



A Proposition Claimed to Weaken Political Parties

The rage of frustrated voters has manifested itself in a reform that could transform American politics. A June 8 California ballot question would eliminate party primaries and, instead, provide that all candidates for elective office face each other in a first round election. The two top vote getters would then meet in the general election to determine which candidate is elected.



Theoretically, party labels would not matter at all. A candidate could run as a Democrat, as a Republican, as a Libertarian or a Socialist, or as simply an unaffiliated candidate. The practical consequence could easily be the demise of political parties or the relegation of those parties to inconsequence, as wealthy independents or third parties could challenge party primacy — or the power of a single party could be set in concrete because the Democrats have an edge in fundraising, advertising, and organization. An election could be between two Democrats, with no one else on the ballot.

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The supporters of Proposition 14 seem to believe this will be the case, since they include the very cozy Democratic insiders in Sacramento. The opposition parties — Republicans, Libertarians, Green Party, American Independence Party, and others — also perceive the measure as doing them no real good, though California Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger has endorsed the proposition. They fear that small parties will be squeezed out and only well-known or connected politicians will have a chance to compete. The opposite argument is that it may be worth a chance to get rid of political parties because parties have historically been detrimental to good governance.

The Founding Fathers feared the influence of political parties or “factions.” They created a form of government, in the United States Constitution, that could operate perfectly well without political parties. Our system, which exists not only at the federal level but in every state, provides for three branches of government. Unlike Britain, Canada, Italy, Japan, and many other nations, the American system of government is not a parliamentary system: The leader of the largest party in the lower house of the national Legislature does not automatically become Prime Minister (or head of government.)

Our system allows a nonpartisan President, like Washington, to perform his constitutional function of executing the laws without wearing a hat as head of his party.

Certainly the constellation of allies and foes of Proposition 14 is unusual for a true “reform” measure.



Written by [Bruce Walker](#) on May 28, 2010

But most people concede that the practical impact of this measure is impossible to foresee. The dysfunction of government in California is so readily apparent that even the most doctrinaire statist now concedes it. Will changing the process of election help reform Sacramento? It is hard to see how that state government could be worse.

Would we be better off without government run by political parties? There is little doubt what George Washington or James Monroe would have said on the subject.

Photo of Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger: AP Images



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