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OPINION-EDITORIAL



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

February 26, 2010

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OP-ED

Rethinking elections

Amid budget shortfalls, can we afford all these special elections?

(Originally published in the Los Angeles Times on February 16, 2010)

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Elections in California are clearly in overdrive. Last year, more than a dozen were held in Los Angeles County, many triggered by vacancies in congressional or legislative offices.

The recent election of former Assemblyman Paul Krekorian to the Los Angeles City Council is keeping the election throttle to the floor in 2010, with a special primary in April, just two months before the statewide primary in June.

At a time when all levels of government are struggling to keep the engine running, cutting costs and looking for ways to work smarter, this pedal to-the-metal pace of special elections is one area in which a major tuneup ought to be considered.

Concerns over voter fatigue and mounting costs, once simply academic discussions, are now an intense reality.

In California, election law requires any vacancy in a state legislative or congressional office to be filled by a special primary and, if needed, a special general election within 126 days from when the governor proclaims the election. Since 2005, 14 vacancy elections to fill unexpired legislative terms have been called, resulting in 22 primaries and runoffs.

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Though the argument can rightly be made that this phenomenon is a testament to a healthy and participatory democracy, the fact is these elections are characterized by extremely low voter turnout and disproportionately high costs.

In two recent vacancy elections for Assembly seats, fewer than one of every four registered voters cast a ballot. The low turnout in these contests is compounded by the costs incurred in conducting them. And over the last decade, Los Angeles County has conducted special vacancy elections for 10 positions, with a sticker price of more than \$12 million. With the low turnout, that came to \$40 to \$50 for each vote cast.

What is most troubling to counties struggling fiscally is that the state has no permanent mechanism to reimburse them for the costs of conducting these special elections. For many of these elections, counties have yet to receive -- and most likely will not see -- a dime to cover these unbudgeted costs.

Faced with a nearly \$20-billion shortfall, the state may want to consider alternatives to reduce these growing costs. Advocates of instant-runoff voting, for example, propose to reduce the number of elections by eliminating the need for a special runoff election. This method allows voters to rank their choices and consolidate the primary and runoff elections into a single election. In Los Angeles County, this option would require new vote tabulation software and systems, state approval and a significant investment in voter education.

Another option might be to adjust the election calendar to space vacancy elections further apart, or to consolidate them with existing or newly established election dates. Election law currently sets the first Tuesdays in June and November of every year as election dates. In odd-numbered or "off" years, vacancy elections could be consolidated in June or November.

Obviously, depending on when the vacancy occurs, this option might leave a seat vacant for too long, so additional dates might need to be considered. Vacant legislative seats represent one less vote in the Legislature and a lack of representation for the district affected.

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An option rarely discussed is the use of appointments to fill vacancies. At least 19 states across the country have some form of appointment process in place to help fill legislative and congressional vacancies. It is unlikely, and probably not advisable, to replace special vacancy elections with an appointment process. But a hybrid solution that uses appointments to help consolidate election dates is a possible compromise and cost-saver. Hawaii, Montana and Tennessee have such systems. California's Constitution only allows appointments for constitutional offices, so legislation would be needed for this alternative.

These options are a starting point for policymakers. As the Legislature reconvenes and a new budget cycle confronts our state and county, the cost of efficient and effective democracy needs to be a part of the discussion.

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