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CALIFORNIA FOCUS

Don't take the Bayou State cure

California 'open primary' would slam door on representative government



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It is the great, irresistible temptation of political reformers to constantly "reform" the election system in a quest for the perfect representative democracy. This urge is usually manifested in endless attempts to calibrate a magic formula of campaign contribution limits that will "take money out of politics," i.e., end

special interest influence.

This same utopian impulse is now being directed at how we elect our candidates, not just how we finance them. A small group of wealthy self-identified reformers is expected to qualify an initiative for the November ballot that would effectively eliminate political parties in California. It would abolish the current system of party members choosing their own nominees for partisan offices and replace it with a two-tiered system where the top two vote-getters in the first round face each other in the run-off election.

They call it the open primary. It is neither.

Initiative proponents are undeterred by the fact that the only other state in the nation using this system is that laboratory of good government, Louisiana. They've labeled it the "open primary" initiative, even though the Louisiana system actually abolishes the primary system and closes participation

among political parties.

The proponents' self-admitted aim is populating the state Legislature with an increased number of non-partisan politicians. They see the state Legislature as excessively partisan and so dominated by ideological extremes as to be unable to craft legislative solutions to the problems confronting state government.

When looking at the numerous initiatives placed on the November ballot, none is remotely as important or threatening as this political fireball.

There are three key problems with Louisiana-style election.

First, it's a radical plan that will distort California politics for decades. Deadened political discourse will begin displacing the activity of the volunteers who constitute political parties and fight furiously during primaries, before coalescing to present clear alternatives to the public. Candidates will avoid taking controversial positions - always seeking to be the least offensive and "most electable."

As parties slide into irrelevance, getting elected becomes even more of a rich man's game than it already is. Wealthy candidates - or those sponsored by very rich special interests - won't need to coordinate with grass-roots activists in order to save money. This initiative effectively replaces a very specific primary with two very expensive general elections. Since all voters will participate, campaign costs will literally double and only those with the funds can play. Great news for political consultants, bad news for political diversity.

Finally, fundamental fairness should concern voters who appreciate our democratic system of political parties. It wasn't long ago that a member of the Green Party got elected to the Assembly in Berkeley. Under the radical Louisiana system, minor parties will be permanently barred from electing their candidates to higher office.

I'm far from certain morphing our elections system into a clone of Louisiana's will necessarily result in more moderates being elected. After all, it was in Louisiana that KKK leader David Duke made it to a gubernatorial run-off with corrupt former Governor Edwin Edwards - squeezing out moderate incumbent Governor Buddy Roemer.

As a former chairman of the California Republican Party, I am much more certain of the damage this initiative will inflict on political parties as an organized force in California. First and most important, it would deny party members the ability to choose their own nominees. Voters affiliated with one of the two major parties, which includes about 80 percent of us, may never see a member of their party make it to the run-off.

Political reforms are infamous for falling victim to the law of unintended consequences, especially in California. The full-time Legislature, campaign contribution limits, even term limits - none has produced the promised benefits, and in the case of the first two have made things worse. Imposing on Californians a Louisiana-style election system is another example of reform that does more harm than good.