

Why Alaskans Are Trying to Recall Their Governor

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Dan Kaufman, *The New Yorker*, March 5, 2020



The current Republican governor, Mike Dunleavy, campaigned, in 2018, on a promise not only to restore the full dividend but to make it retroactive, which would amount to giving nearly seven thousand dollars to every Alaskan. “Alaska suffers from a crisis of confidence with our politicians and our government,” he wrote, in an editorial for the Anchorage *Daily News*, a few days before the election. “The first step in bridging that divide is to protect and restore the PFD.” He added, “Alaskans must be paid back what the governor arbitrarily took from them.”

Dunleavy vowed to do this without any painful spending cuts. Once in office, he launched a dramatic assault on the state’s public sector. A year ago, his administration announced

a budget proposal that included the restored dividend—about three thousand dollars—but not the retroactive amount, which was paid for by more than a billion dollars in cuts. It reduced funding by more than forty per cent for the University of Alaska system and by three hundred million dollars for the state's Department of Education. Safety-net cuts included a ninety-per-cent reduction for homeless services, a decrease for Medicaid of more than a third, and the elimination of programs such as adult Medicaid dental benefits, cash assistance to the elderly poor, and public assistance to Alaskans who are blind or have disabilities. A number of essential services were also gutted, including the Alaska Marine Highway System, a network of ferries that provides a transportation lifeline to dozens of coastal communities unconnected to the state's road system.

The day after Dunleavy's budget was announced, eight House Republicans and two Independents joined the Democrats to create a broad coalition that opposed it. Republicans in the Senate also pushed back against Dunleavy's cuts. Natasha von Imhof, the Republican co-chair of the Senate Finance Committee, told me, "You can't just take huge chunks off the programs and services and expect things to run."

Dunleavy defended his budget in a series of public hearings that were sponsored and paid for by the Alaska chapter of Americans for Prosperity (A.F.P.), a political-advocacy organization founded by Charles and David Koch. To attend the hearings, citizens were required to register with the A.F.P. and abide by its rules, which prohibited holding signs or recording the sessions. At a hearing in Anchorage in March, where three hundred protesters had gathered outside, two women holding up an anti-Dunleavy banner were thrown out. Later that spring, Dunleavy began using state funds to pay for a Facebook campaign that criticized several Republican lawmakers, including von Imhof, over their opposition to the full dividend and urged constituents to contact them. Von Imhof's Facebook page was soon bombarded with violent messages. "You look like a fucking vampire," one read. "Seriously I hope you get hit driving to work so you can't lie and steal anymore," read another.

In June, the legislature released its own budget proposal. It did not specify a dividend amount but left room for one of about nine hundred dollars. Like Dunleavy's budget, it had no tax increases, relying instead on the same formula he had used: the larger the dividend, the deeper the cuts. Dunleavy responded by issuing more than a hundred and eighty line-item vetoes, which totalled four hundred and forty-four million dollars in funding. Alaska's constitution requires a three-fourths vote in the legislature to override a budget veto—the highest such threshold in the country. In early July, Dunleavy hosted a separate legislative session in a middle school in the city of Wasilla, a base of his support, with twenty-one legislators who supported the full dividend. The move made it impossible for lawmakers in the state capitol, in Juneau, to override his vetoes. "It was warfare," a Republican legislative aide told me.

Dunleavy had overturned other political norms in the state, too. A week after his election, his chief of staff, Tuckerman Babcock, sent a letter to nearly a thousand nonunionized state employees ordering their resignations. Previous governors had demanded the

resignations of high-level political appointees, but Babcock's letter was sent to hundreds of nonpolitical state workers, including geologists, accountants, pharmacists, and I.T. workers. Babcock explained to the press that the purpose of the resignations was to have state employees "affirmatively say, 'Yes, I want to work for the Dunleavy administration.'" Employees who refused to resign were later fired.

Many of the state's most vulnerable residents, meanwhile, seemed to be in crisis. Advocates for homeless services feared that five of Anchorage's seven shelters, which serve a population of more than a thousand people, would need to close or drastically reduce their capacity if the cuts were implemented. The city's mayor, Ethan Berkowitz, declared a civil emergency. "We were looking at our unsheltered homeless population increasing by a factor of eight to ten," he told me.

The Permanent Fund Dividend office in Anchorage.

In Anchorage, advocates for homeless services feared that shelters would need to close or drastically reduce their capacity if budget cuts were implemented.

In Anchorage, local media reported on a man named Michael Shelden, who had had sixteen teeth pulled, owing to chronic pain. He was told to come back in four weeks for his dentures. That same month, Dunleavy issued his vetoes. Because Shelden could no longer access Medicaid dental benefits, and could not afford to pay two thousand dollars for the dentures on his own, his dentist's office told him that he could no longer get his teeth. "I cried," he told a local television station. "And I wake up crying at night."

In the town of Cordova, ferries took residents and their vehicles across the sound to Whittier, a ninety-minute drive from Anchorage, where they could stock up on groceries, see doctors, and visit family and friends. As a result of Dunleavy's budget cuts to the Marine Highway System, the ferries have stopped running and residents are now trapped in Cordova until spring, unless they can afford a ticket on the daily flight to Anchorage, which typically costs around four hundred dollars round trip. "The loss of the ferry," Clay Koplin, Cordova's mayor, told me, "may be the slow death of our community."

Dunleavy's past did little to prepare Alaskans for his style of governance. He was raised in a union household in Scranton, Pennsylvania, by parents who admired Franklin D. Roosevelt. He moved to Alaska in 1984, drawn in part by the state's fishing and hunting pursuits. He got a job teaching in Koyuk, an Unalit and Malemiut village about a hundred and thirty miles from Nome. After earning a master's degree in education from the University of Alaska Fairbanks, he spent two decades working as a teacher, a principal, and a superintendent in Arctic communities in the northwest part of the state. In the late nineteen-eighties, he married an Inupiaq woman named Rose Newlin, who worked as a customer-service agent in the airline industry. The couple moved to Wasilla, Sarah Palin's home town, two decades later, where Dunleavy began his political career by serving on the local school board. In 2012, he was elected to the state senate. (Dunleavy declined to comment for this article.)

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A pro-life Catholic, one of Dunleavy's signature issues in the legislature was a failed amendment to the state constitution that would have allowed public-school funding to go to private and religious schools. As governor, his religious views have continued to influence his decisions. Last February, the Alaska Supreme Court blocked an effort to restrict the use of state Medicaid funds for abortions. Federal Medicaid funds can only be used for abortions that end pregnancies that are the result of rape or incest, or for those that threaten the life of the mother. States can make their own rules, however, and the legislature wanted to limit the use of Medicaid funds to cases deemed "medically necessary." One of the most controversial vetoes that Dunleavy issued last summer cut the Alaska Court System budget by \$334,700, the amount the government paid for what he called "elective" abortions. Dunleavy said that the amount was chosen in direct response to the court's abortion rulings.

The decision contributed to growing anger over Dunleavy's conduct and the harshness of his budget cuts. On August 1st, a recall effort to remove him from the governor's office was formally launched. Alaska's recall law, while onerous, allows for the removal of government officials on certain grounds: lack of fitness, incompetence, neglect of duties, or corruption. Two legal justifications for the recall effort were Dunleavy's abortion-related spending cut to the state's court system and the Facebook campaign targeting state legislators. Dunleavy had also failed to appoint a judge within forty-five days to the Palmer Superior Court and mistakenly vetoed an additional eighteen million dollars in Medicaid funds.

The recall's proponents were first required to gather signatures from ten per cent of the voters in the last general election, or 28,051 people, which would be submitted to the state's director of elections for certification. Within a day of the certification launch, they had gathered more than ten thousand signatures, and by early September they had submitted nearly fifty thousand. (By contrast, it took a group of citizens trying to recall Governor Wally Hickel, in 1991, a year to gather twenty thousand signatures.) In early November, the director of elections, following the legal advice of the attorney general, Kevin Clarkson, a Dunleavy appointee, rejected the petition. Clarkson's twenty-five-page opinion asserted that none of the four main justifications reached the statutory requirements: the failure to appoint a judge in Palmer was "merely procedural rather than substantive"; the Facebook campaign paid for by the governor was not proved to be partisan; the Medicaid-funding mistake (which, counting federal matching requirements, could have cost the state tens of millions of dollars more) was a "typographical error"; the abortion-related veto was a "dispute over policy" and within the governor's constitutional rights.

Recall Dunleavy, the group leading the effort to remove the governor, appealed the decision in Alaska's Superior Court, which ruled in January that the recall could proceed. "The recall process is fundamentally a political process," the judge said. "This is not an issue for the judicial branch to decide whether the governor should stay in office or not." The Department of Law, under Clarkson's leadership, appealed the ruling to the Alaska Supreme Court. Craig Richards, a former Alaska Attorney General and a leader of the

legal team for Stand Tall with Mike, a group formed to oppose the recall, told me, “This is completely political. They’re trying to basically overturn the election so that they can get the solution they want.”

Meda DeWitt, the chair of Recall Dunleavy. “I know we will win,” she said.

A significant number of the recall proponents, however, had been Dunleavy supporters, including Joe Usibelli, Sr., the chairman of Alaska’s largest coal-mining company. “From a company viewpoint, at the time, it sure seemed the right way to go,” he said, explaining his vote for Dunleavy. “But you’ve got to look at the bigger picture. Ideology is not a good way to set policy.” For Usibelli, who is one of Recall Dunleavy’s co-chairs, the movement to remove the governor is a chance to reclaim the state’s tradition of political independence. “A lot of people identify themselves simply as Alaskans,” he said. “The recall has brought together people you would never find in the same room, let alone agreeing on something.” For Dunleavy’s strongest supporters, such opposition within the governor’s own party amounts to an unforgivable act of betrayal. “There is a serious problem when some do not back the governor,” Carol Carman, a local Republican Party chair, wrote last year, in an e-mail to Dunleavy’s legislative allies. “Traitors need to be identified and replaced or the ship will sink.”

A few weeks after his election, Dunleavy named Donna Arduin, a consultant based in Florida, as the director of the Office of Management and Budget. Arduin is a partner in Arduin, Laffer & Moore Econometrics, a consulting firm that specializes in advising governors and legislators on state budgets. The firm’s other principals, Arthur Laffer and Stephen Moore, have devoted their careers to the economic theory that lowering taxes will inevitably lead to economic growth. Laffer is the father of supply-side economics, and he worked in the Administrations of Richard Nixon and Ronald Reagan; Moore, the founder of the anti-tax advocacy group Club for Growth, was nearly nominated to the Federal Reserve Board by President Donald Trump, but Moore withdrew his name from consideration after he was widely criticized for his history of sexist remarks. In a profile in the Duke alumni magazine, Arduin, a self-described libertarian, said that she had “joined government to shrink it.” “I have no sympathy for people who want handouts from the government,” she said. The article noted that, when she saw a man on the street holding a sign that read “Anything helps—Smile—God Bless,” she said, under her breath, “Get a job.” (Arduin denied making the remark.)

For three decades, Arduin has been helping design austerity budgets for Republican governors. In 2003, she was the chief budget adviser for Jeb Bush, in Florida, when, as part of an effort to cut taxes, the state put fifty-five thousand low-income children on health-insurance waiting lists and eliminated funding for eyeglasses, hearing aids, and dentures for seniors. Later that year, Arduin began advising Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger, of California, who ultimately reopened two shuttered private prisons, one of which was owned by a spinoff of the GEO Group, which is now the largest prison corporation in the country. As the Los Angeles *Times* reported, ten days after Arduin left her job, in 2005, the spinoff company, Correctional Properties, named her as a trustee. (Arduin denied any involvement in Schwarzenegger’s decision.) While working for

another Florida governor, Rick Scott, Arduin designed a budget that called for the elimination of nearly nine thousand state jobs and for “utilizing inmate labor to grow prison food, and competitively bidding health care contracts resulting in public prison costs that are as low as private prisons.” (Scott eventually tried, unsuccessfully, to privatize twenty-seven prisons in the state.)

A major victory for anti-labor advocates originated in the office of Arduin’s previous employer, Governor Bruce Rauner, of Illinois. In 2015, Rauner, a Republican, filed a federal lawsuit to bar *AFSCME*, a public-employee union, from requiring the payment of agency fees, which fund its nonpolitical activities, such as collective bargaining and grievance representation. A court ruled that Rauner did not have standing to file the suit, but three state employees, including Mark Janus, a child-support specialist, replaced him on the case. In 2018, the U.S. Supreme Court issued its decision in *Janus v. AFSCME*. The ruling—a break with forty years of precedent—allowed public-sector workers to opt out of paying agency fees, which, over time, is almost certain to erode the unions’ bargaining power. Though Arduin was not directly involved in the Janus case, she served as a senior fellow at the Illinois Policy Institute, a conservative think tank that helped fund the suit. (Mark Janus is now a senior fellow at the Institute.)

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As the architect of Dunleavy’s budget, in Alaska, Arduin has continued to advocate for slashing and privatizing public services. During her tenure, she proposed sending five hundred prisoners to facilities out of state. The administration also pushed for the privatization of the Alaska Psychiatric Institute, the state’s only public mental-health hospital, despite a 2017 legislative study showing that doing so would neither save money nor improve outcomes for patients. (She denied involvement in the proposal.) When she announced the cuts to the Marine Highway System, she explained that it was far more expensive to transport vehicles on the ferry than it was for them to travel via the highway, even though the ferry serves communities that don’t have access to the highway. “She seems to have virtually no understanding of the state,” Tom Begich, the Democratic minority leader of the state senate, told *Governing* magazine. “She never once addressed the impact the cuts would have at the local level.” (Arduin left her job as Dunleavy’s budget director in September, 2019.)

The unused ferry terminal in Cordova.

In Cordova, ferries took residents and their vehicles across the sound to Whittier, a ninety-minute drive from Anchorage, where they could stock up on groceries, see doctors, and visit family and friends.

In March, 2019, Arduin’s office noted in a report that, based on economic modelling conducted by the Buckeye Institute, a conservative think tank in Ohio, “taxation on the economy would be much worse than it first appears and more detrimental than spending reductions.” The Buckeye Institute is a member of the State Policy Network, a constellation of conservative state-based think tanks founded, in 1992, by a businessman and former Reagan confidant named Thomas Roe. As [Jane Mayer reported](#), in *The New*

Yorker, the S.P.N. is a nonprofit organization that has received funding from corporations such as Philip Morris, GlaxoSmithKline, and Facebook, as well as from various entities linked to Charles and David Koch, to promote corporate-friendly ideas like low taxes, school vouchers, anti-union legislation, and environmental deregulation.

The S.P.N., which now has sixty-five affiliate members, including at least one for each state, is part of the American Legislative Exchange Council, a national group founded in the early seventies that brings together corporate lobbyists, conservative think tanks, and state legislators to draft and disseminate model legislation and policy ideas. The S.P.N. and *ALEC* have been instrumental in enacting conservative policies that have pushed battleground states such as Wisconsin, North Carolina, and Michigan to the right. They appeared to now have a foothold in Alaska's state government. Representatives from one of the S.P.N.'s affiliates, the Alaska Policy Forum, appeared with Arduin and Dunleavy at the Americans for Prosperity-sponsored budget hearing in Anchorage.

In December, Attorney General Clarkson was a featured speaker at an *ALEC* conference in Scottsdale, Arizona. The topic of his speech was a recent legal opinion he had issued, in which he argued that Alaska was not in compliance with the U.S. Supreme Court's decision in *Janus v. AFSCME*. Clarkson asserted that simply giving state employees the choice to opt out of paying dues was not enough; workers needed to opt in. He asked the state to stop collecting dues unless the state has "clear and compelling evidence" that employees have given their consent to "subsidize the union's speech."

Dunleavy quickly moved to comply with Clarkson's interpretation. His office issued an administrative order that required dues-paying members of Alaska's public-employee unions to sign a form acknowledging that they were "waiving their First Amendment rights" and to provide a second piece of authentication, such as an e-mail, reaffirming their intentions. After issuing the order, Dunleavy's administration sued *AFSCME* and the Alaska State Employees Association, Alaska's largest public-employee union, for violating the *Janus* decision. In October, a Superior Court judge halted Dunleavy's order. Clarkson has brought in the D.C.-area law firm of William Consovoy, one of Trump's private attorneys, which suggests that Clarkson intends to take the case to the U.S. Supreme Court. At the *ALEC* conference, Clarkson outlined his legal reasoning that the option to opt out of one's dues "was not constitutional" and amounted to "forcing employees to continue to subsidize the union."

Though Alaska is traditionally a Republican state, it also has the fifth-highest union density in the country. One pro-labor Republican businessman who helped launch the recall was incredulous about the Dunleavy administration's legal battle over its *Janus* interpretation, for which it recently allotted as much as six hundred thousand dollars. "Why are they doing this?" he said. "It's *Alaska*. We should never be at the forefront of a legal case like this."

Clarkson's opinion on *Janus* has fuelled a central narrative of the recall movement: that Alaska's politics are being outsourced to national interests. Dunleavy has also tied his fate to Trump, whom he has taken to emulating, using slogans like "Make Alaska Great

Again.” “What we’re trying to do up here is to work on behalf of the average American, average Alaskan—not necessarily the special interests,” Dunleavy said, in an interview with Breitbart, in October. “It’s those special interests that want to redo the elections here in Alaska and are looking to try impeach the President now nationally.” Trump has been unwavering in his support of Dunleavy, inviting him onto Air Force One during stopovers in Anchorage. After a recent meeting, Trump tweeted, “My friend Mike @GovDunleavy of the Great State of Alaska, is being treated very unfairly by the Democrats because he is doing an unbelievable job and fulfilling every one of his promises.”

A sign for the recall effort at a home in Cordova.

Dunleavy’s former Senate district, in Wasilla, is in the Matanuska-Susitna Valley, known as the Mat-Su. The valley, which begins about forty-five miles north of Anchorage, contains roughly a hundred thousand people in an area almost as large as West Virginia. Ironically, the valley was first developed, in 1935, as part of a New Deal resettlement program. The program offered two hundred and three destitute farming families from Minnesota, Wisconsin, and Michigan the opportunity to homestead in the valley, which had rich soil and only about a hundred families spread out over a quarter of a million acres. The government poured five million dollars into the project, paying for the families to relocate and giving each one a forty-acre plot. Although the farmers initially struggled, the colony soon became successful, and, by 1948, it was producing half the produce grown in Alaska. The colony is long gone, but its elegant, simple barns still dot the landscape, and the nineteen hours of sunlight during the summer routinely produce hundred-pound cabbages and thousand-pound pumpkins.

Before it became a state, in 1959, and during the decade after, Alaska was predominantly progressive. During the nineteen-seventies, the construction of the eight-hundred-mile Trans-Alaska pipeline attracted white workers from the Deep South, many of whom were conservative, accelerating a rightward shift in the state that had begun with the arrival of large numbers of military personnel during the Cold War. As the pipeline neared completion, Governor Jay Hammond, a Republican, pushed for the establishment of a sovereign wealth fund—a savings account—to benefit future generations of Alaskans. In 1976, voters approved an amendment to the state’s constitution creating the Permanent Fund. By 1980, after an oil shock the year before, the price of crude had reached a hundred and twenty dollars a barrel, in inflation-adjusted dollars. “We were giving away money,” Mike Bradner, a former Democratic speaker of Alaska’s State House, told me. “People didn’t even know what they were appropriating for.”

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That year, Hammond signed legislation to give every resident of Alaska a yearly dividend from the Permanent Fund’s earnings. Two years later, the first checks, for a thousand dollars, were mailed out. The dividend is the closest any state has come to providing a universal basic income, and its creation was supported by both progressives, who

avored a redistribution of collective wealth, and libertarians, including Milton Friedman, who believed that it was the best way to alleviate poverty and could also be used to dismantle the welfare state. In Alaska's rural areas, particularly in the state's Native villages, some of which are among the poorest communities in the country, the dividend helps offset the high cost of electricity and staples like milk, which can cost more than thirty dollars a gallon.

The same year it passed the dividend, the legislature repealed Alaska's income tax. Though Hammond opposed the repeal, he did not veto it. Since then, several legislative attempts to reinstate the income tax have failed. In 2004, at a conference on the fiscal dilemma posed by Alaska's reliance on oil revenue, Hammond said that his biggest regret as governor was not vetoing the income-tax repeal. Three years later, Governor Sarah Palin signed legislation to tax oil production in Alaska at twenty-five per cent of net profits, and higher if profits exceeded thirty dollars a barrel. (In Norway, the rate is seventy-eight per cent, which helps fund the country's extensive social-welfare system.) In 2008, the price of oil reached a hundred and forty-five dollars a barrel, and the state sent out checks for thirty-two hundred dollars.

In 2013, Palin's successor, the Republican Sean Parnell, a former executive for ConocoPhillips, repealed Palin's oil-company tax increase, a move that cost the state two billion dollars in revenue in the first year alone. By then, oil prices had plummeted, which created a gaping financial deficit. The dilemma over what the cash-strapped state should do about the dividend has persisted ever since.

Von Imhof, the Republican state senator from Anchorage, supports reducing the dividend, which she equates with socialism, to address the state's financial crisis. In December, at a Chamber of Commerce meeting at a brewpub in Eagle River, halfway between Anchorage and the Mat-Su, she gave a detailed presentation in which she argued that, for the state to afford essential services like Medicaid, the dividend must be reduced. The attendees, who included a representative from Dunleavy's office and many legislators and citizens from the Mat-Su, offered pointed critiques. "Why is it that the people are having their P.F.D. taken by the politicians?" a gray-bearded man asked. "Your point: Should the dividend dictate the framework of the budget? That should be true. It's not the politicians' P.F.D.—it's the *people's* P.F.D."

The following day, I went to see Bill Wielechowski, a Democratic state senator, at his home, in east Anchorage. Wielechowski's airy kitchen is filled with barrels of fermenting beers and homemade meads made with local honey and wild fruit. In 2016, he had unsuccessfully sued the state when Governor Walker reduced the dividend. "Democrats are supposed to be the party of the people," he explained, "the party of the working class." But Wielechowski is also dismayed at how Dunleavy has used the full P.F.D. as a cudgel—and a cover—to dismantle the safety net. "It's been weaponized," he said. "I used to have these conversations with Dunleavy when we were both in the Senate. We both predicted this moment: he wanted to push the state in the direction where you were

faced with making cuts or giving up the Permanent Fund, and he thought cuts would prevail. I wanted to push the state in the direction of increasing oil taxes, keeping the services, and keeping the full P.F.D.”

For Wielechowski, the recall, which he supports, is complicated because he also believes that the bipartisan effort to reduce the dividend is orchestrated by the oil companies. “Reducing the dividend is all about getting rid of the Permanent Fund so that the oil companies don’t have to pay more taxes,” Wielechowski said. “It’s all about oil.” Wielechowski believed that Palin, by raising oil taxes, had made a truly populist move, and he noted that her approval rating rose to ninety per cent, the highest of any Alaska governor. But he sees Dunleavy, who voted to repeal the oil-company taxes as a state senator and now refuses to consider any tax increases on the oil companies, in a different light. “His populism is a total façade,” Wielechowski said. “When push comes to shove, his populism takes a back seat to corporatism.”

Last September, the final ferry departed Cordova, one of the largest commercial fishing ports in the country. Its two ferries, the older, slower Aurora and the faster Chenega, are currently docked in Ketchikan—the Aurora is in need of repair, and the state intends to sell the Chenega. Service is not expected to return until late April, and is currently scheduled only for the duration of the summer salmon-fishing season. At the town’s holiday bazaar, in December, there was an undercurrent of gloom and anger owing to the abrupt seven-month suspension of Cordova’s ferry service. Brian Wildrick, the owner of Harborside Pizza, used to pack a month’s worth of supplies in his cargo van. Now he worries that he may have to close several days a week, since he can’t afford the expensive commercial freight-shipping rates. Stacie Chappell told me that her sister, Jamie, went to Anchorage to have her baby—Cordova has no obstetrician—and had to have her labor induced early so that she could return to Cordova before the ferry service ended.

No one was more devastated by the loss of the ferry than Janet Johnson and her twenty-year-old daughter, Wilde Rose. Two years ago, the town of Cordova bought Janet a used wheelchair van so that she could more easily transport Wilde Rose, who has cerebral palsy, to medical appointments in Anchorage. Janet now says that they may have to leave the town. “It’s hard to go, because if you are someone with disabilities there are so many good things about it here,” Janet said. “You can fish twenty feet off the road, you can see bears right outside your van window.” But, without the ferry service, Janet wondered if they would be able to leave at all. “We’re kind of trapped here,” she said. Wilde Rose leaned forward, struggling to speak. “It’s because of Dunleavy,” she said.

The town of Cordova gave Wilde Rose Johnson and her family a wheelchair-accessible van, which they previously used to get to Anchorage for appointments when the ferry was running.

In addition to having to fly in order to get to Anchorage without the ferry, Wilde Rose Johnson then has to be lifted into a non-accessible van to leave the airport.

On a misty morning, Clay Koplin, Cordova’s mayor, picked me up at my hotel in his S.U.V. It was early and still pitch-black outside, but Koplin, an avid hunter and fisherman,

wanted to show me Cordova's ferry dock before he went moose hunting. Koplin, who had voted for Dunleavy, told me that more people in Cordova signed the recall petition than voted for all the candidates combined in the past election. Koplin signed, too. Like many Alaskans, he has a libertarian streak, dating back to the seventies, when President Jimmy Carter set aside fifty-six million acres of public land as national monuments; Koplin became drawn to a secessionist movement that was gathering momentum in opposition to the designation. "My parents were right in the middle of that," Koplin said. "I grew up in that ecosystem. We read the Federalist Papers, the Constitution. We kind of cut our teeth on the Founding Fathers."

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For Koplin, supporting the recall was an affirmation of Alaska's independence. "The recall is a backlash against outside interests," he said. Koplin described how the state had been exploited in the past. Simon Guggenheim and J. P. Morgan developed the Kennecott mine, two hundred miles north of Cordova, which contained the richest vein of copper in the world. The Guggenheim family went so far as to construct a two-hundred-mile private railroad to transport copper ore to Cordova, where it was then shipped out of state. When the mine was depleted, the railroad was torn up. "Colonization—that's the story of Cordova," Koplin said. "They had the richest copper mine in the world here. What did they leave behind? A few clapboard buildings and a hole in the mountain. They tore up the train tracks and took it with them. They left nothing."

After we pulled into the ferry's empty parking lot, Koplin got out and stood in front of the chained gate. "It's so frustrating," he said. "We appreciate things like this. We take care of them and value them." Koplin recently met with Dunleavy to discuss the fate of the Marine Highway System, which, like a regular highway, requires constant maintenance. "I'm making this financial argument to him for the ferries, because that's what this administration understands," Koplin said. "But that's not what really hurts the psychology of the town. What hurts is that we have to fight every single year for something that is a very deep, social experience. The ferries are part of the community's fabric. They're what makes Cordova different." Koplin gestured toward the vast expanse of Prince William Sound and the Chugach Mountains surrounding it. "It isn't just that our particular way of life has been eroded—it's that a really *great* way of life has been picked apart by people that don't understand or appreciate it."

Clay Koplin, the mayor of Cordova.

Last month, the State Supreme Court, which will hear oral arguments in the recall lawsuit on March 25th, allowed Recall Dunleavy to begin gathering signatures. The move confirmed a widely held expectation that the court will certify the recall, and prompted Stand Tall with Mike to drop out of the lawsuit opposing it, though attorneys for the state have vowed to continue the legal fight. (If Dunleavy loses the recall election, Lieutenant Governor Kevin Meyer, a Republican and a former oil-company executive, will become governor.)

The last major recall election in the United States was in Wisconsin, in 2012, when Governor Scott Walker defeated a campaign that had gathered more than a million signatures. Like Dunleavy, Walker faced opposition over the influence of outside interests, the lack of citizen input while long-held political norms were overturned, and a rejection of public austerity. In 2011, when Walker announced a law that attacked public-employee unions, a grassroots movement launched a three-week occupation of the Wisconsin state capitol and mustered protests that, at their peak, drew more than a hundred thousand people in Madison. After failing to defeat the law, the movement turned toward recalling Walker from office.

The recall petition, a stunning organizing success, directed the movement's energy into a purely electoral campaign. Walker was able to outraise his Democratic opponent by six to one and benefitted from tens of millions of dollars in outside spending. He won reelection by making the race a referendum on the legitimacy of the recall itself. After Walker's victory, the movement that had risen to oppose him vanished almost entirely. The battle for Wisconsin had become a national proxy, and Walker's success helped to pave the way for Trump's victory in the state.

There are hints that Alaska's recall fight may also have national implications. Dunleavy will almost certainly have enormous backing from out-of-state donors, as well as support from Trump. And Dunleavy has started pitching his governorship as essential for the country. "America needs Alaska's natural resources," Dunleavy said, when a judge ruled against overturning a ban on offshore oil drilling in the Arctic Ocean. After Dunleavy met with Trump last summer, the Environmental Protection Agency reversed its opposition to the construction of an enormous mine near Bristol Bay, the home of fifty per cent of the world's sockeye salmon. Dunleavy and Trump are also pushing for logging in the Tongass National Forest, and the federal government has announced plans to auction leases to oil companies in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge.

For some of Dunleavy's opponents, the recall's broad-based support in Republican Alaska is also a chance to prove that the allure of Trump's right-wing populism is waning. "I've watched scientists who work for nonprofits sitting beside proud, conservative N.R.A. members with the same goal: recall Dunleavy," Taylor Kimbarow, a deckhand and former marine in Cordova, told me. "We have the opportunity here to shift the tide and push back against one of the many people you can say is walking lockstep with the current Administration. I think the recall is going to expose a lot of feelings that are blatant all over this country. People are fed up about what's going on."

Since the recall effort was launched, Dunleavy has been softening some of his positions. His second round of budget vetoes, in August, was notably less extreme, especially toward the university system, whose funding he agreed to cut by seventy million dollars over three years, instead of by a hundred and thirty million dollars in one year. And he ultimately accepted a partial dividend of sixteen hundred dollars. "Everything is now put through the recall lens," a Republican legislative aide told me. "How can this defuse the recall?"

Kendall, of Recall Dunleavy, noted that the threat of a recall continues to have a moderating effect: Dunleavy's most recent budget, announced in December, contains few spending cuts, and essentially punts the difficult decisions over the dividend to the legislature. "It was a huge capitulation," Kendall said, which he believes will only help fuel the recall movement. "If he only behaves when you've got your foot on his throat, why would you take your foot off his throat?"