

# **Explaining the Rise of California Gubernatorial Recall Elections, 1913-2021**

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## **Abstract**

The recall election, which allows voters to oust elected officials before their terms have ended, is the product of state-level Progressive Era reforms intended to dismantle political machines. While California was the first state to adopt the recall, in 1913, its use has increased significantly in recent decades. Current scholarship fails to explain why the use of the recall increased, despite a poor track record of ousting sitting officials. To address this question, this paper analyzes the emergence of gubernatorial recall election attempts in California between 1913 and 2021. While California is not the only state to have implemented the recall election, it offers the most available data of all recall attempts (successful and unsuccessful) since its implementation. Using data on recall attempts, I address several potential explanations for the increase in attempted recall elections since the 1970s, including an increasingly competitive partisan environment for gubernatorial elections, the greater legitimation of direct democracy institutions, and the disappearance of traditional political parties as a means of channeling popular discontent.

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## **Introduction**

The study of American electoral institutions tends to focus on regularly scheduled events, which typically occur every two, four, or six years. Yet American states allow voters to disrupt this chain of events through recall elections which, assuming certain conditions are met, provide voters an opportunity to oust elected officials from office for any reason. While the U.S. Constitution does not provide for recalls at the federal level, forty states allow for recall elections of state or local officials (Ballotpedia 2021). Of these forty, nineteen states allow for the recall of statewide officers (governors, legislatures, etc.) (Ballotpedia 2021). Recalls are, by design, a rare occurrence. Yet while recalls have existed for over a century, they have begun to gain more traction in American politics in recent years. This includes attempts at recalling high-profile statewide officials, including California Governors Gray Davis (2003) and Gavin Newsom (2021), as well as Wisconsin Governor Scott Walker (2012). In very recent years, recall attempts have increased significantly on elected members of school boards, in part due to perceived backlash over the use of Critical Race Theory in classrooms (Ballotpedia 2022).

Yet recall elections have, at best, a mixed record of success. In fact, throughout US history, while many recall elections have been forced on local and state leaders (some of which successfully removed an officeholder), only four recall elections have been forced on the governor of a state, two of which have been successful in their removal (Biskupic 2014). Of these four recall elections of governors, three have occurred in the past eighteen years, with the first of four occurring in 1921 (Biskupic 2014). Given the rare use and infrequent success of recalls historically, what explains the increasing incidence of recall election attempts in recent years? Examining recall attempts in California, this article aims to assess what is driving the more recent uptick in propensity for recall attempts at the gubernatorial level, especially given the fact that the institution has existed for over 100 years.

### **The Rise of the Recall: Puzzles and Potential Explanations**

In the United States, recall elections trace their roots to the state of California. The recall was born out of political change and became available to voters in the height of the Progressive Era. However, political acts initiated by motivated actors at the state level led to the recall's implementation, being used as a tool to rout corruption from elected office. The first instance of a recall election dates to 1902, when the City of Los Angeles adopted a provision, followed by state legislature approval in 1903 (Farmer 2001). A similar provision was later adopted in San Diego by 1905, with several other municipalities following suit (Farmer 2001). California finally legalized and implemented the recall provision for state-level officeholders in 1911, just three short years after Oregon had been the first to do so in 1908 (Farmer 2001). Momentum for the recall was driven extensively by the progressive movement, coupled with growing sentiment of frustration toward political machines. In Southern California, the Southern Pacific Railroad was the primary broker of political power, using its influence and money to assist in the installation of candidates that would support its interests. The person to bring the concept of the recall to light in the United States was a medical doctor, Dr. John R. Hayes (Farmer 2001). Hayes, also known as the "Father of the Recall," was well read on socialist and populist movements occurring throughout Europe, in addition to being cognizant of Switzerland's adoption of the recall, which inspired the American version (Farmer 2001). A core tenant of the progressive movement was the eradication of political corruption, namely machines that had dominated politics throughout localities in the US. The recall fits squarely into this movement, becoming a centerpiece particularly in California as it restored the power of the vote and democratic function to voters that were able to make use of the tool (Farmer 2001; Fallone 2011).

Most scholarship on recall elections focuses on accounting for success or failure in bona fide efforts to oust an incumbent official. While Los Angeles and Seattle were the first two cities to put the recall to work and remove locally elected officials from office, the first state to invoke a gubernatorial recall was North Dakota. Governor Lynn J. Frazier was successfully recalled and removed from office in 1921 while serving his fourth two-year term (Biskupic 2014). Frazier had faced economic upheaval and poor farm prices across the state, which coupled with a successful drive from the Independent Voters Association, led to his ousting from office – despite being elected US Senator not long after (Biskupic 2014). Recall attempts would persist throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century for those states that permitted the provision, though the next successful removal of a governor won't happen again until 2003 (Biskupic 2014).

The recall election that has attracted the most significant scholarly attention is the successful 2003 effort to oust California Governor Gray Davis (D). Masket (2011), for example, shows that Republicans in particular were able to overcome institutional hurdles in the Gray recall by coordinating candidates and strategically mobilizing support around Arnold Schwarzenegger while pressuring other candidates to drop out of the race. Racial polarization, as Segura and Fraga (2008) suggest, also made it difficult for Democrats to consolidate on a viable Democratic alternative candidate, Lieutenant Governor Cruz Bustamante. Other studies focus on institutional features of the election that helped to account for success of the Gray recall, such as ballot name placement (Ho and Imai 2006) and campaign finance rules (Garrett 2004). Alvarez et al. (2004), for example, showed how electoral institutions disadvantaged Gray's supporters, and suggest that administrative burdens, closed and relocated precincts, and language barriers may have unintentionally suppressed turnout where there are various diverse, multilingual communities.

As a rule, failed recalls have rarely attracted the same level of attention. There are, for example, only a handful of studies of the 2012 attempted recall of Wisconsin Governor Scott Walker (R), which focus less on explaining the failure of the recall and instead use the election as a case of social media dynamics (Xu et al. 2014; Mascaro et al. 2012), contentious cultural politics (Wagner et al. 2014), or contemporary issues in election law (Biskupic 2014).

And whereas the Walker recall was at least a bona fide effort, virtually no scholarship exists to explain the incidence of recall *attempts* in the U.S. context, especially those aborted early in the process. This is significant, in part, because of the proliferation of recall elections in democratic societies. Evidence from Latin America suggests that recall elections are no longer a tool of the ideological left or progressives alone; rather, their use crosses political boundaries (Spivak 2004; Welp and Whitehead 2020). Nor, given the resources requirements necessary to hold recall elections, are they necessarily a tool used by bottom-up, mass movements (Welp and Whitehead (2020). As Geissel and Jung (2018) suggest, successful recall elections in German states are the result of a combination of factors, including weak government legitimacy, long officeholder tenure, and institutional design – be it citizen initiated with signature requirements or legislature initiated with majority vote requirements. Interestingly, the study did not find a statistically significant relationship between recall use and signature requirements in the German context, though there is evidence for the opposite in Latin America (Geissel and Jung 2018).

Still, in the United States, failure is the most common outcome in state recall elections. While recall attempts ebb and flow in conjunction with political movements, they seldom yield successful outcomes. Yet despite persistent evidence of failure, attempts at recall elections have increased in recent years (see Figure 1). Part of the reason for the increase in recall elections may

be a result of the successful 2003 California gubernatorial recall itself, popularizing the institution to a new generation of politically motivated people (Spivak 2020).

--Figure 1 about here--

Why, despite the persistent evidence of failure have recall elections become more common in recent years? There are several potential explanations, three of which I test here. First, the most basic explanation concerns popular approval of incumbent elected officials. As Geissel and Jung (2018) suggest, the recall can be used as a tool of expressing dissatisfaction with incumbents, especially regarding matters of democracy and economic instability. Since the 1960's, population shifts and changing party dynamics across the state have ushered in periods of divided government in the state, constraining the governor at times from enacting a policy agenda. In turn, this may result in a decline in the governor's approval. Thus, as incumbent governors' approval decreases, the number of recall attempts should increase (H1).

A second explanation regarding the uptick of recall elections concerns what may be an indirect consequence of the passage of Proposition 13. The 1970s in California marked a period of frustration for taxpayers as the population increased, and coupled with that, the demand for public goods and services. Property taxes in particular became an issue for homeowners, with property tax rates rising to exceed incomes for households (Danforth 2021). Furthermore, the state Supreme Court decision in *Serrano v. Priest*, which – affirmed that property tax revenue for public schools can be redistributed to underfunded schools on the foundation of violating the Equal Protection Clause of the 14<sup>th</sup> Amendment – added an element of racialization to the anti-tax movement (Danforth 2021). Property tax revenue being shifted directly to less affluent, often minority schools frustrated many, in part incited by Howard Jarvis. Jarvis was a lobbyist who,

seizing on California's property tax conundrum and growing sentiments of cynicism with government, forced a political movement that led to the adoption of Proposition 13 by a healthy margin (Citrin 2009). Proposition 13 accomplished several things including an amendment to the state constitution which prohibited increases in property tax rates above 1% of the full property value, required a two-thirds majority vote for tax changes in the legislature, as well as grandfather clauses on property tax rate transfers within families in subsequent propositions (Citrin 2009; Danforth 2021). The passage of Proposition 13 yielded significant cuts in spending, local revenue budgetary shortfalls, and tuition fees for California public colleges (Danforth 2021). More notably, the amount of legislation passed by means of proposition increased significantly following Proposition 13. Direct democracy became more common, in part, because of the success of Proposition 13's passage, creating a demonstration effect. Propositions, often used as tools by political and special interests to promote pet policies and wealth redistribution, became far more normative (Citrin 2009). Hence, following the passage of Proposition 13, the number of gubernatorial recall attempts should increase (H2).

A third potential explanation for the increase in recall election attempts may be a greater level of ballot-box mobilization within the state during a given governor's term in office. As noted above, the usage of direct democracy in California increased during the latter half of the twentieth century. Between 1940 and 1970, 42 proposition initiatives were on the statewide ballot, whereas the period from 1971 to 2005 experienced 157 (Citrin 2009). This reflected not only voters' and advocacy organizations' learning about the potential utility following the enactment of Proposition 13, it also reflected a shift in organizational mechanisms to channel political discontent. By the 1970's, party organizations became largely hollowed out, whereas looser networks of single-issue or ideological organizations began to dominate the political arena



(Shefter 1994; Erie 1988; Polsby 1983). In contrast to political parties, these emergent organizations had less capacity for, and interest in, directly fielding candidates for office during the traditional election cycle. Their emphasis on issues and ideas as opposed to the maintenance of organizational infrastructure led them to focus on ballot measures as a primary site of political contestation. It is conceivable that these organizations were capable of channeling resources into recall-election attempts. Thus, as ballot measures in California are used increasingly more, recall election attempts will also increase (H3).

The previous scholarship on the recall – including a recent review of the history of recalls in America by Spivak (2021) – has highlighted descriptive and quantitative qualities regarding the nature of past recall elections. However, the current literature has not produced a systematic case study of gubernatorial recall elections across a span of years. The recall not only has implications for democracy but also of the stability of our current institutions being undermined by nationalized and deeply polarizing politics. This study aims to make sense of what conditions propel successful recall elections, and in doing so, contributes to existing literature by providing evidence to attest to political behavior and what drives these complex mechanisms.

### **Data and Methods**

To test the hypotheses regarding conditions that may prompt recall elections, I examine variation in the number of attempted recalls of California governors from 1913 through 2021. The dependent variable in the analysis is the number of certified recall attempts in a given year, as reported by the California Secretary of State. A certified recall attempt is when a petition has been filed with the Secretary of State to remove an incumbent governor.

I collected data on three independent variables for this study, each of which came from the California Secretary of State's Office (see Table 1). First, I collected data on the incumbent governor's two-party vote share in the prior general election. Second, I collected data on a binary indicator of all years following the passage of Proposition 13. Third, as an indicator of ballot-box mobilization, I collected data on all attempted ballot initiatives for each year in the dataset. This data includes the total number of attempts for that year, not necessarily how many qualified or made it to the ballot.

--Table 1 about here--

Using this dataset, I estimated four negative-binomial regression models. The dependent variable in these models is the number of gubernatorial recall attempts in each of the years in the analysis (1913-2021). The first three models include only one of the three independent variables as well as all controls. The final model includes all independent variables and controls.

## **Results**

Table 2 presents the results of four negative-binomial regression models predicting the number of gubernatorial recall attempts in a given year. The first three examine the effects of each of the independent variables alone. The final model incorporates each of these variables. All models include control variables (bivariate models can be found in Table A1 of the Appendix).

--Table 2 about here--

The first independent variable – the incumbent governor's two-party vote share in the prior general election – had a negative and statistically significant effect on the number of

gubernatorial recall attempts in a given year. In other words, incumbent governors with higher support are less likely to have a recall initiated against them, while incumbent governors with weak support are more likely to have a recall initiated against them.

Second, the binary indicator for years following Proposition 13 also had a positive and statistically significant effect on the number of gubernatorial recall attempts each year. Years following the passage of Proposition 13 saw a significant increase in the number of gubernatorial recall attempts.

The third independent variable – ballot initiatives – did not have a statistically significant effect on the number of gubernatorial recall attempts, either in the reduced or the full model. Thus, I fail to reject the null hypothesis that there is no correspondence between the number of ballot initiatives attempted in a given year and the number of gubernatorial recall attempts.

--Table 3 about here--

Because the results of negative-binomial models cannot be straightforwardly interpreted, Table 3 presents marginal effects from Model 4. All else equal, a shift in the gubernatorial vote-share variable from its mean to one standard deviation corresponds to a 60 percent reduction in the number of gubernatorial recall attempts. Additionally, the passage of Proposition 13 corresponds to a 300 percent increase in the number of gubernatorial recall attempts, holding all other variables constant at their mean or (in the case of dichotomous variables, their modal) values.

## **Discussion**

The aim of this study was to investigate why – despite a legacy of failure – attempts at gubernatorial recalls have increased in California in recent decades. The findings of my data analysis point to recall attempts being strongly associated with popular support of the incumbent governor, as well as the spike in recent attempts being associated with a likely “demonstration effect” following the passage of Proposition 13. While ballot-measure attempts do generally increase around the same time that gubernatorial recall attempts also increase, my data analysis does not conclusively illustrate a relationship between the two.

Perhaps the most important finding with respect to the uptick in gubernatorial recall attempts is the association with Proposition 13. The recall as an institution became available to the citizens of California in 1911. Gubernatorial recall attempts are largely sparse in the early years of its existence, with the first attempt lodged at Governor Culbert L. Olson (D) in 1939. The large spike in the attempted use of the institutional device does not manifest, however, until the late 1970s, during the tenure of Governor Jerry Brown (D). To an extent, this temporal trend is a mirror image of the increase in the use of ballot initiatives following the passage of Proposition 13. Yet while recall campaigns are like ballot initiatives in that they are costly and difficult to win, recalls offer fewer immediate policy gains for voters and have a far worse track record of success than ballot initiatives. Why then, might we see a spike in recalls beginning in the 1970s? My data analysis on the Proposition 13 variable provides a potential answer. Not only did Proposition 13 demonstrate the potential impact of ballot initiatives as an effective tool for policy change, it also illustrated that there were potential benefits to be derived from a mass political movement against an incumbent elected official outside of the formal election cycle.

Tellingly, nongubernatorial recall attempts also increased following the passage of Proposition 13 (see Figure 2).

--Figure 2 about here--

However, another important question arises from the data and the literature: why should efforts be mobilized to attempt a recall when its likely bound to fail? The literature on recalls shows that recalls are expensive to undertake and require a great deal of mobilizing. Considering that most attempts end in failure, this suggests that the main motivation of invoking the recall may not necessarily be the removal of an incumbent governor. With the 2021 recall attempt on incumbent Governor Gavin Newsom (D), the extensive efforts of the recall actually making it to the ballot proved to be futile. Given that California is heavily democratic, the end result – despite some momentum by the recall campaign throughout the summer of 2021 – was largely expected. While the attempt itself failed, the end result was the forcing of Democrats to mobilize a campaign themselves to counter a fairly extensive movement. The recall and oppose recall campaigns experienced significant support and endorsements from the national political parties, with both President Biden and Vice President Harris stumping for the incumbent Governor on the campaign trail. Some support for this theory may be lent from research exploring the increasing trend of nationalized political parties, and the changes in party functionality, increasingly playing roles in local and state politics (Azari 2016; Drutman 2018; Hopkins 2018).

There is also something to be said about popular support for the governor and its relationship with recall attempts. Conventional wisdom suggests that an elected official with waning popularity is likely to lose the next election in some form or another. As my analysis suggests, weak incumbent governors – measured by two-party vote share of the last

gubernatorial election as well as partisan strength in the legislature – are more likely to face a recall attempt. The successful recall attempt of then-incumbent Governor Gray Davis (D) in 2003 may provide some context for this result. While the Governor’s support in the legislature did marginally decline after the 2002 gubernatorial election, he was reelected with historically low turnout and with declining favorability numbers (Baldassare et al. 2003). While nearly all gubernatorial recall attempts fail to materialize, the unique combination of factors including a lower signature threshold because of low turnout in the last election, as well as party coordination and convergence (Masket 2011) led to a surprising result in the ousting of Gray Davis. This may have also sparked momentum for the Newsom recall in 2021, where the Governor faced a scandal related to Covid-19 lockdown measures. However, the unique conditions present in the Davis recall were not present in the Newsom recall, not to mention that California’s Democratic voter base had grown extensively since 2003.

While this analysis provides a plausible starting point for understanding forces of institutional change shaping recall elections, it also has limitations. The first limitation to address is the limit of the case study itself: this article solely focuses on gubernatorial recall attempts in California. I chose California because of its unique history with the recall and the consistency of available data on those attempts. I also chose to limit my analysis solely to gubernatorial recall attempts, setting aside recall attempts of other statewide officers or recall attempts of state legislators and local elected leaders. California has a long history of the recall stemming from the Progressive Movement, and many recalls have been attempted on other elected leaders in the state with success, even in recent history. Having reviewed the literature on recalls and collected data on nongubernatorial recall attempts in the state, recalls of a more local scale, such as state representative or district attorney, appear far more likely to succeed than statewide attempts

against an incumbent governor. In June of 2022, San Francisco's District Attorney Chesa Boudin (D) was successfully recalled from office (White 2022). Recalls of a more local scale are still arduous to pull off but require considerably less resources than running a statewide campaign in a state as large and populous as California.

Another limitation of my research was the inability to access historical records on recall petitions in the state of California. The California Department of State's archives office maintains records including recall petitions and filing documents relevant to the recall process. While these records are available to the public, they are contained in large file collections that require a visit to Sacramento, which I did not have the means to carry out. Having access to these records would have further enhanced my research by having a clear sense of the motivations for filing recall attempts from the filers themselves, as well as potential information about the filers. Both of these things may offer some further insight as to why the recall has been explored and used in more recent years. This would also be a place where further research could be utilized to have a clearer understanding of who is invoking the recall, and most importantly, why. Understanding not only the action but the actor as well might provide some clarity to the increased usage of this seldom successful political institution. As I have alluded to, there is also a clear gap in the literature on the success rate of recall at the statewide level versus the local level. Further research would provide insights into just how useful the recall is in the contemporary context. Finally, the research on the historical development of recalls would benefit from structured, interstate comparisons, which would allow us to examine the effects of variation in legal requirements for recall elections.

These limitations aside, the evidence here points up the value of situating the analysis of recall elections in time rather than merely considering the factors critical to their success or

failure in the present moment. If the evidence here is any indication, the recall has not merely endured for over a century, its meaning has mutated over time (Berry, Burden, and Howell 2010). This mutation is less the result of changes in the formal institutional structure of the recall than it is the product of broader developments in the California political landscape. As recall attempts increase across the country, better understanding of why organized groups continue to use recalls as a political opportunity structure despite, or perhaps even *because of*, the uncertain odds of this enterprise seems like an important, and outstanding, research task.



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## Tables and Figures

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics

Variable	Mean	Standard Deviation	Min, Max
Gubernatorial Recall Attempts	0.50	0.91	0, 4
Gubernatorial Vote Share in Last Election	0.60	0.09	0.47, 0.93
Post Proposition 13	0.39	0.49	0, 1
Ballot Initiatives Titled	19.28	21.02	0, 109
Republican Governor	0.63	0.48	0, 1
Gubernatorial Election Year	0.25	0.43	0, 1
Time Trend	57	31.61	1, 109

Figure 1. Moving Average of California Gubernatorial Recall Attempts, 1913–2021

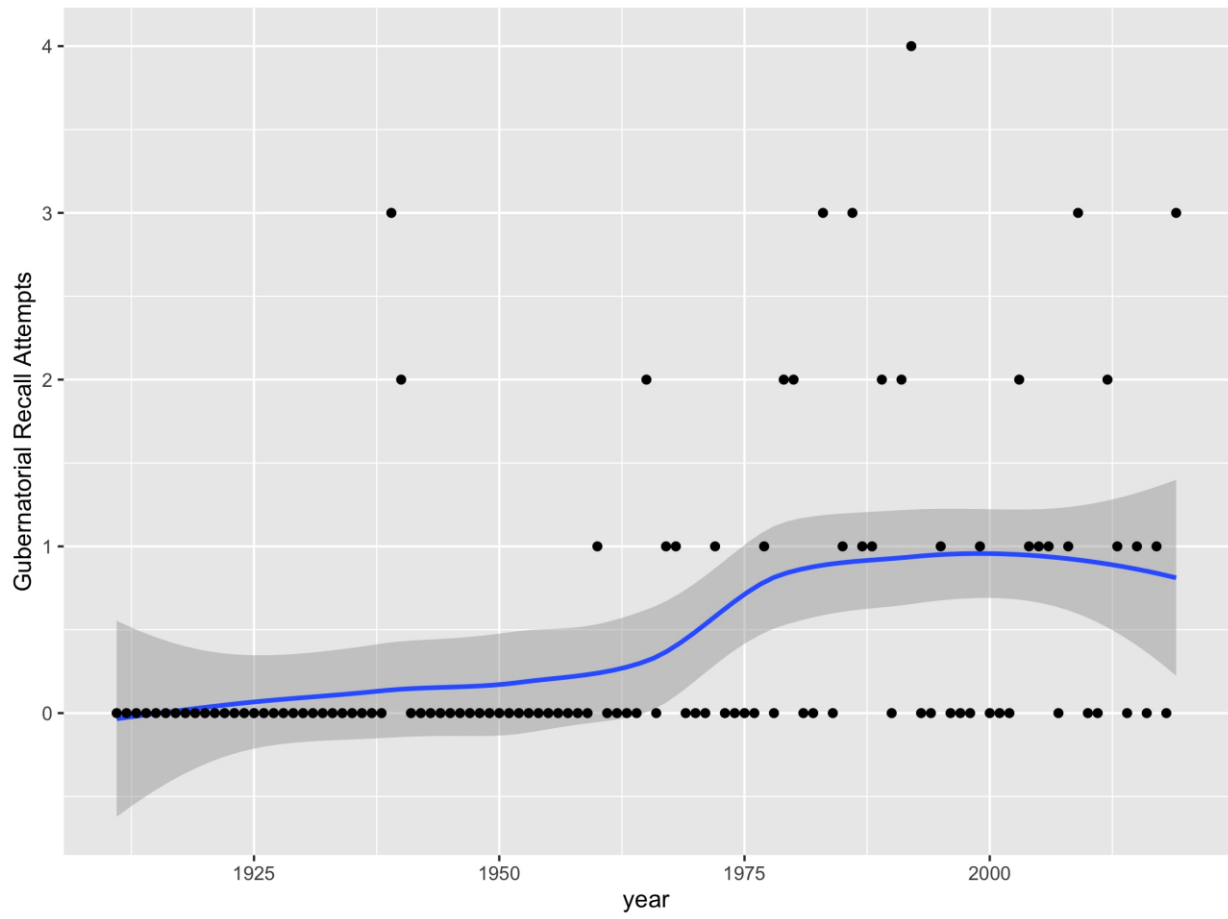


Table 2. Negative Binomial Regression Predicting Number of California Gubernatorial Recall Attempts, 1913–2021

Variable	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Gubernatorial Vote Share in Last Election	−10.64 (3.92)**	--	--	−11.42 (3.86)**
Post Proposition 13	--	1.36 (.69)*		1.53 (.66)*
Ballot Initiatives Titled	--	--	0.00 (0.00)	−0.00 (.00)
Republican Governor	−0.18 (.33)	−0.23 (.35)	−0.11 (.37)	−0.39 (.37)
Gubernatorial Election Year	−1.50 (.57)**	−1.39 (.56)*	−1.42 (.57)*	−1.43 (.57)*
Time Trend	0.03 (.01)***	0.01 (.01)	0.03 (.01)**	0.00 (.01)
Alpha	0.48	0.46	0.60	0.34
Log likelihood	−85.37	−88.04	−90.00	−82.66
Observations	109	109	109	109

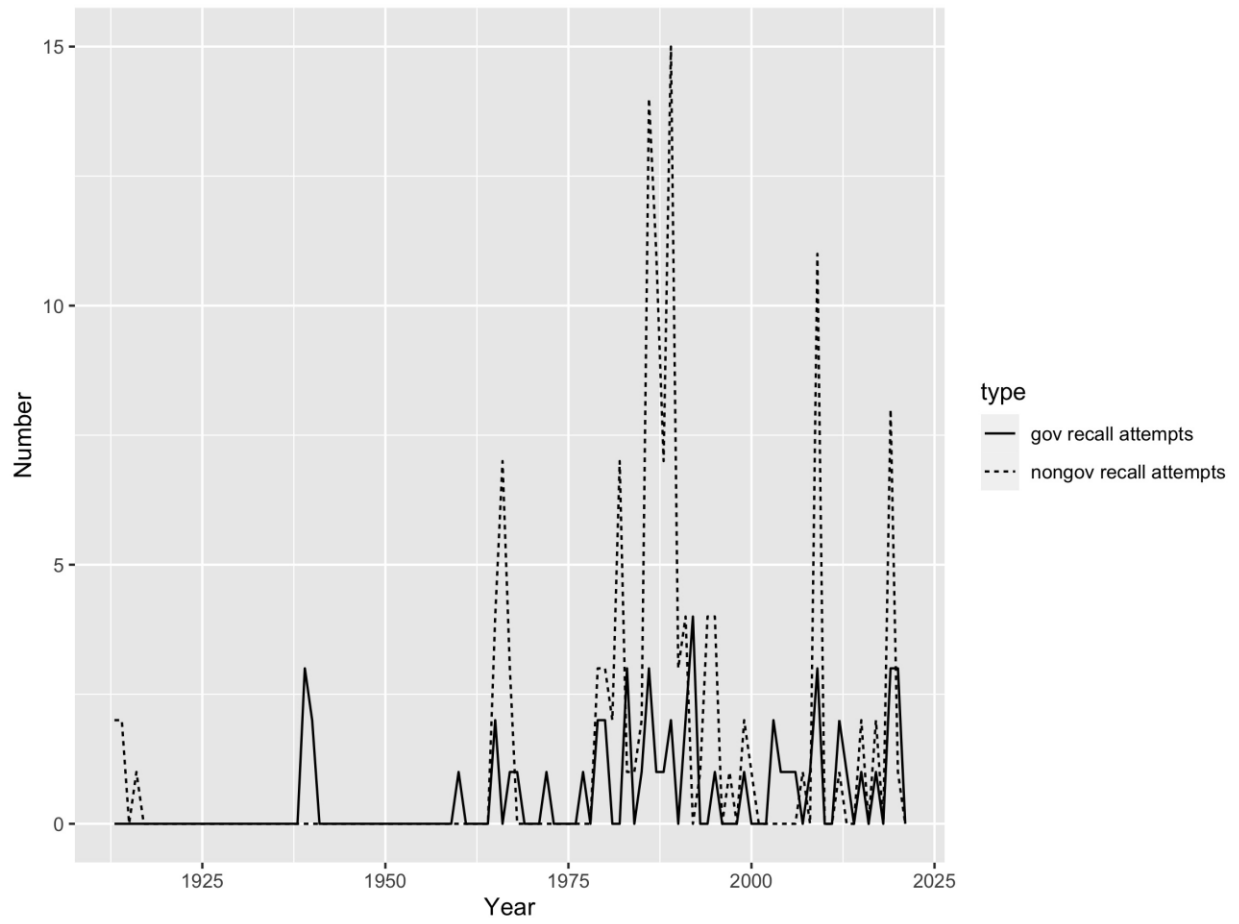
Note: cells are coefficients from negative binomial regression with standard errors in parentheses. \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*  $p < 0.05$ , +  $p < .1$

Table 3. Marginal Effects for Statistically Significant Variables in Model 4

Variable	Change in variable (from, to)	% change in number of recall attempts (from, to)
Gubernatorial Vote Share in Last Election	0.60→0.69	-60%
Post Proposition 13	0→1	300%

Marginal effects are calculated by shifting variables one standard deviation above the mean for continuous variables and from 0 to 1 for the Post Proposition 13 variable. All other variables are held constant at their mean values or, for dichotomous variables, at their modal value.

Figure 2. Gubernatorial and Non-gubernatorial Recall Elections in California, 1913-2021





## Appendix

Table A1. Bivariate Analysis of California Gubernatorial Recall Attempts, 1913–2021

Variable	(1)	(2)	(2)
Gubernatorial Vote Share in Last Election	−9.51 (3.41)***	--	--
Post Proposition 13 (0,1)	--	1.71 (.36)***	--
Ballot Initiatives Titled	--	--	0.02 (.01)**
Alpha	1.36	0.65	1.44
Log likelihood	−99.09	−92.85	−99.98
Observations	109	109	109

Note: cells are coefficients from negative binomial regression with standard errors in parentheses. \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*  $p < 0.05$ , +  $p < .1$