

No: It would hurt the GOP and reward mushy candidates

The attention of California Republicans is naturally focused on the rambunctious gubernatorial and U.S. Senate contests. After all, who we nominate for those offices, and the slate of constitutional officers, is essential to the GOP's recovery as a force in California politics.

Overshadowed by the sound and fury of those contests is an initiative on the June ballot that could affect GOP fortunes even more profoundly by permanently, radically altering how party nominees are selected.

Proposition 14 replaces our traditional party primary system with the "blanket" primary used by that paragon of political dysfunction, the state of Louisiana.



Shawn Steel is California's National Republican Committeeman and a former chairman of the Republican Party of California.

Prop. 14 is the fruit of a corrupt bargain struck a year ago between liberal Republican state Sen. Abel Maldonado and legislative Democrats: Maldonado voted to enact the budget and largest tax increase in state history in exchange for putting the blanket primary on the June ballot.

Traditionally, California voters choose party nominees in a primary election, the winners of which face each other in the November general election. Political parties are free to decide votes in their primaries. For example, the GOP allows decline-to-state voters to vote in its primary, in addition to registered Republicans. This system has served our state well for decades.

The radical Prop. 14 scheme proposes a blanket primary in which all candidates are on a single ballot. The top two vote-getters - regardless of party affiliation - advance to the general election.

The blanket primary narrows, rather than widens, voters' choices. Many of our gerrymandered legislative and congressional districts are dominated by a single party. In these, general elections would be between a Republican and a Republican, or a Democrat and a Democrat. In large, rural districts, there would never be a Democrat on the November ballot. Likewise for Republican candidates in urban areas like Los Angeles and San Francisco. As for third party candidates, they'd effectively be knee-capped.

This is no accident. The blanket primary is designed to blur the lines and populate the Legislature with politicians with mushy beliefs. The unstated premise is that sharp philosophical differences between the two parties is unhealthy, and that seeking voter allegiance on such a basis is "partisan" and therefore bad.

In a free society, parties should be allowed to set their own rules for selecting nominees, not have one imposed on them against their will.

Adopting a blanket primary in the tea party era would be a historic mistake. I can't remember the last time so many ordinary Americans were so earnestly engaged in issues of politics and government, actively pushing back against state and federal governments that have slipped their constitutional moorings and are spinning out of control.

At a time of maximum voter alertness to the very real differences between two parties - and their flaws - do we really want a blanket primary that blurs those distinctions? Is it wise to rig the game so that voters, rebelling against the status quo, have their choices narrowed to two brands of vanilla? Some elites argue that the California Republican Party can only grow by diluting itself, and they see the blanket primary as a means to that end - but that view ignores history and is blind to the opportunities ahead.

In California, the seeds planted by years of Democratic policies - high taxes, anti-business regulations, massive entitlements and unsustainable public pension obligations - are bearing their bitter fruit. The edifice of liberal governance is quickly crumbling, and more and more Californians are open to Republican solutions grounded in liberty and limited government as the surest path to restraining government and creating economic opportunity. Why, then would we choose such a moment to adopt a blanket primary that deprives voters of robust choices and offers them a narrow octave of echoes, instead?