

Proposed Open-Primary Initiative Would Destroy Political Life

By Shawn Steel

Forum

LOS ANGELES DAILY JOURNAL • WEDNESDAY, OCTOBER 13, 2004 • PAGE 6

In a few days, the California political world may erupt. We are facing permanent destruction of all minor parties, marginalization of the major parties and an evisceration of political activists. On Nov. 2, voters will decide whether to adopt a radical scheme to change our electoral system fundamentally in this state.

Proposition 62 is financed by Richard Riordan and a host of super-rich power brokers who want to end the contest of ideas in political primaries.

Advertised as an open-primary election initiative, in reality it would impose a Louisiana-style nonpartisan voting process in California.

The Louisiana primary election law was devised by Gov. Edwin Edwards, a Democrat, in 1975 as a means of throttling the growth of an emerging Louisiana Republican Party. The notorious Edwards went on to beat corruption charges in 1987 but was convicted in 2001 of racketeering, extortion and fraud and sentenced to 10 years in prison.

To use Edwards' Louisiana system as a model for elections in California is outrageous. Louisiana has long had a reputation for corrupt Banana Republic politics, and the state's primary election law permitted extremists like David Duke and Edwards to be finalists for governor in 1991. Louisiana voters were forced to choose between the Klansman and the crook.

Ten billionaires helped pay for signatures to qualify this Louisiana-style primary to be on the November ballot.

They include Haim Saban ("Mighty Morphine Power Rangers"), Eli Broad (major developer Kaufman & Broad), Don Bren (chief executive officer of the Irvine Co.) and John Chambers (chief executive officer of Cisco Systems).

This ballot proposition is not an open-primary or even the blanket-primary proposal adopted by Californians as Proposition 198 in March 1996. It is a radical scheme that will destroy the role of political parties in our state.

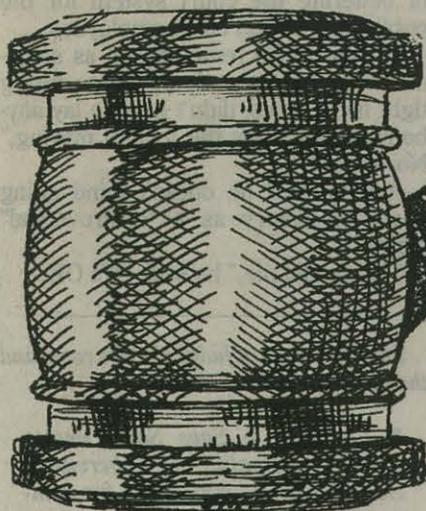
WEDNESDAY,

OCTOBER 13, 2004

VOL. 117 NO. 199

LOS ANGELES

Daily Journal



If this initiative is adopted, there will be no official party nominees for any office. There will be no Democratic candidate and no Republican candidate, or any other party candidate.

This will allow wealthy self-financed candidates to dominate elections for generations. Inevitably, this will create personality cults.

Instead of facing party activists, wealthy candidates will massage the public with Pabulum messages.

In this radical system, candidates' names would appear randomly placed on a primary ballot. Listing party affiliation would be up to the parties.

All voters, including those not affiliated with a political party, would receive the same ballot and would be allowed to vote for any candidate, regardless of the candidate's party affiliation. The two candidates receiving the highest number of votes, regardless of their political party, would appear on the November election ballot.

To a large extent, the two candidates qualifying for the November election will depend on the field of candidates

running in the primary.

In statewide races, if the primary field comprises three or more Republicans and two Democrats, the November general election likely will be between two Democrats. Similarly, if the field comprises three or more Democrats and two Republicans, the runoff likely will be between two Republicans. These whimsical outcomes are anti-democratic.

Former Rep. Tom Campbell, author of Proposition 198, observes that, in his 1992 Senate race, the two candidates qualifying for the November runoff both would have been Democrats, had this Louisiana-style primary been in effect.

Adoption of the Louisiana plan will have a devastating effect on small parties. With runoffs involving only the two top vote-getters, it will be a very rare instance when a Green Party candidate's name appears on the November ballot.

This system will result in perpetual internal warfare, in which two members of the same party vie for election in November legislative runoffs.

How is a political party supposed to

run a "ground game" for all its candidates if the party is at war with itself? How can there be genuine diversity of ideas if all parties are effectively disenfranchised?

In many coastal urban counties, Republicans and other parties will no longer compete. The same is true for Democrats in suburban and rural areas. Political diversity will suffer when parties are eliminated from the November ballot.

There is probably no more important political proposition in the last 10 years than Proposition 62. If approved, it will marginalize all parties, reduce introduction of new ideas in the political process and allow wealthy personality cults to dominate California politics for decades to come.

It's unfair to minor parties, it's anti-democratic and it will have huge unintended consequences.

Voting no on Proposition 62 is the only reasonable answer.

Shawn Steel is director of California Club for Growth.