



**2016-2017  
Research Package for Topic 3**

**This House Supports (THS) legislation that  
would allow recall elections at every level of  
Canadian government**

**RECALL**

**ELECTION**

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## Overview:

It has been said that the value of democracy rises from the ability of citizens to “throw the bums out”. That is, democratic forms of government allow their people to hold leaders accountable through regular elections. In most places, elections are held every few years. So what happens if citizens want to throw a particular bum out of office earlier than that?

Recall elections are a procedure currently allowed in some jurisdictions that allow voters to force an incumbent legislator out of office, triggering an election before the end of that legislator’s term in office. The topic for debate this semester is whether to implement policies that would allow recall elections at every level of Canadian government - municipal, provincial, and federal. Debaters should focus their arguments on the practical effects of recall elections on voters, legislators, parties, and the government, as well as the philosophical value of giving citizens the ability to prematurely unseat their leaders.



## Definitions and Models:

This topic is highly reliant on debaters providing reasonable, accurate definitions and a complete, functional model.

Recall elections are similar to, but not the same as, two other forms of unseating representatives or triggering early elections. Debaters should understand how recall elections are different from these other procedures:

- **Impeachment:** representatives can be formally removed from office by the legislature in which they sit. This process is referred to as impeachment, and is usually connected to criminal or highly unethical behavior. It is distinct from recall elections in that it is initiated by other legislators, rather than by citizens in the representative’s district.
- **Vote of No Confidence:** should the parties in the legislature pass a vote of no confidence, or fail to pass a “confidence bill” like a budget, an election is triggered. No confidence measures are distinct from recall elections in that they are (a) initiated by sitting members of the legislature and (b) trigger elections for all seats in the legislature, rather than for a specific seat.

The value and effect of recall elections is highly contingent on the exact process by which the recall election can be called and administered. Debaters should present a model that explains, in broad terms, the system they want to implement. Key elements to consider are:

- **How can a recall election get called?:** Most jurisdictions with recall elections require a certain number of voters within the district to sign a petition in order to trigger the recall. Debaters should provide a rough estimate of how many signatures would be required for the recall election. If the number is too small, then recall elections can be called without a broad base of public support. Too large, and it becomes functionally impossible for a recall election to get called.
- **What is the process by which the election is administered?:** There are broadly two systems for recall elections: those that require a referendum and those that immediately trigger an election. In the first, voters in a district first vote on whether there should be a recall election, with that election only occurring after the referendum passes. In the second, the successful petition for a recall election is enough to trigger the election. Furthermore, debaters should consider whether there should be limitations on the timing of recall elections (i.e. should there be a certain amount of time before/after a general election in which a recall cannot be held) and whether certain individuals should be immune to recall elections (e.g. party leaders).



## Key Issues

### 1. Accountability

- a. Does the possibility of recall elections hold representatives more accountable to the public? How do they impact the behavior of sitting legislators?
- b. In a Canadian context, consider the phenomenon of elected representatives changing parties (“crossing the floor”).
- c. Should individual legislators be held responsible for legislation passed by their own party?
- d. Are the ethics systems currently in place sufficient to ensure that representatives conduct themselves appropriately while in office?



## 2. Legitimacy

Would recall elections improve the legitimacy of representatives in the eyes of their constituents?

- a. Do constituents currently doubt the legitimacy of their representatives?
- b. Are the voting patterns in recall elections significantly different than those of general elections?

## 3. Governance

Does the availability of recall elections impede the ability of elected representatives to govern effectively?

- a. Is a system of recall elections prone to abuse by highly motivated interest groups?
- b. To what extent would recall elections direct politicians towards certain types of legislation?

## 4. Political Parties

Would recall elections have different effects on municipal politics when compared to provincial or federal governments?

- a. How do recall elections affect the behavior and perspective of political parties?



### Key Examples

1. British Columbia: BC has implemented recall elections at the provincial level. Debaters are encouraged to understand the structure of the BC recall system, as well as the history of its use.
2. California Gubernatorial Recall (2003): Several academic papers have been written on the 2003 recall effort in California. Debaters should focus on the context, implementation, and voting patterns of that election.
3. Wisconsin Gubernatorial Recall (2012): The attempt to recall Governor Scott Walker in 2012 was a highly politicized use of recall election systems. It is important to understand why and how the recall was initiated, as well as its results.
4. Several countries other than the US and Canada have had recall systems in place at various points in history. Debaters should take care to find examples that are analogous to the political structures present in Canada, and which take place in countries with similarly developed economies and democratic norms.