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CA RECALL HISTORY

BY KATHERINE ADELMAN '22

At the turn of the twentieth century, California politics was dominated by one entity: the Southern Pacific Railroad. The company was so large and amassed such wealth that it controlled the affairs of both political parties, effectively squashing any criticism from within official government institutions. This kind of monopoly power and the political corruption it allowed inspired the progressive movement at the state level, mirroring a similar trend taking place on the national stage. It was within this context that California's progressive party rose to power.

To get a sense of the national mood in this era, it is important to understand that the progressive party was gaining traction across the United States. Reforming basic democratic processes was on the minds of many Americans in the late 1800s and early 1900s as citizens committed themselves to a new wave of social and political activism. One

aim of the movement was to generate a more direct democracy. Progressives pushed for three reforms to reclaim power for citizens, all three of which California would go on to adopt. They were the recall, the referendum, and the initiative. Progressives argued that these reforms would more intimately engage citizens in democratic processes, thus enhancing citizenship. These processes would also provide citizens with a means to staunch the influence of overbearing state lawmakers and corporations--another major concern of the era--part of the corruption of decades past.

The idea for the recall was born around the time of America's founding. The idea to formalize the recall was contemplated in some of the thirteen colonies. Some states even included a recall provision in their state constitutions, though the procedure immediately fell out of use and was not widely discussed again until the late nineteenth century.

In 1902, Oregon became the first state to formalize the referendum and initiative processes, and in 1908, it became the first state to institute the recall process. Sixteen states, including California, followed suit. However, Oregon's precedent was not the exclusive impetus for California's ultimate decision to adopt the recall. The political conditions created by monopoly power convinced Californians of the need to adjust their election and legislation procedures.

The effort to institute a recall process in California began in 1898 under the stewardship of progressive party leader, Dr. John Randolph Haynes. Frustrated with the current procedures, which he believed stymied civic progress, Dr. Haynes became the recall's most active advocate. In 1900, he managed to secure an appointment to the Charter Revision Committee for the City of Los Angeles. Through this position, he was able to influence the 1903 charter, which formally instituted the recall for city councilmen and the mayor. The recall was successfully employed multiple times in the first years of its existence, prompting twenty-five other localities in the state to adopt the recall provision for themselves.



Dr. John Randolph Haynes
PHOTO SOURCE: Wikimedia Commons

Still, California progressives sought to push for reform beyond specific localities. Party leaders decided that the next step in their strategy was to launch a gubernatorial campaign with a pro-recall advocate on the ticket. They found their man in Hiram Johnson, a San Francisco Assistant District Attorney. The bulk of Johnson's campaign centered around the corrupt behavior of the Southern Pacific Railroad and his commitment to weeding out malicious corporations and restoring power to the people. His pleas won over voters and he assumed office in 1910. Upon his inauguration, Governor Johnson immediately set out to fulfill his campaign promises. Johnson pushed for an amendment to the California State Constitution. His efforts were fruitful when, in 1911, he secured the passage of an amendment institutionalizing the recall, referendum, and initiative.

The first recall attempt to qualify for the ballot occurred in 1913, against the Republican Senator Marshall Black. The attempt was successful, forcing Senator Black out of office and making way for his pro-prohibition replacement, Democrat Herbert C. Jones, to enter into office. This was the first of



Gov. Hiram Johnson
PHOTO SOURCE: Wikimedia Commons

only eleven recall attempts to have successfully made it on the ballot. The vast majority of recall attempts--168 out of a total of 179--never achieve enough signatures to go to a vote.



Sen. Marshall Black
PHOTOS from JoinCalifornia.com



Herbert C. Jones

In the years immediately succeeding the introduction of the recall, it found popular use at the state level. Three recall attempts qualified for the ballot in 1913 and 1914, two of which successfully ousted the state senators challenged. This excitement for the recall would not last, however. Between 1916 and 1960, there were only five recall attempts, none of which obtained enough support to make it on the ballot. Even when the recall once again came into regular usage in the mid-1960s, there would not be another successful recall attempt until 1994, when California State Senator David Roberti (D) found himself on the chopping block and ultimately ousted.



Sen. David O. Roberti
PHOTO SOURCE: VerdeXchange

Since 1960, every governor has experienced at least an attempted recall, though only twice has the issue made it on the ballot and only once was it successful in the removal of a governor from office. The unfortunate governor was Democrat Gray Davis who, eleven months into his second term, found himself handing over his governorship to his replacement, the Republican Arnold Schwarzenegger.

Governor Davis never experienced particularly high favorability amongst his constituents and only narrowly won reelection in 2002. Thus, when the state began experiencing major problems, Davis was an easy, unpopular target for frustrated constituents. His first major setback, the energy crisis, occurred during his first term, but the resentment generated as a result carried over into his second term. Starting in 2000, the state had begun experiencing rolling blackouts as it faced ever worse electricity shortages. The crisis had been brewing since before Davis took office, but it was under his leadership that blackouts became a normal occurrence, causing many Californians to fault him for mishandling the situation. Things got worse for Governor Davis when, less than a month into his second term, Davis announced that the state was facing a \$35 billion budget deficit. After this announcement, state Republicans began immediately collecting signatures for his recall.



Gov. Gray Davis
PHOTO SOURCE: The US National Archives

CALIFORNIA RECALL HISTORY

Target Official	Attempts	Qualified for Ballot	Recalled
Governor	55	2	1
Lieutenant Governor	2		
Attorney General	7		
Secretary of State	1		
State Treasurer	1		
State Controller	1		
Insurance Commissioner	2		
Member of the Board of Equalization	2		
Member of the State Senate	30	6	3
Member of the Assembly	50	3	2
Supreme Court (entire membership)	1		
Supreme Court (individual justices)	27		
Total	179	11	6

Source: "California Recall History." California Secretary of State. Accessed October 24, 2021. <https://www.sos.ca.gov/>.

Additional political conditions of this era helped make the recall against Davis a success. To start, never before in California's state history had a governor been successfully recalled. Accustomed to these failed attempts, despite 53 attempts against governors, many people did not take the threat of a recall seriously, resulting in a lackluster showing at the polls. Furthermore, the California of the early 2000s was far more centrist than the California of 2021. Less polarization decreased the power of party loyalty resulting in less energy from Democratic constituents on election day. Davis was also hurt by Schwarzenegger's prominence. Famous for his work in Hollywood, Schwarzenegger stood out in the crowded field of replacement candidates, which helped him eventually oust Davis in 2003.

Thus the 2021 recall beat the odds by being only the eleventh recall attempt of 179 to make it onto the ballot. The failure at the polls to oust Governor Newsom, however, was consistent with California's recall history. ♦



Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger
PHOTO SOURCE: Wikimedia Commons

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