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A subsidy of political parties

BY UNION-TRIBUNE EDITORIAL BOARD
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George Washington belonged to no political party and was fearful of how a budding party system might impact the new nation. In his farewell address published Sept. 19, 1796, in a Philadelphia newspaper, the first president laid out his reasons for not seeking a third term and issued several warnings about the party system, including this:

“The alternate domination of one faction over another, sharpened by the spirit of revenge ... is itself a frightful despotism.”

The party system nevertheless blossomed – and the nation somehow endured. But friction between the government and the political parties still exists. It may not reach the level of “a frightful despotism,” but a small example is now playing out in San Diego and elsewhere in California.

As reported in the Union-Tribune last month, San Diego County Registrar of Voters Deborah Seiler and several counterparts from other counties are leading an effort to save millions of taxpayer dollars by removing elections for the obscure party central committee positions from publicly financed primary election ballots. Among officially recognized parties, only Libertarians opt out of the county-run balloting.

Seiler’s reasoning is hard to dispute. It costs San Diego County about \$400,000 to certify party candidates, include them on the ballot and conduct the elections. The central committee positions are internal party posts, not governmental offices. And voters are largely unaware of who the central committee candidates are and what the committees do. Indeed, of 240 candidates listed on the ballot here in June 2010, 160 of them, 67 percent, were running for central committee seats. A quick look at election returns shows that large supermajorities of voters did not bother to vote for the party central committee slots.

It is, Seiler says, “a complete taxpayer subsidy of a private organization.” Statewide, it amounts to about \$7.5 million. A major change in the way California conducts primary elections, approved by voters last year, will make the central committee balloting even more cumbersome in coming elections.

Local Republican Chairman Tony Krvaric acknowledges Seiler’s concerns. County Democratic Chairman Jess Durfee demurred. Other partisans have argued that removing committee elections from the public ballot would further centralize political party power with a handful of leaders. That is no doubt true, and a legitimate concern.

But we believe Seiler’s reasoning to be far more persuasive.

Sadly, Seiler and her registrar colleagues have yet to find a legislator in Sacramento willing to carry a bill requiring all parties to find another way of selecting their organizational leaders.

In this age of financial distress at virtually every level of government, every sensible idea for saving significant money ought to at least be given a hearing. We urge a member of the San Diego County delegation, from either party, to step

up.

Find this article at:

<http://www.signonsandiego.com/news/2011/apr/11/a-subsidy-of-political-parties>

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