



The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

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SPICe Briefing

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Approaches to recall of elected representatives

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This briefing provides an overview of the typical features of mechanisms for recalling elected representatives. The briefing also summarises proposed and operational recall mechanisms in the United Kingdom, and examples of recall mechanisms in other countries. ¹



12 March 2025
SB 25-09

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Summary

Recall mechanisms allow an electorate to remove their elected representative(s) before their term in office ends.¹ The rights of an electorate to recall an elected representative are typically established by constitutional provisions or by statute.¹ The conditions that can trigger recall mechanisms, the elected representatives that can be recalled, and the support required to successfully recall an elected representative vary across countries and jurisdictions that permit recall.² This is to ensure that the recall mechanism is compatible with the electoral system used to elect representatives.² As such, recall mechanisms are less common in places where the electoral system is party-based (e.g., mixed-proportional system) rather than candidate-based (e.g., first-past-the-post system).²

Only Members of Parliament (MPs; UK Parliament House of Commons) can be recalled in the United Kingdom. Recall procedures for Members of the Scottish Parliament (MSPs) and Members of the Senedd (MS) have been discussed in the Scottish Parliament and Senedd Cymru, respectively. However, as of now, no such system has been established for recalling representatives from either legislature. There is no recall mechanism at the Northern Ireland Assembly.

Various countries have implemented recall mechanisms at different governance levels to dismiss elected representatives before their terms expire. This briefing provides an overview of the recall procedures in the United States, Latvia, Canada, Venezuela, Germany, Japan, and Mexico.

Proposal to introduce a recall mechanism for Members of the Scottish Parliament

On 19 January 2022, Graham Simpson MSP proposed a draft Bill setting out conditions that could trigger the removal of an MSP from the Parliament and a recall mechanism to allow constituents to directly recall a representative. Graham Simpson MSP has since secured the right to introduce a Members Bill on Removal from Office and Recall of Members of the Scottish Parliament.³

The proposal document lodged by Graham Simpson MSP proposed that constituency MSPs could be recalled and subsequently replaced by holding a by-election. The proposal notes that replacing regional MSPs subject to recall may be a "more complex consideration".³ This is because elections to the Scottish Parliament are carried out using the Additional Member System (AMS).⁴ This voting system combines first-past-the-post and proportional representation. A first vote is used to elect a named candidate for a single member constituency (like UK Parliament elections).⁴ A second vote is used to elect an additional member.⁴ This vote is cast for a political party or an independent candidate on a regional ballot. Each political party standing in the regional ballot will have submitted a list of candidates in order of the party's preference (this is known as "closed list").⁴ When a vacancy of a Scottish Parliament seat occurs, the Scotland Act 1998 provides that constituency MSPs (section 9) are replaced by holding a by-election and regional MSPs (section 10) are replaced by selecting the next member on the party list.⁵ Graham Simpson MSP, in reference to the question of how recalled regional MSPs could be replaced, stated in the proposal document:

"[...] while it is possible to envisage how a recall petition could be run across a region, it is challenging to establish how the member, and other candidates seeking election to their seat could compete in any form of by-election."

Scottish Parliament, 2022³

A consultation on the proposed Bill was held between 19 January 2022 and 13 April 2022.

⁶ There were 125 respondents providing views on the introduction of a mechanism for recalling MSPs. ⁶ 84% of respondents were supportive of such a mechanism. The summary of the consultation responses highlights several general reasons given in support of a recall system:

"MSPs are there to represent their constituents; should those constituents be dissatisfied with their representation they should have the right to demand a change of representative (SS ID: 183011196). This is simple accountability to the electorate to ensure their MSP is working to the rules and is working for their community as a priority (SS ID: 183003001)."

Scottish Parliament, 2022⁶

The Electoral Management Board for Scotland (EMB), the statutory body with responsibility for overseeing devolved elections in Scotland, was the only organisation to respond to the consultation.⁶ The EMB expressed concerns about designing a recall system for regional MSPs and maintaining proportional representation in the Parliament.

The EMB states:ⁱ

“ The potential introduction of recall system for MSPs is again a policy decision for the Scottish Parliament, outwith the remit of the EMB. However the EMB must highlight the practical challenges that it would involve especially if applied to MSPs elected through the Regional lists. For those elected in constituencies, there is a model from the 2015 Act that has been applied three times. There are practical challenges - appropriate, accessible and well located signing places, arrangements for postal or proxy signing, access to a current register etc and costs would arise for all of these that would need to be resourced. However the mechanism for running a petition and a consequent by-election is clear and has a model in the 2015 Act. For Regional members however vacancies are not filled by by-election and the approach to recall is far from clear. A successful recall petition might create a vacancy but the consequence would not be a by-election. Proportionality from the original poll would need to be preserved. Assuming the recalled member still had the endorsement of their party then they would remain in the seat. If the party removed their endorsement then the seat would go to their next candidate on their list. These are theoretical challenges to the policy, possibly beyond the EMB remit for comment, but they reflect clear practical problems that would confront Returning Officers.”

Scottish Parliament, 2022⁶

Professor Alistair Clark, of Newcastle University , provided a response to the consultation and highlighted some of the design considerations for ensuring compatibility with the Additional Member System used to return MSPs to the Scottish Parliament. ⁶ Professor Clark's response states:

“ The question of recall should be completely separate from the question of who is chosen to succeed the recalled MSP. On the question of thresholds for recall petitions, 10% of the area the MSP is elected for seems reasonable enough, whether that is a constituency or a regional list. I would not adopt a tiered approach to this where different levels are required in different types of electoral area. In practice however this probably means there is more chance of recall with a constituency MSP than a list MSP. I am sanguine about the fact that the recall of a regional list MSP would not necessarily lead to a by-election. This is how the casual vacancy system for the lists works, and I see no reason why it shouldn't continue to work that way if an MSP is recalled. The voters will have a new MSP, who, given what happened to their predecessor, is likely to take their role seriously, which seems to me to be the whole point of the exercise.”

Scottish Parliament, 2022⁶

Graham Simpson MSP lodged a final proposal in Parliament on 27 September 2022 and secured the right to introduce a Bill. ³ On 2 May 2024, during Stage 1 scrutiny of the Scottish Elections (Representation and Reform) Bill at the Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee, the then Minister for Parliamentary Business George Adam MSP indicated his view that the issue of recall should be considered by the Parliament. ⁷ George Adam MSP stated:

ⁱ The 2015 Act referred to in the quotation is the Recall of MPs Act 2015. This Act allows Members of the House of the Commons to be recalled and is summarised later in this briefing in a section titled [Recall of Members of Parliament \(House of Commons, UK Parliament\)](#).

“ [...] I put on the record that I think it is for the Parliament to make that decision, probably using your bill as a vehicle. It is important that we have that discussion, and, in my view, it is probably better coming from a member as opposed to the Government.”

Scottish Parliament, 2024⁷

Recall mechanisms in the United Kingdom

This section of this briefing summarises the procedure for recalling MPs from the House of Commons at the UK Parliament and the recent inquiry at the Senedd Cymru on individual member accountability.

Recall of Members of Parliament (House of Commons, UK Parliament)

The Recall of MPs Act 2015 provides for the recall of individual MPs in the UK Parliament House of Commons.⁸ The Act received Royal Assent on 26 March 2015.⁹

The Recall of MPs Act allows for a recall petition to be opened against a sitting MP if any of three conditions are met.¹⁰ The conditions are:

- The MP has, after becoming an MP, been convicted in the United Kingdom of an offence and sentenced or ordered to be imprisoned or detained, and any appeal period has passed without the conviction being overturned.^{ii iii}
- Following on from a report from the Committee on Standards in relation to an MP, the House of Commons orders the suspension of the MP from the service of the House for a specified period (at least 10 sitting days, or at least 14 days if sitting days are not specified).
- The MP has, after becoming an MP, been convicted of an offence under section 10 of the Parliamentary Standards Act 2009 (if they provide information which they know to be false or misleading in a material respect in support of a claim for allowances).^{iv}

If a condition is met, the Speaker of the House of Commons will notify the returning officer for the constituency of the MP who faces recall. The relevant returning officer will then become the petition officer for the case.

The petition officer is required to send a notice to all eligible voters telling them that a petition is to be opened in their constituency along with opening and closing dates for the petition. Constituents can sign recall petitions in signing stations, through postal services, or by proxy. These logistical matters are overseen by the designated petition officer.

Constituents of the MP facing recall are eligible to sign the recall petition if they are registered and eligible to vote in UK Parliament elections.¹⁰ This means an individual is eligible to sign the recall petition if, in addition to being registered to vote, they are:

- 18 years old and above

ii Detention under mental health legislation is exempt from the recall provisions.

iii If a sitting MP were to be convicted of an offence for which they receive a custodial sentence of more than a year and is detained, they would automatically lose their seat. An MP being remanded in custody similarly does not trigger recall.

iv This sentence does not have to be custodial.

- A resident in the constituency
- UK, Irish or qualifying Commonwealth citizen
- Not subject to any legal incapacity to vote.

The Recall of MPs Act 2015 provides that:

“ a recall petition is successful if the number of persons who validly sign the petition is at least 10% of the number of eligible registered electors. “The number of eligible registered electors” is the number of persons registered in the register of parliamentary electors for the constituency on the last day of the signing period excluding those who, according to their entry in the register, are aged under 18 on that day.”

legislation.gov.uk, 2015⁸

If the petition does not receive signatures from at least 10% of the number of eligible registered voters, then the recall fails and the MP retains their seat.¹⁰ If the petition receives signatures from at least 10% of eligible registered voters, then the MP has been successfully recalled and the constituency seat becomes vacant.⁸ A by-election to replace the MP is then held.¹⁰ UK Parliament by-elections fill vacancies using the same electoral system as general elections, which is the first-past-the-post method. The MP being recalled is able to stand at the by-election.

At by-elections following a successful recall petition, anyone spending over £500 on their campaign must register with the Electoral Commission. The spending limit is £10,000. The UK Government provided an estimate of the cost of a recall petition as between £37,700 and £100,500 with a best estimate of £64,300 when it introduced the draft Recall of MPs Bill.¹¹

Examples of recall petitions against sitting MPs

Ian Paisley – North Antrim

The first recall petition was opened on 8 August 2018 after the House of Commons voted in favour of suspending Ian Paisley for 30 days of Parliament business.¹⁰ This was due to a failure to declare visiting costs to Sri Lanka paid for by the Sri Lankan government.¹² The subsequent recall petition did not garner the percentage of registered voters within the electorate of North Antrim and therefore failed.¹⁰ A freedom of information request indicated the cost of the petition process to the Electoral Office of Northern Ireland was £166,000.¹⁰

Margaret Ferrier – Rutherglen and Hamilton West

After Margaret Ferrier self-referred to the Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards in October 2020 for a breach of Covid-19 regulations, the House of Commons Standards Committee recommended a suspension from the House for 30 days in March 2023.¹⁰ This was approved by the House of Commons on 6 June 2023. A recall petition was then opened in the Rutherglen and Hamilton West constituency.¹⁰ The petition received signatures from 14.7% of eligible registered voters.¹⁰ This triggered a by-election. Margaret Ferrier decided not to stand to retain her seat, and the seat was subsequently won by Michael Shanks for the Labour Party.¹³

Scott Benton - Blackpool South

On 14 December 2023, Scott Benton self-referred to the Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards following a newspaper investigation that published a recorded conversation in which Mr Benton was heard proposing to lobby on behalf of gambling companies.^{10 14 15} The House of Commons Standards Committee recommended a suspension of 35 days and the House approved a motion suspending the MP on 27 February 2024.¹⁰ A recall petition was subsequently opened on 12 March 2024.¹⁰ Scott Benton resigned from the seat on 25 March 2024 and the recall petition was terminated.¹⁰ A by-election to fill the vacancy took place on 2 May 2024 and Labour Party candidate Chris Webb won the seat.¹⁰

Consideration of recall during the Senedd Cymru (Members and Elections) Bill

As noted previously, MPs in the House of Commons (UK Parliament) are the only elected representatives in the UK that can be recalled by their constituents. The Senedd Cymru, however, considered recall during its scrutiny of the Senedd Cymru (Members and Elections) Bill. The final Bill, which did not include any provisions for recall, was passed on 8 May 2024 and received Royal Assent on 24 June 2024.¹⁶

The Bill, among other things, provides for the change of the Senedd's electoral system so that all Members are elected using a closed list proportional representation system.¹⁷ The

current Senedd returned its members (Members of the Senedd, MS) under the same Additional Member System used to elect MSPs to the Scottish Parliament. At present, there are 40 single-member constituencies and five four-member regions.¹⁸ The electoral system provided for by the Bill changes this to 16 eight-member constituencies. Political parties contesting the constituency submit a list of 8 candidates and voters cast a vote for a political party (or independent candidate).¹⁷ Votes are then translated to seats in the constituency using the D'Hondt formula.¹⁹ If a vacancy in a constituency seat was to occur between general elections, then the seat would be filled from the next eligible candidate on the party list.¹⁷ The seat would remain vacant until the next general election if the seat was held by an independent candidate or the party list is exhausted.¹⁷

While a mechanism to recall MSs was not part of the Bill, the Reform Bill Committee recommended during its Stage 1 scrutiny that the Standards of Conduct Committee undertake work on recall mechanisms and other means of strengthening individual member accountability.²⁰ Recall was also considered during Stage 2 proceedings when Darren Millar MS lodged amendments providing for recall of MSs.²¹ The system proposed by Darren Millar MS echoed the UK Recall of MPs Act 2015 with a recall petition for a Member of the Senedd being issued to constituents upon an MS's conviction and sentencing, or imprisonment, or if they are suspended from Senedd proceedings for 10 or more sitting days by the Standards of Conduct Committee. If the petition garnered signatures from over 10 percent of the constituency's electorate, a by-election would be held with the replacement member returned to the Senedd by the "*simple majority system*".²¹ Darren Millar MS provided his reasoning for why a by-election should be held to replace a list member subject to recall during Committee of the whole Senedd proceedings on 5 March 2024:

“ Now, why a by-election rather than filling the vacancy with a list candidate? Well, for two reasons. Firstly, because of legal reasons in relation to human rights, an MS who has been the subject of recall petition cannot be prevented from the opportunity to fill a vacancy that is then created. So, they must have the ability to be able to stand in an election following a successful petition to remove them from office. Because, of course, only 10 per cent of that electorate will have been able to express an opinion through the recall petition process. And the second reason not to simply fill a vacancy created by a recall petition by the next candidate on the list is because, as we have seen with the recall system for MPs, members of the public rarely want to be represented by an MP of the same political party in a by-election following a recall.”

Senedd Cymru, 2024²²

The amendments were not agreed to by the Senedd. Members indicated that the Standards of Conduct Committee should be able to hold its inquiry on individual member accountability and the issues around introducing a recall mechanism for MSs.²² Mick Antoniw MS, Counsel General and Minister for the Constitution in the Welsh Government, stated:

“ Recommendation 50 of the Reform Bill Committee to develop options in conjunction with the standards committee was the approach that's been adopted, and, of course, concern was also raised about the need to consult and engage on this. So, that is the approach I take—not to support the proposal now. I'm very sympathetic and I think there is probably common agreement on the need to have a policy such as this, but to insert it now at this short notice without the ground work being done and the consideration being needed I think is a flaw. But I do very much support that, if we have a standards committee that is already starting a process of looking into this, and with a recommended conclusion date, then I think this is the approach where this should be tackled.”

Senedd Cymru, 2024²²

Chair of the Standards of Conduct Committee Vikki Howells MS confirmed during the Bill's Stage 3 proceedings that the Committee had agreed to take forward an inquiry on recall and individual member accountability, stating that the Committee will:

“ take evidence from key witnesses who can help the committee to identify an effective and proportionate recall machinery that works for Wales and our electoral system.”

Senedd Cymru, 2024²³

Senedd Cymru Standards of Conduct Committee inquiry on Individual Member Accountability

The Senedd Cymru Standards of Conduct Committee began its inquiry on Individual Member Accountability on 3 June 2024.²⁴ Part of the remit of the inquiry is to consider options for recalling MSs elected under the electoral system provided for by the Senedd Cymru (Members and Elections) Bill.²⁴

Professor Alistair Clark, Professor of Political Science at Newcastle University, provided oral evidence to the Standards of Conduct Committee. Professor Alistair Clark shared views on the grounds for recalling MSs, ensuring the recall mechanism is compatible with the Senedd electoral system, and the replacement of independent candidates subject to recall.²⁵ Professor Alistair Clark stated to the Committee on 17 June 2024:

“ So, the first step of their recall process is that institutional check, if you like: prison sentence, suspension for 10 or more days, or a violation of the expenses Act. That, I think, removes the problem of things being raised that, to be honest, are just political issues, for instance. It removes, to some degree, the politicisation of the standards process, because I think there is a danger here of that potentially happening. [...] There's the standards element to it and there's also an electoral system element to this. And I think that's made more problematic by having proportional representation closed list systems, because, traditionally, what would happen under those systems is not a recall election, where you go back to the electorate and ask their opinions of the list of candidates and get them to elect someone again; what would happen would be that the next placed person for that party on the list becomes the Member. And I think that's more standard practice under proportional representation systems. I think the question very much for the Senedd is which way does it want to go in that regard. I think it's quite plausible for the Senedd to go down the road of just having—if someone's recalled, then having the next available member for that party to replace them. That keeps the party balance as elected, but there's a new Member. I think that's perfectly plausible and in line with international standards. If you wanted to have a recall election, it is then going to get much, much more complicated, unfortunately, because you couldn't under proportional representation under those circumstances, unfortunately. So, you would need to think what form of electoral system you would want to run that particularly specialised type of election. I think that that's—well, obviously—another choice. To my mind, and off the top of my head, there are probably a couple of options there: back to first-past-the-post, albeit in a much larger constituency, because you would be talking about one of the larger proportional constituencies to begin with, but potentially something like the alternative vote as well, which is a preferential system, but where you end up with the candidates needing 50 per cent of the vote through transfers to be elected.”

Senedd Cymru, 2024²⁵

Referring to the possibility that an independent MS is subject to recall, Professor Alistair Clark stated:

“ There's not much you can do in that regard. If they're elected as an independent, then by definition they're on their own. The seat would probably need to be vacant. I'd not expect that many independents to be elected to begin with, given how the thresholds would work within the electoral system. But yes, the seat would then need to be vacant.”

Senedd Cymru, 2024²⁵

Professor Jonathan Tonge, Professor of Politics at the University of Liverpool, also provided oral evidence to the Committee and indicated that an MS subject to recall should be replaced by the next candidate on the party list.²⁶ Professor Jonathan Tonge provided further options for the format of the recall process and replacing an MS through a by-election. Professor Jonathan Tonge stated:

“ Yes, the next person on the list. That's the most straightforward way to do it. In terms of the petition itself, there are different ways of doing the recall petition to trigger that process of co-option. [...] You could just have the 10-per-cent-of-the-electorate threshold to sign the petition and then that triggers automatic removal. There's a case for having a higher threshold, because we're talking here about outright removal of the miscreant, albeit replaced by someone from the same party, whereas, obviously, for the Westminster system, that miscreant has the option potentially of fighting a by-election, not that most do so far. [...] You could have a straightforward, if you like, mini-referendum, on whether the person stays or goes. [...] Another option would be to have by-elections. It's not impossible to have PR-STV^v by-elections. Ireland's managed it for more than 100 years. [...] 138 by-elections since 1923, when they were introduced in Ireland under PR-STV. It's not a case that you simply get the original party re-elected. You get almost half—in 67 of those cases, there's been a change of party at the by-election. But there are obvious disadvantages to having STV elections and, again, there's a risk that you punish the party rather than necessarily the individual, which I don't think is the point of the exercise. And another alternative, which I'm sure you won't go for, but I'll just raise it, you could—it would probably confuse the electorate as well—have a first-past-the-post by-election. But mixing that in a PR-STV system, I'm not advocating it; I'm just floating it very, very gently as a possibility.”

Senedd Cymru, 2024²⁶

On 29 January 2025, the Committee [published its inquiry report](#). The report included the following recommendations ²⁷ :

- The Committee recommends the Welsh Government bring forward legislation to introduce a system of recall by 2026 in time for the Seventh Senedd.
- The Committee recommends that the system of recall introduced for the Senedd has one stage which puts to the electorate a question based around the principle of retain the Member or remove and replace them with the next candidate on their party list at the last Senedd election.
- The Committee recommends, given the process set out by the Committee, that it is referred to as a 'remove and replace ballot' rather than recall.
- The Committee recommends that legislation is drafted to give the Senedd the ability to recall a Member as a standalone sanction.
- The Committee recommends that the legislation should require, in Standing Orders, the responsible committee to produce guidelines on the application of recall, including matters which may result in automatic recall (if not included on the face of the bill). This guidance should be subject to a vote by the Senedd.

^v Proportional representation single transferable vote.

International examples of recall mechanisms

- [United States of America](#)
- [Latvia](#)
- [British Columbia, Canada](#)
- [Venezuela](#)
- [Germany](#)
- [Japan](#)
- [Mexico](#)

United States of America

The United States does not permit recall of elected representatives at the federal level. However, there are provisions for recalls of state officers in 19 states and of local-level elected representatives in 39 out of the 50 states.²⁸ The types of elected representatives that can be recalled varies across states. For example, in Illinois only the Governor can have a recall petition launched against them. However, in states such as Georgia, Colorado, California and Arizona (and 6 other states) all elected officials in the executive, legislative and judicial branches of government can be recalled.²⁸

In most states the recall process cannot start until the representative has served between two and twelve months in office.²⁸ Some states also have rules preventing recalls in the last 180 days of a representative's term.²⁸ The procedures for recalling representatives differ across states but they generally begin with the certification of a petition calling for the recall of the representative.²⁸ If the petition is signed by a certain number of voters then a successor is appointed or elected.²⁸ Some states may hold a "recall election" where voters indicate whether the incumbent representative should be recalled and then indicate their preferred replacement candidate.²⁸

California

The [State Constitution of California](#) provides for the recall of state and local representatives.²⁹ The constitutional provisions for recalling elected representatives in California are supplemented by a [procedural guide published by the Office of the Secretary of State for California](#).³⁰ This document sets out the procedures for recalling state and local representatives.

Recall of state level representatives

Chapter two of the Procedures for Recalling State and Local Officials outlines the framework for carrying out recall efforts on state-level representatives.³⁰ Any state-level

elected representative can be recalled in California.²⁹ A state-level representative encompasses elected positions such as legislators in the California State Assembly and the California State Senate, as well as executive offices like the Governor and the Secretary of State.³⁰

The process starts with proponents of the recall of an elected representative creating a Notice of Intention.³⁰ This notice provides the relevant electorate with the proponents' reasoning on why the representative should be recalled.³⁰ It must be distributed in the relevant electoral area and needs to gather a certain number of valid signatures before a recall petition can be circulated.³⁰ The signature requirements for the Notice of Intention are outlined in the Procedures for Recalling State and Local Officials as follows:

“ The minimum number of proponents listed on the notice of intention is 50, or equal to five times the number of signatures required to have been filed on the nomination paper of the officer sought to be recalled, whichever is higher.”

State of California, 2024³⁰

The Notice of Intention must be published in a “newspaper of general circulation” in the area where the recall election may take place.³⁰ If there is no newspaper, it must be made visible within three places open to public access in the area.³⁰ Within seven days of this publication the official who is at risk of recall must reply to the Notice of Intention.³⁰

The recall petition is circulated in the representative's electoral area.³⁰ The recall petition includes the Notice of Intention and the representative's reply to the Notice of Intention.³⁰

The State Constitution of California requires that a petition to recall a statewide officer (such as the Governor) must be signed by electors equal in number to 12 percent of the last vote for the office, with signatures from each of 5 counties equal in number to 1 percent of the last vote for the office in the county within 160 days.²⁹ A petition to recall a State Senator or Member of the Assembly must be signed by electors equal to at least 20% of the last vote for the office.²⁹

The recall petition is then verified by election officials following the deadline to file the petition.³⁰ A certificate of sufficiency is granted if the petition is found to be valid. The Governor, upon certification from the Secretary of State, must announce the recall election.³⁰ This election, to decide on the recall of an official and potentially elect a successor, is set by the Governor to occur between 60 and 80 days after certification.³⁰ However, the recall election can be held up to 180 days post-certification to coincide with the next regular election within the same jurisdiction, provided at least fifty percent of eligible voters are shared between the two.³⁰

During the recall election, voters decide whether to remove the officer from office. Voters may also indicate a preferred successor.³⁰ The recall is successful if more than 50% of the votes indicate the representative should be removed from office.³⁰

2003 gubernatorial recall election

Governor Gary Davis was replaced by Arnold Schwarzenegger in 2003 after a successful recall petition led to a recall election in California.³¹ This occurred after a statewide

energy crisis in 2001 and public concern over the state budget.³¹ Ted Costa, the primary proponent of the recall petition, published a proposal for the recall of Governor Gary Davis, stating the reasoning behind this decision to be:

“ Gross mismanagement of California finances by overspending taxpayers’ money, threatening public safety by cutting funds to local governments, failing to account for the exorbitant cost of the energy fiasco, and failing in general to deal with the state's major problems until they get to the crisis stage. California should not have to be known as the state with poor schools, traffic jams, outrageous utility bills, and huge debts... all caused by gross mismanagement.”

Lawrence , 2003³¹

The recall petition began circulating in March 2003 and was confirmed as meeting the requisite number of signatures on 24 July 2003.³²

The recall election was held 7 October 2003 and resulted in 54.6% of voters favouring removing Governor Gary Davis from office, with Arnold Schwarzenegger being elected as the replacement candidate with 48.5% of the vote from a pool of 135 candidates.^{33 34}

2021 gubernatorial recall election

State Republicans in California acted as proponents in recall proceedings to recall Democrat Governor Gavin Newsom in 2021.³⁵ The Notice of Intention stated:

“ Governor Newsom has implemented laws which are detrimental to the citizens of this state and our way of life. Laws he endorsed favour foreign nationals, in our country illegally, over that of our own citizens. People in this state suffer the highest taxes in the nation, the highest homelessness rates, and the lowest quality of life as a result. He has imposed sanctuary state status and fails to enforce immigration laws. He unilaterally over-ruled the will of the people regarding the death penalty. He seeks to impose additional burdens on our state by the following: removing the protections of Proposition 13, rationing our water use, increasing taxes and restricting parental rights. Having no other recourse, we the people have come together to take this action, remedy these misdeeds and prevent further injustices.”

Office of California Secretary of State, 2021³⁶

The recall petition met the signature requirements and a recall election was scheduled for 14 September 2021. 62% of voters at the recall election were in favour of retaining Governor Gavin Newsom and as such the recall attempt failed.³⁷

Further attempts to recall Governor Gavin Newsom have been launched since 2021. Most recently, in January 2025, following California's response to the wildfires. The threshold for initiating recall proceedings was passed with the petition still to be launched at the time of writing³⁸ .

Recall of local level representatives

Chapter three of the Procedures for Recalling State and Local Officials outlines the

framework for triggering and carrying out recall efforts within the state of California at a local level.³⁰ It is reasonably similar to the procedure for recalling state level officials. In the state of California, a local level representative includes elected officers of a city, county, school district, community college district, or other special district.³⁰

The process starts with proponents of the recall of a certain elected representative creating a Notice of Intention.³⁰ This notice provides the relevant electorate with the proponents' reasoning on why the representative should be recalled.³⁰ It must be distributed in the relevant electoral area and needs to gather a specific number of valid signatures before a recall petition can be circulated.³⁰ The signature requirements for the Notice of Intention are outlined in the Procedures for Recalling State and Local Officials as follows:

“ The appropriate number of valid signatures: (1) For a local office where the number of registered voters in the electoral jurisdiction is at least 100,000, the minimum number of proponents listed on the notice of intention is 50, or equal to five times the number of signatures required to have been filed on the nomination paper of the officer sought to be recalled, whichever is higher. (2) For a local office where the number of registered voters in the electoral jurisdiction is at least 1,000 but less than 100,000, the minimum number of proponents listed on the notice of intention is 30, or equal to three times the number of signatures required to have been filed on the nomination paper of the officer sought to be recalled, whichever is higher. (3) For a local office where the number of registered voters in the electoral jurisdiction is less than 1,000, the minimum number of proponents listed on the notice of intention is 30.”

State of California, 2024³⁰

The Notice of Intention must be published in a “newspaper of general circulation” in the area where the recall election may take place.³⁰ If there is no newspaper, it must be made visible within three places open to public access in the area.³⁰ Within seven days of this publication the official who is at risk of recall must reply to the Notice of Intention.³⁰

The recall petition is circulated in the representative's electoral area.³⁰ The recall petition includes the Notice of Intention and the representative's reply to the Notice of Intention.³⁰ The number of signatures required to successfully trigger a recall election is dependent on total number of registered voters in the electoral area.³⁰ The proportion of registered voters required to recall an elected representative for each population size is set out in the Procedures for Recalling State and Local Officials, as follows:³⁰

“ a) Thirty percent (30%) if the registration is less than 1,000. (b) Twenty-five percent (25%) if the registration is less than 10,000 but at least 1,000. (c) Twenty percent (20%) if the registration is less than 50,000 but at least 10,000. (d) Fifteen percent (15%) if the registration is less than 100,000 but at least 50,000. (e) Ten percent (10%) if the registration is 100,000 or above.”

State of California, 2024³⁰

The timescale for acquiring signatures is also dependent on the number of registered voters in the electoral area.³⁰ These timescales are outlined below:

“ (a) 40 days if the electoral jurisdiction has less than 1,000 registered voters. (b) 60 days if the electoral jurisdiction has less than 5,000 registered voters but at least 1,000. (c) 90 days if the electoral jurisdiction has less than 10,000 registered voters but at least 5,000. (d) 120 days if the electoral jurisdiction has less than 50,000 registered voters but at least 10,000. (e) 160 days if the electoral jurisdiction has 50,000 registered voters or more”

State of California, 2024³⁰

The recall petition is then verified by election officials following the deadline to file the petition. A certificate of sufficiency is granted if the petition is found to be valid. Within 14 days of receiving this the governing body which calls elections for the officeholder subject to recall must confirm that a recall election will be held. The election must take place no less than 88 and no more than 125 days upon the governing body confirming that it will be taking place. ³⁰

During the recall election, voters decide whether to remove the officer from office. Voters may also indicate a preferred successor. ³⁰ The recall is successful if more than 50% of the votes indicate the representative should be removed from office. ³⁰

North Dakota

The [North Dakota Constitution](#) permits the recall of any state-level elected official (e.g., Governor, Members of the State Assembly, State Senators) ³⁹. A recall petition with signatures amounting to 25 percent of the votes cast in the last gubernatorial election within the official's electoral district are required to initiate a recall. ⁴⁰ Each recall petition requires a sponsoring committee of five members and a chairperson. ⁴¹ The recall petition can collect signatures for one year. ⁴¹ Recall petitions with the requisite number of signatures are filed with the Secretary of State and if deemed valid, the official subject to recall has a 10-day period during which they may choose to resign. ⁴¹

Recall elections in North Dakota are contested between the incumbent and any nominated candidates. ⁴¹ The candidate with the majority of votes assumes the office for the remainder of the term. ⁴¹ An official cannot face a recall petition more than once in the same term. ⁴¹

North Dakota Recall Election 1921

This was the first case of a recall mechanism being used to remove a State Governor in the United States. ⁴² The recall removed three NPL (Non-Partisan League) politicians, Governor Lynn Frazier, Attorney General William Lemke and the Commissioner of Agriculture and Labour John. N. Hagan. ⁴² The opposition party to the NPL known as the Independent Voters Association met the requisite levels of statewide support to call for a special recall election. ⁴² The legislation to instate recall elections in North Dakota had passed a year prior with the support of the NPL. ⁴²

Wisconsin

The Constitution of Wisconsin grants citizens the right to recall any elected official provided the official has completed at least one year in office.⁴³ If a recall election is conducted and the elected official remains in office, they cannot be subjected to another recall attempt during the same term in which the initial recall was unsuccessful.⁴³

2012 Wisconsin Recall Effort

Republican Governor Scott Walker faced a recall effort in 2012 due to opposition from parts of the electorate and trade unions following policy decisions that stripped public sector trade unions within the state of most powers.⁴⁴ Proponents of the recall argued that this policy was not included in his campaign and that he had no mandate to make this change to policy with such economic impact. Governor Walker argued that it was necessary to keep the state budget balanced.⁴⁴

The successful campaign for recall petition signatures was supported by Democrats and received close to one million signatures from 4.4 million eligible voters in 60 days.⁴⁴ The recall effort went to a state-wide recall election where 54% of voters supported Governor Walker staying in office.⁴⁵ Therefore, the recall was unsuccessful, and Governor Walker retained his elected office.⁴⁵

Latvia

The national parliament of Latvia, the Saeima, uses a party-list proportional representation system to return members to the legislature.⁴⁶ Article 14 of the Constitution of Latvia allows for the recall of the entire Saeima, but not individual members.⁴⁷ The Constitution of Latvia (in translation) sets out the following regulations on the timing of a recall referendum:

“ Not less than one tenth of electors has the right to initiate a national referendum regarding recalling of the *Saeima*. If the majority of voters and at least two thirds of the number of the voters who participated in the last elections of the *Saeima* vote in the national referendum regarding recalling of the *Saeima*, then the *Saeima* shall be deemed recalled. The right to initiate a national referendum regarding recalling of the *Saeima* may not be exercised one year after the convening of the *Saeima* and one year before the end of the term of office of the *Saeima*, during the last six months of the term of office of the President, as well as earlier than six months after the previous national referendum regarding recalling of the *Saeima*. The electors may not recall any individual member of the *Saeima*.”

Constitutional Court of the Republic of Latvia, 2016⁴⁸

The constitutional power allowing for an electorate-initiated recall election has not been used. However, the President of Latvia also has the constitutional power to propose the dissolution of the Saeima and call a referendum on the matter (see Constitution of Latvia Article 48).⁴⁷ This was used for the first time in 2011. The referendum passed in favour of

parliamentary dissolution.⁴⁹

British Columbia, Canada

British Columbia is the only province or territory in Canada which has a system of recall to remove a Member of the Legislative Assembly (MLA) from office between elections. It is provided for by the Recall and Initiative Act 1996.⁵⁰

There are no conditions of justification for a recall petition to be proposed, although petitions cannot be initiated within the first 18 months of an MLA being elected whether at a general election or by-election and cannot be submitted if there is a general election scheduled within the next six months.⁵⁰ Only one election resulting from a successful recall petition can be held in an electoral district between general elections.⁵⁰

The petition organiser must provide a statement of 200 words or fewer to say why they believe the MLA should be removed.⁵⁰ The petition organiser or a registered canvasser then collects signatures from other eligible registered voters in their electoral district.⁵⁰ A successful recall petition in British Columbia is required to collect signatures from 40% of eligible voters.⁵⁰ The legislation sets out that in order to sign a recall petition the individual:

“ (a) must have been a registered voter for the electoral district for which the Member was elected on final voting day for the last election of the Member, and (b) on the date the individual signs the petition, must be a registered voter for an electoral district in British Columbia.”

Statutes, Regulations, Bills, and Gazette of British Columbia, 1996⁵⁰

The Recall and Initiative Act also provides for the expense limits at recall elections. An election because of a recall is held in accordance with section 35 of the Constitution Act - this is a by-election held in accordance with the usual conventions and within 90 days.⁵¹ In 2018, the Recall and Initiative Act was amended to bring spending at recall elections in line with other elections.⁵² The [Recall and Initiative Amendment Act](#) banned corporate and union donations to recall elections and restricted advertising rules which had had no spending limits during recall elections.⁵² The Act also provided that only eligible individuals can make contributions to a maximum of \$1200 per year.⁵² An eligible individual is a resident of British Columbia and a Canadian citizen or permanent resident. Recall advertising sponsors are limited to \$5,000 during a recall petition period.⁵²

Since the introduction of the Act there have been 30 attempts to launch recall petitions against MLAs.⁵³ However, there has only ever been one attempt which has met the quota for required signatures. This was in 1998 when representative Paul Reitsma faced a recall petition that required 17,048 signatures, and which subsequently received 25,430 signatures across the two-month allocated period. The petition failed to trigger a by-election as Reitsma resigned during its verification process.⁵⁴

A report by Elections B.C. stated the cost of administering four recall petitions for the fiscal years 2010/11 and 2011/12 as:⁵⁵

- Oak Bay- Gordon Head \$109,460 (\$2.85 per registered voter)
- Comox Valley \$20,503 (\$0.42 per registered voter)
- Kamloops-North Thompson \$25,525 (\$0.67 per registered voter)
- Maple Ridge-Mission \$7986 (\$0.23 per registered voter).

Venezuela

The National Assembly of Venezuela uses a mixed-majoritarian electoral system to return its 165 members.⁵⁶ The Constitution of Venezuela (last amended in 2009) provides for recall petitions to be initiated against any elected representative, including the President. Specifically, Article 72 of the Constitution (in translation) states:

“ Once one-half of the term of office to which an official has been elected has elapsed, a number of voters representing at least 20% of the registered voters in the affected constituency may petition for the calling of a referendum to revoke that official's mandate. When a number of voters equal to or greater than the number of those who elected the official vote in favour of the recall, provided that a number of voters equal to or greater than 25% of the total number of registered voters vote in the recall referendum, the official's mandate shall be deemed revoked and immediate action shall be taken to fill the permanent vacancy as provided for by this Constitution and by law.”

constitutionproject.org, 2009⁵⁷

Recall petitions can be initiated at any time after the midpoint of the elected representative's term of office and before the beginning of their last year of office.⁵⁷ A recall petition against an elected representative can only be filed once in each term of office.⁵⁷ Where an individual elected representative is removed by recall petition, new elections may take place for seats elected through plurality or a substitute may be selected where the seat is elected by closed list (in accordance with the Constitution).⁵⁷

Recall referenda have been proposed and held in Venezuela several times since 1999. Academic research monitoring recall attempts in Venezuela between 1999 and 2013 reports that there were approximately 167 attempts with 10 eventual votes.⁵⁸ This data does not disaggregate by elected official (e.g., President, National Assembly Deputy, or State-level Elected Representative) or the electoral system used to elect or replace an elected representative (e.g., plurality or closed list).⁵⁸

Recall attempts in Venezuela (particularly those against the sitting President) have been highly contentious and resulted in further constitutional disruption in the National Assembly and judiciary (e.g., the 2017 Venezuelan Constitutional Crisis).⁵⁹

Germany

Direct recall of elected representatives is available at the state (lander) level in Germany

for certain elected representatives. 11 of the 16 states in Germany have legislation to allow for recall of Mayors.⁶⁰ However, out of the 11 states that permit recall, only four allow for recalls initiated by citizens; the remaining states require the legislature or Municipal Council to initiate the recall of the Mayor.

Direct, or citizen-initiated, mayoral recall was first introduced in Brandenburg in 1993. Following this, Saxony and Schleswig-Holstein adopted recall procedures in 1995. In Brandenburg, the signature quota for a recall to be valid was set at 10%, whereas in Saxony it required one third of the eligible electorate. Similarly, approval quotas vary, with only 25% needed in Brandenburg, in contrast to 50% in Saxony.⁶¹ Mayoral recalls initiated by Municipal Councils in these states generally need a majority of councillors to vote in favour of a recall election, although this majority can range from an absolute majority to a three-quarters super-majority, depending on the state.⁶⁰

The 16 federal states of Germany each have their own legislatures known as Landtags. In Germany, the recall of state parliament members is possible in five states: Bavaria, Berlin, Brandenburg, Bremen, and Rhineland-Palatinate. However, these states only permit the recall of the entire legislature rather than individual members (see [emphasis box for a case study of the Landtag of Bavaria](#)).

Recall in Bavaria

The Bavaria State legislature in Germany uses an open-list proportional representation system for its party list seats.⁶² The Constitution of Bavaria (Article 18, Section 3)⁶³ provides for the recall of all elected representatives in the Landtag (the Bavarian State Parliament). It does not provide for the recall of individual representatives. Citizens can petition the State Ministry for a referendum to dismiss the parliament. If the petition receives signatures from one million citizens entitled to vote, then the parliament can be dismissed by a state-wide referendum. If the referendum passes, elections to the legislature are expected to occur six weeks after the dismissal of the parliament.

Japan

Local governance in Japan is organised through prefectures and municipalities. There are 47 prefectures which focus on the needs of the wider area, while the 1719 municipalities deal with providing services locally.⁶⁴ Both levels of local governance are based on a presidential system with officials being elected directly.⁶⁴ Recall in Japan is permitted at all subnational levels of governance.⁶⁵

Between 1947 and 2014, Japan saw 1527 different attempts at initiating recall petitions with 485 of these attempts leading to a recall election.⁶⁶

Mexico

Article 35(IX) of the Constitution of Mexico provides for the recall of the President.⁶⁷ The constitutional reform was made in 2019 and is known as the Revocation of the Mandate of the President of the Republic.⁶⁸

The Constitution of Mexico provides that a presidential recall can only be initiated once during a President's six-year term, and can only be initiated after the first three months of the third year of the term. The recall petition must receive signatures from at least 3% of the voters from the Nominal List of Electors, spread across a minimum of 17 of the 32 federal states. The National Electoral Institute has 30 days to validate and arrange a referendum once these criteria are met.

A recall referendum is deemed successful if:

1. There is a voter turnout of at least 40%; and
2. the majority of votes are in favour of recall.

If the President is recalled, the President of Congress assumes the role of interim President. The Chamber of Deputies and the Senate must then select a successor within 30 days to complete the Presidential term. The outcome of the recall can be contested at a federal election tribunal.

The first presidential recall election in Mexico was held on 10 April 2022. Voters were asked to decide if the incumbent President Andrés Manuel López Obrador should stay in office and serve his full six-year term.⁶⁹ The recall referendum followed a successful recall petition campaign promoted by the President.⁷⁰ More than 90% of the votes cast at the recall referendum supported the President completing the six-year term.⁷¹ However, even if the majority had voted for the President's recall, it would have failed because the turnout was only 19%, falling short of the 40% required by the Constitution.⁷¹

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- 1 This SPICe briefing has been prepared by Bruce McCall as part of a work experience placement in the Environment, Rural, Constitution and International team in SPICe. The briefing includes previously drafted material from SPICe Research, some of which may already be published.

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