

A Story of “Special” Proportions

In my last article I wrote that I would dedicate this column over the next few months to analysis and rebuttals to the Governor’s upcoming proposals. This past month has provided fodder for a years’ worth of columns.

A special election in November could have as many as fifty-three initiatives on the ballot, including at least ten that are highly controversial propositions. On May 3rd, Margita Thompson, press secretary for Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger said, “It’s the Governor’s intention to have a special election.” So are we going to have a special election or not?

Some Democratic lawmakers have said they prefer not to hold a special election, which could cost taxpayers as much as \$70 million. In Alameda County, we estimate that the cost of a special November election would be in the \$2.9 million range. Alameda County still, despite all promises to the contrary, hasn’t been paid back by the State for the millions we spent on the last special election. Remember that one? That was the one where we recalled Governor Davis and elected Governor Schwarzenegger in the first place. The cost to taxpayers and Counties is a mere drop in the bucket when you look at all the political contributions behind the initiatives. Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger and his allies spent more than \$6.4 million around the state in a high-priced effort to qualify a package of 3 initiatives for a possible November special election. They have raised a total of \$8.3 million and those numbers are as of the end of March and don’t account for fundraising drives in April or May. This type of fundraising sets a dangerous, but unsurprising precedent: those who have money can afford to advance their issues to the voters where those without capital cannot and are left out of the process.

The Governor insists that at least three initiatives will have enough signatures to qualify three initiatives for the ballot: tenure reform for teachers, redistricting, and his “Live Within Our Means” budget reform proposal.

Schwarzenegger has chosen to focus in recent days on his “Live Within Our Means” budget-control measure, which would enact stricter spending limits and allow the Governor to make unilateral cuts. All this balloting by initiative has led to an “oldie but goodie” type of political advocacy- if you can’t beat ‘em- join ‘em. Some opponents of the Governor’s proposed policy reforms are preparing to underwrite a hugely expensive campaign in which they will try not only to defeat Schwarzenegger’s measures but also enact their competing ballot items including measures to address prescription drug costs.

According to the Los Angeles Times, Schwarzenegger has picked on some powerful adversaries in his use of ballot initiatives to enact reforms, and his opponents are using the same tool this year.

Take for example the prescription drug initiatives. A proposed ballot measure sponsored by labor unions and Democrats would provide discounts on prescription drugs to some low-income state residents. Under the proposal, pharmaceutical manufacturers would be required to provide discounts on drugs for low-income residents or face exclusion from Medi-Cal. Supporters of the proposal say it would help the state use its purchasing power to negotiate lower drug prices under the plan. But, the pharmaceutical industry is supporting an alternative to the labor-supported, Democrat backed measure. Their counter measure, drafted by the Pharmaceutical Research and Manufacturers of America, would create a voluntary drug discount program for pharmaceutical companies modeled on Schwarzenegger's California Rx proposal (Senate Bill 19).

It begs the question- is the Governor a sore loser? One can't help but wonder if all this "balloting by initiative" is some elaborate contest between the Legislature and the Governor—is the Governor only taking issues to the voters that he can't get approved by the Legislature? Sure he is. If the Senate Health Committee had not rejected Senate Bill 19 last week do you think that the issue would be coming to the voters for approval? No. He would have just signed the bill into law once it finally made it to his desk.

Like the Republicans in the US Congress trying to do away with the filibuster, the Governor is trying to use his ever dwindling popularity by taking his already State House and Senate rejected proposals to the voters and call it "democracy." How many times does one voter have to say "no?" We elect those into State office that we believe hold our values and empower them to be our voices in Sacramento, our legislature has told the Governor, "no, that won't work for our communities."

Let's tell the Governor that you'd rather see the \$70 million California counties would spend on hosting his "special election" spent on programs you care about here at home like education, health care and social services. Tell him you'd rather see him spending his time in Sacramento on the problems you elected him to deal with-- like getting our State out of our horrible fiscal situation and actually balancing the State budget, not getting us into more debt by hosting an election that will cost millions.

State Controller Steve Westley was quoted as saying, "How many times can you tell the voters 'this act will cure deficit spending?' The Governor has a credibility problem." Similarly, a senior advisor to Speaker Nunez was quoted as saying, "It's difficult to offer a counterproposal on the [ballot] initiatives when you don't know the Governor's bottom line. He's like Jell-O, wriggling all over the plate."

It remains to be seen if there will be a special election or not, but I implore you, if there is, do your research before casting a November ballot. Many competing interests will place similarly worded initiatives on the ballot. It will be up to you to decipher them and make every vote count.