

IN MY OPINION**Caroline Porter****Some thing Wong****Illinois
needs
recall**

My first reaction to the arrest of Knox County Clerk Marc Wong was to feel sorry for him. After all, he had ambitions of running for higher political office and according to some sources, even for president of the United States. Anyone convicted of a felony can't ever be a candidate for any elected office, so it appeared his ambitions were nipped in the bud.

But because of centuries of prior experience, we Democrats have an uneasy feeling in our gut. It's that "Wong is going to walk" feeling. It means we are beginning to think that even though he confessed on video tape to forging checks, stealing from the campaign fund of State Representative Donald Moffitt and the Knox County Republicans and broke federal and state campaign disclosure laws, Wong will never be punished. Because he's the Republican "fair-haired boy," we fear that somehow the judges, elected as Republicans, and the jury will be convinced he just made a little mistake and serve no time. In fact, we now know that Wong's criminal activity began in 1999.

In response to a petition drive to have him removed as county clerk, Wong said he wouldn't resign because as county clerk he hadn't stolen anything. Well, now, doesn't that make us feel better? There are two problems here. 1) we can't believe him and 2) he clearly doesn't think he's done anything wrong.

Let's compare this to what happened to a Democratic Township Supervisor who was caught embezzling funds from the town coffers. Upon being arrested and indicted, he immediately resigned his elected office. Even though his health was poor, he was sentenced to five years in prison.

Yep, we Democrats don't think justice will work as well for Marc Wong. We remember the days, as recent as in the last decade, when strange things happened in the county justice system because of partisanship and we just can't seem to shake that old cynicism.

One glaring omission from the Illinois



constitution is the lack of a method to impeach or recall elected officials. Bureau County suffered through years of having a sheriff who had been indicted for second-degree murder and misuse of county funds. It was a lovely story. The sheriff agreed to be interviewed by a reporter from the Kewanee Star-Courier about the charges of misuse of funds and went to her house. While there, he showed the woman a letter he was going to send to the press, saying her husband was a child molester. The reporter dropped dead of a heart attack. The sheriff was accused of not giving her CPR or calling the ambulance very quickly. Like the O. J. Simpson case, the sheriff was found not guilty of murder, but the reporter's family is suing him in civil court. Found guilty of numerous felonies, however, he finally had to leave office, but spent years strutting in front of television cameras in his office and the courthouse, thumbing his nose at county citizens and the slow-moving justice system.

Former Illinois Supreme Court Justice James Heiple was another example of a public official who should have resigned and refused to. Illinois Governor George Ryan was an excellent candidate for a recall referendum.

Recall elections are an electoral device in American politics which allow citizens to remove an elected official from office before the end of that person's term. These elections are considered an extension of democracy in that they allow citizens to hold elected officials accountable after they have been elected and during their term in office. Recalls do not require accusations of illegal acts — they can be used if an official is considered to be incompetent.

Those who wish to remove an official need to raise a petition with the names of typically 25 percent of the number of people who voted for that official in the previous election. Once the 25 percent of the required names have been collected, a special election is held. If the majority of those who vote want that officials to be removed, then this takes place. The person who succeeds this official can be voted for in the special election or can be elected at a subsequent election.

A good case could be made for an amendment to our Illinois constitution providing the machinery for recall or impeachment of state and local elected officials. But getting the support of these same officials for such an amendment could be a bit tricky.

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