

The California GOP's unwelcome mat

by *Lionel_Van_Deerlin*

Perhaps you've heard about the country club that posted two lists near its entrance. One contained the names of members in arrears with their dues, the other of members recently deceased. One elderly golfer quipped, "If I don't find my name on either list, I go on in."

Things in California's upcoming primary election aren't quite that simple for political independents - people who haven't decided whether to register as Republicans or as Democrats. The two parties see these undecideds in different ways. The Democrats, ever mindful of Noah's bidding to go forth and multiply, will welcome independent voters with open arms on Tuesday, and offer them a party ballot. With the Dems, it's come one, come all. But let a non-Republican request a GOP ballot, and the precinct clerk is instructed to freeze up like Interstate 5's narrow two-lane Tejon Pass outside of Los Angeles the third week in January.

"Sorry," the applicant will be told. "Those ballots are limited to registered Republicans only."

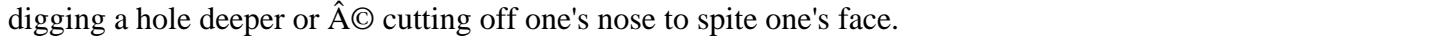
At its highest levels in our state, the party of Bush and Cheney decided to limit the nominating process to those who can document themselves conservatively pure at heart. If a voter was uncertain of his or her ideology at sign-up time - or conceivably felt some business or social pressure for declining to state a party preference - well, they could as well be on that "deceased" list for the Tuesday hoedown.

Please understand me here. I do not fault the Republican organization for setting membership standards - no more than I would the Daughters of the American Revolution or Sons of the Golden West. All of us find social satisfaction and sometimes a sense of security in being among "our own."

As applied to political affiliation, however, any entrance requirement seems self-defeating. Purpose of a political organization, surely, is singular and the same for all of them - to exert economic or social influence by winning elections. And to accomplish this in a democracy, a party must attract to its standard a majority of fellow citizens without regard to their race, their religion or previous condition of servitude.

Until a few short years ago, it didn't matter much if a voter here and there decided against joining one of the two major political parties. As recently as 1970, California's dissidents were fewer than one in 10. A relatively insignificant number, these, who sat out the primary elections regularly held for nominating presidents and others seeking partisan office.

As of last month, however, the state's registration was divided as follows: Democratic 42.6 percent, Republican 33.5 percent and "decline to state" a whopping 19.3 percent. (The remaining roughly 5 percent align with American Independent, Libertarian, Green and other fringe parties.)

It is thus clear that in contrast with past years, Californians reluctant to claim a party allegiance now number nearly one in every five voters. In hard numbers, that's around 2 million people whom the Republican Party is kissing off. In similar circumstances, this would be seen as (a) making a bad situation worse, (b) digging a hole deeper or 

The Florida primary, which narrowed the Republican presidential field on Tuesday, could concentrate national attention on what may be expected to happen on the West Coast. If John McCain can continue his winning ways despite this state's highly restrictive Republican primary, the GOP's 2008 nomination should be his.

But McCain has yet to prove he has overcome the distaste that certain of his moderate social views have caused among his party's "true" conservatives. These include the ineffable Rush Limbaugh and a host of radio talk-show hosts who seem to take Limbaugh's political guidance as gospel. With the certitude that is his style, Limbaugh asserts that a McCain nomination would mean death for the Republican Party.

OK, Rush, so why not let the party members in California decide if you know what you're talking about? In some earlier voting states, which hand non-party members whatever ballot they choose, the mass of independents has flocked to McCain on the Republican side, as it has swelled Barack Obama's totals for the Democrats.

California, where the GOP places red lights and security barriers in the path of independents, should prove whether McCain can make the grade among conservatives alone, and whether the nomination can be his without a brokered convention.

And, oh yes - whether ol' Rush has been skipping his meds again.

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