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Sacramento-area election officials push to get party committees off primary ballots

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Sacramento election officials are helping lead the way to remove political parties from primary ballots to save millions of dollars statewide.

Candidates for local Democratic, Republican and other party central committees totaled about a third of all the candidates on the county's ballots last June, according to Sacramento County Voter Registrar Jill LaVine.

LaVine said it costs Sacramento County about \$300,000 to certify party candidates and run the contests, even though most voters repeatedly ignore them.

LaVine has joined with San Diego County Registrar Deborah Seiler and other county registrars to lobby for public support to eliminate the state requirement that these contests be placed on the ballot.

Seiler said such support amounts to a subsidy of private organizations.

"These central committees are not public office," she said. Yet a huge part of the elections staff workload is devoted to them, she said, starting with verifying candidates' petitions, determining proper ballot designations and including them on increasingly more cumbersome ballots.

"It's as if we were running the Kiwanis Club election," Seiler said.

Elections officials in California say taxpayers pony up about \$7.5 million statewide to cover the costs of races for local political party seats. Only the Libertarian Party in California has opted out of county-run balloting.

Elections officials say there have been no takers in the Legislature to alter the process.

"Everybody says, 'Yah, good idea! Good idea!' " said Gail L. Pellerin, Santa Cruz County clerk and president of the California Association of Clerks and Election Officials.

Pellerin said she hopes once the issue is better understood, "We might get some public

outcry."

Most voters are unfamiliar with the political party candidates, Pellerin said in a March 14 letter to Gov. Jerry Brown, seeking his support. In one tally, about three-quarters of all voters in the primary election failed to cast any votes for the central committee candidates, she said.

State law ought to be amended to allow central committees to select members by caucus, she told Gov. Brown.

Steve Davey, chief of staff for Roseville Republican Sen. Ted Gaines, said that to his knowledge, association representatives had not contacted Gaines, who sits on the Senate Elections and Constitutional Amendments Committee.

"If they want to, I'm sure we'd take the meeting," Davey said.

The situation is becoming critical since funds from the state to cover mandated costs have dried up, Seiler said.

Some elections officials say running contests for political party seats will cost more under Proposition 14, the open-primary constitutional amendment approved by California voters last June.

The legislative analyst, in the ballot pamphlet analysis, said the overall fiscal effects would not be significant.

Changes in how officials prepare, print and mail ballot materials could in some primaries drive costs higher, the analyst wrote, in part because ballots would grow longer. In general elections, however, shorter ballots could save money.

In Sacramento County, "we anticipate it almost doubling our costs for the primary election," said LaVine, who co-chairs the legislative committee for the county elections association and has researched the data.

In Los Angeles County, the data show, central committee candidates made up 45 percent of the 1,109 candidates on last June's county ballot. And in San Diego, two-thirds of the county's 240 candidates were for central committees in mid-2010.

Sherry Bebitch Jeffe, political analyst at the University of Southern California, said the issues are basic.

The bottom line, she said, is the function of the county central committees: They support the party base, and they can endorse candidates.

"There is a question, at a time we are hurting for money, whether or not those functions ought to be paid for by state and local governments," Jeffe said.

Kerri Asbury, chairwoman for the Democratic Central Committee in Sacramento County, acknowledged the added cost and work the contests require.

"It is a huge burden for a very over-strapped county elections office to run this," said Asbury.

But she said central committees benefit the public, and the Democratic central committee has talked to county elections staff about changing the process.

"It is partisan representation for the public," she said. "... We go into the communities for our schools and local issues. But it's done in partisan ways."

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