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## Recall symptomatic of political ills

### Recall the system

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Those who back the recall election in California do so with understandable frustration at the magnitude of unsolved problems our state faces. But the risk is high that if we simply change the occupant of the governor's office, it will be a change without a difference for the challenges we face.

Our basic problem in California is our inability to address effectively the serious issues confronting us -- the budget crisis, transportation, immigration, housing, environmental protection, job creation, the energy crisis, health care and the deterioration of our educational system and our parks -- because our decision-making is hamstrung by a statewide system. Changing the way any elected governor or other state officials operate is highly unlikely until we address the flaws in our system. Most seriously, campaign financing is out of control in California. The last governor's race cost \$130 million. Only candidates who are personally wealthy or spend most of their time raising money can achieve statewide office in California. An elected official makes decisions about thousands of issues every year, virtually all of which touch the interests of groups that are past or prospective contributors. This requires public officials to walk extremely narrow lines between legitimate decisions and ethically questionable ones, and to shun hard decisions that might affect a certain sector -- say the utilities or unions -- because they know they will need to raise money from them in the future.

Through redistricting, Republicans and Democrats in the state Legislature have created safe legislative districts that favor incumbents. This has excluded would-be challengers to inadequate representatives and formed strangely shaped districts that have little in common other than voters who habitually make the same party choice. Term limits for legislators were well intentioned, but they have resulted in elected officials who have little time to accomplish goals or obtain seniority and are always positioning themselves for the next office, to the detriment of doing their legislative job effectively. The joke going around is that a first-term assembly member is a freshman, a second-term member is a speaker, and a third-term member is senator-elect.

The initiative process, created by Progressive reformers a century ago, was meant to be the citizens' method of direct legislation. But it has turned into a huge money operation, where many initiatives are backed and opposed by special-interest groups who pay large amounts of money to professional signature collectors to gather the support necessary, and engage in often misleading advertising about what the initiative is and what its impact will be. The voters are left trying to guess what it's all about.

The primary system promotes those who are at the extremes of both parties

-- liberal Democrats and conservative Republicans can most successfully navigate the state primaries because interest groups at the extremes support candidates in the primaries. When those elected collide in the state Legislature, not much gets done because there is little overlapping framework of common philosophy or desire to cooperate. The requirement of a two-thirds majority in the California legislature to pass a state budget also makes efficient decision-making very difficult. Many states require a simple majority.

Largely because of voters' cynicism about their ability to have any impact on this system, we experience extremely low voter participation in California, around 30 percent in recent elections, which magnifies all these problems by essentially removing the citizenry from the governing process. An inattentive citizenry, uninvolved in the governance process, gives rise to a system and elected officials who do not serve their needs -- witness the popularity of the recall.

Abuses by political consultants and lobbyists are rampant. Richie Ross, the king of negative campaigning, is reputed to refuse to work for candidates unless they endorse all the other candidates for whom he is working. As reported recently by The Chronicle, Ross combines campaign consulting with lobbying, allowing him to get a candidate elected and then have that person's ear to lobby for his clients. As the wheeler-dealer behind Lt. Gov. Cruz Bustamante's campaign, Ross engineered the donations from Indian casinos, which he also represents as a lobbyist. And one wonders whose strategy it was to put this money into anti-Prop. 54 ads, enabling Bustamante not to return most of the contributions after a judge ruled them illegal?

In sum, in California we have a system of governance that is not fair, not accessible to citizens, not clean and in which the public has thus lost confidence. This is a problem that won't be solved by a recall election.

One hundred years ago, Progressive reformers in California organized to help citizens take back state government from what they perceived to be corrupt officials. Led by Gov. Hiram Johnson, they instituted the initiative process and the recall, as well as other wide-reaching reforms of state and local institutions. The Commonwealth Club is proud to have been a vehicle for debate and pursuit of these reforms. It is time for a new reform agenda in California, removed from the personalities and short-term debates of the current recall episode. The reforms of the early 20th century need to be re-examined for their current effect, and many new issues, such as the impact of private money on statewide elections, must be addressed. California's problems are not unique, but they are a bellwether for those in other states and on the national scene. If we address these issues here, California will once again provide its leadership to the nation as a whole.

Gloria C. Duffy is CEO of the Commonwealth Club of California, which is celebrating its 100th anniversary Oct. 21 with a gala featuring Tom Brokaw. To make a reservation, contact [annualdinner@commonwealthclub.org](mailto:annualdinner@commonwealthclub.org) or call (415) 869-5910.