

So Kick 'em Out—but Fill the Vacuum

■ **Term limits:** They would retire professional legislators, all right—but the danger is that special interests would clone their replacements.

By HARVEY ROSENFELD

The biggest bank heist in history was an inside job. In 1982, California legislators rewarded years of campaign contributions from the savings-and-loan lobby by eliminating S&L investment safeguards. Then they looked the other way as the fat cats looted the vaults and swindled their customers. Thanks to its deregulation of thrifts, California is responsible for about 76% of all S&L fraud cases. The cost to American taxpayers: \$500 billion.

The S&L scandal is merely the most visible example of California's polluted politics. Last year, state legislators pocketed \$24.4 million in campaign contributions, the overwhelming majority from special interests. In exchange, badly needed laws to reform the insurance industry, rescue our collapsing health-care system and protect the environment are blackjacked by legislative committees. Desperate, the voters increasingly step in to do the job themselves, with ballot measures such as Proposition 103.

Accustomed to a \$44,898 annual wage, plus nearly \$30,000 in lavish perks such as free cars, auto insurance, weekly trips to their home districts and \$88 a day for living expenses, state legislators are increasingly insulated from the pocketbook problems of their constituents. Indigent mothers, the elderly and disabled had to wait more than a month for the Legislature to enact a budget that would meet the state's overdue commitments. But the legislators never missed a paycheck—thanks to their earlier foresight in passing a law guaranteeing themselves their salary, budget or not.

Indeed, for today's career politicians, job security, not public policy, is the major concern. And that security is provided by the special interests, which give prodigiously to make sure their allies remain in office. In 1988, 92% of the campaign



'You mean, like, wow, we can actually get rid of, you know, incumbents with this whatchamacallit?'

contributions from the largest political action committees in California went to incumbents, allowing them to outspend challengers by as much as 5 to 1. Since 1984, only seven legislative and congressional incumbents have been denied office in California. With ever fewer candidates to choose from, it is not surprising that the largest political force in California is the 75% of its citizens who are eligible to vote but usually don't bother.

Politics is too important to be left to the politicians any longer. Two initiatives on the November ballot provide an opportunity to end the private domination of democracy by the privileged.

Proposition 131 would terminate the lifetime tenure of entrenched politicians by limiting members of the Senate and Assembly to 12 years in office, and all statewide officials to two terms, or eight years. It would also restrict PAC contributions, cap the campaign spending that has

turned state politics into a \$200-million business and allow citizens to voluntarily earmark some of their taxes to finance campaigns, eliminating the need for candidates to become indebted to wealthy donors. In addition, Proposition 131 would stimulate a new grass-roots politics by matching in-district contributions—now a fraction of campaign funds—with \$3 from the public fund for every \$1 donated by a resident.

The second measure, Proposition 140, is more severe: It would roll back the Legislature's budget by 40%, then index it to inflation. Assembly members would be limited to six years in office, state senators and statewide elected officials to eight. Unlike 131, however, Proposition 140 doesn't contain any of the campaign-funding restraints that would prevent the special interests from filling the vacancies.

Some critics of term limits argue that even 12 years is not enough time to become an expert legislator. But there are very few jobs that take that long to learn, and representing the public isn't one of them. Others ask, what about legislators like Assemblywoman Maxine Waters (D-Los Angeles): Why

force our few consumer champions out? The problem is, there aren't enough of them to justify maintaining a system that bars most pro-consumer people.

If either of the term-limit measures passes, it will register a 10 on the political Richter scale, signaling a rebellion that is likely to surge nationwide.

As revolutionary as term limits are, little would be gained if current legislators are simply replaced by clones hand-selected by the special interests through their dependents, the fossilized parties.

The only way to guarantee that the term-limit proposals fulfill the promise of a citizen democracy is for Californians fed up with traditional politics to organize themselves to fill the vacuum created when the initiatives kick in.

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