and Kurt T. Weber*

John F. Kennedy once remarked, “Those who make peaceful revolution impossible will make violent revolution inevitable.” Think seriously about JFK’s words as the recall effort against California Gov. Gray Davis continues.

Oregon voters passed an initiative 95 years ago that helps reduce the potential of a violent revolution. On June 1, 1908 Oregonians put into place what is now Article II, Section 18 of the state Constitution: “Every public officer in Oregon is subject...to recall by the electors of the state or the electoral district from which the public officer is elected.”

Jim Puzzanghera at the San Jose *Mercury News* writes, “The first recall law in the country was a municipal measure enacted in Los Angeles in 1903 for local officials.” In 1911 California followed Oregon’s lead and became the second state to allow the recall of all public servants. The Initiative and Referendum Institute notes, as many as 5,000 recall elections for state and local officials have been held in the United States.

The California recall has its local detractors. A July 30 Salem *Statesman Journal* editorial decries, “Voters so distrust government that they willingly chip away at the representative democracy our enlightened Founders gave us.” Actually, the recall is representative democracy in action.

Our Founders, who led an armed rebellion against England’s unresponsive rule, would agree. Thomas Jefferson himself asked, “What country can preserve its liberties if its rulers are not warned from time to time that their people preserve the spirit of resistance?” The recall epitomizes peaceful resistance, one civil tool we have to hold public servants accountable to We the People.

The editorial continues, this distrust in government “threatens to destroy Americans’ faith and support for their political system.” We should look more closely at the causes of this distrust instead of focusing on a symptom.

According to an August Field Poll 70 percent of California voters disapproved of Davis’s performance as governor. Even 49 percent of voters from his own politi-

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cal party were unsatisfied with him. Those numbers demonstrate little “faith” or “support” in the Davis-led government. The important question: Why?

Some California recall critics worry the process could be easily abused to depose officials for petty reasons. However, the process is not easy. Puzanghera notes, “Although 18 states permit the recall of state officials, only one U.S. governor apparently has ever been thrown out of office because of it, North Dakota’s Lynn J. Frazier in 1917.”

The Associated Press reports the Honorable Barbara Roberts was the only Oregon governor, and one of the few in the U.S., to ever encounter a serious recall attempt. In 1992 the timber industry led such an effort, but the campaign fell a few thousand signatures short of initiating a recall election.

The Better Portland Alliance recently undertook a recall effort against Portland Mayor Vera Katz for “malfeasance in office and abuse of power,” but did not succeed in getting sufficient signatures. State employee Timothy Dunn has initiated an Internet campaign to recall Gov. Kulongoski. Dunn states Oregonians were misled by Kulongoski, who repeatedly stated during his campaign and initial months in office he would not push for higher general taxes. In a May 27 speech he promised, “I’m not going to ask the Legislature, and I’m not going to ask the citizens of Oregon to raise taxes.” Within three months, Kulongoski approved an \$800 million tax increase.

In 1983 recall petitions were circulated against Michigan’s then-Gov. Jim Blanchard and numerous state legislators for increasing income taxes. Voters ousted State Senators David Serotkin and Phil Mastin from office. Michigan did not become the Mayhem State as a result; in fact, the Great Lake State remains peacefully in the Union to this very day.

The ability to recall public servants encourages them to be responsive to We the People. The recall is akin to a parliamentary “vote of no confidence,” a common occurrence in England and other countries with similar governmental systems.

Corporate executives and CEOs of non-profits are fired everyday, not just every two or four years, for malfeasance and irresponsible leadership. Our public servants should be held just as accountable. Being elected to a term in office is a privilege granted by voters; voters should be able to revoke that privilege when they deem it necessary.

Oregonians need not fear the ability to recall politicians. To the contrary, we should view recalls for what they are: peaceful revolutions.

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