

More Than a Presidential Primary – Propositions on the February Ballot

By Dan Sharp

Another California election, another set of ballot propositions for voters to consider. It's a list that at first glance looks daunting, but it really isn't. In one case, the "yes" side is urging us to vote "no," while four measures are nearly identical, just swapping out the name of various tribes with gaming operations in the state.

Here's a quick glance at each of the propositions:

Proposition 91

In 2002, California voters overwhelmingly supported Proposition 42, which allegedly required that gas taxes be used for transportation purposes. But as soon as the state government went broke again, they used a little-discussed trigger that allowed them to siphon off the gas tax money for the General Fund. So a "clean up" initiative came in the form of Proposition 1A in 2006, which required the state to pay back such borrowing. At the same time, this initiative was being qualified.

While proponents of Proposition 91 settled on Proposition 1A as a compromise, it was too late – this initiative had qualified, and was then required to go to the voters. So the proponents of this initiative are urging us to vote "no."

It is important to notice a distinction between this measure and 1A. Under current law, the legislature can borrow the money, but they have to pay it back within several years. Under 91, the legislature could borrow the money, but they would be required to repay it during the same fiscal year.

Proposition 92

Since voter passage of Proposition 98 some 20 years ago, K-12 education and community colleges have been given a guaranteed share of state government income. This initiative would change the formula for community colleges, giving them a slight increase in funding, and dropping the per unit fees for students from \$20 to \$15. There is major disagreement from the education community about this initiative, but I think there are other questions – and this applies to Proposition 91 as well.

While the legislature has proven itself wholly incapable of governing, how much trouble have voters caused by taking significant budgeting authority away from them? Beyond that, why do we fail to address the structural issues in the budget? Why haven't we given the legislature the ability to create two-year budgets? Why haven't we introduced zero-based budgeting, where agencies could be rewarded for watching their pennies? These piece-meal reforms should give us pause.

Proposition 93

And speaking of piece-meal reforms, I wrote about this issue last month. This initiative would change term limits, giving lawmakers the ability to serve 12 years in one house of the legislature, rather than 14 years carved between the two. It would also give the current Senate President Pro Tem and Assembly Speaker Fabian Nunez a few more years in their respective leadership posts.

With term limits, we have traded professional politicians for career politicians. We've traded those who had the time to develop legislative expertise for a new class who are constantly eyeing that next campaign, that next move up the political ladder. There are few legislators on either side of the aisle today who hold a candle to their counterparts of previous decades.

Propositions 94 – 97

Indian gaming in California has become a multi-billion dollar business in just eight years. Over the past quarter century, the Golden State has gone from a gambling-free zone, to another lottery state, to full-blown Vegas-style casinos on sovereign land from the High Desert to the Oregon border.

These initiatives would collectively allow four tribes to add up to 17,000 additional slot machines. For that right, the tribes will turn over potentially hundreds of millions of dollars each year to the state budget.

Beyond the morality issues, beyond the tribal sovereignty issues, there are serious questions about the Federal government's handling of these "compacts" with the tribes. The fundamental question before voters is whether we want more slot machines in exchange for a cash infusion to the state's coffers.

A final thought

One final thought on the propositions and it's a similar concern I have about the sheer volume of bills careening through the halls of the Capitol each year. It's important to know who is behind any measure that changes public policy, who is paying the bills; but it is equally important to know its history – the hows and whys and who is impacted. Voters should carefully consider those questions when marking this particular ballot.