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## **A deceptive Prop. 93**

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Say there's an argument for getting rid of term limits in California. Assume that if voters had not approved a 1990 term-limits measure, seasoned lawmakers would not have allowed the \$14 billion shortfall staring California in the face to develop.

Just when I start rethinking my support for term limits, Sacramento solons have come up with a scheme so arrogant, so greedy - and so ridiculous - that I have to rethink my rethinking of term limits.

I present to you Proposition 93, the reputed term-limits reform measure brought to you by the leaders of the California Legislature. The 1990 term-limits law limited service to six years in the Assembly and eight years in the state Senate, for a total of 14 years. Supporters want you to think the 2008 version is a tougher measure, as it caps total time in the Legislature at 12 years.

Voter beware: Thanks to what the attorney general's office euphemistically calls a "transition period," Proposition 93 allows the clock to start anew for some 42 Sacramento incumbents. So while the AG's ballot summary says the measure "reduces the amount of time a person may serve in the state legislature from 14 years to 12 years," it actually would allow some lawmakers to serve as long as 16 years.

In case you haven't guessed it, that means Assembly Speaker Fabian Núñez and Senate President Pro Tem Don Perata, who were term-limited out at the end of this year, would be able to hold onto their seats for four more years, in the case of Perata, and six more years, in the case of Núñez.

How is it, you might ask, that lawmakers who are supposed to lose their seats this year could nonetheless qualify to be on the ballot?

*Mirabile dictu*, Sacramento rejiggered the election. Last year, the Senate and Assembly passed a bill, signed by Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger, which set up an early presidential primary election in February and a second June primary for state officials. Somehow, Democratic leaders, who complained about the \$55 million cost of the 2005 special election, found themselves championing two 2008 primaries -

one conveniently early so that a measure could be put on the ballot that would allow Perata, Núñez and company to run for re-election. Prop. 93 was born.

When it looked as if supporters had failed to garner the necessary signatures to qualify their measure for the February ballot without a time-consuming signature check - which would take weeks and thus place the measure on the June ballot - four counties, including Alameda and Contra Costa, magically revised their counts upward - just in time to help Perata and Núñez hang on.

After the needed signatures appeared, all talk of promised redistricting reform disappeared. Núñez and Perata had talked about reforming how seats are apportioned to make them more competitive. But once they got what they wanted - a February primary, a forgiving signature count and a bait-and-switch initiative that could help them hold onto the power - they dropped even the pretense of cleaning up their act.

California Insurance Commissioner Steve Poizner, a Republican, notes that all the swells needed now was an underfunded No on 93 campaign. To challenge this "naked power grab," Poizner donated \$1.5 million of his own money to defeat 93.

As a believer in redistricting reform, Poizner noted that if legislative leaders get rid of term limits, "they will never in a million years, out of the goodness of their hearts" agree to reforms that would make legislators more accountable to voters.

More Poizner: "If it wasn't for these term limits, they'd be there forever. With gerrymandering, there's no competition left."

Former state Controller Steve Westly, a Democrat, told The Chronicle editorial board Tuesday that he supports redistricting reform "emphatically," but that the need for more experienced lawmakers is so great that he supports Proposition 93. Do "not hold the good hostage for the perfect," Westly said. "This is still good policy."

Sorry. It cannot be good policy to reward a dishonest scheme concocted by otherwise feckless politicians. California is facing a \$14 billion budget shortfall. Now Californians are supposed to vote to change the Constitution to keep the same truth-challenged legislators in power longer?

In 1990, voters supported term limits because they wanted to evict arrogant self-serving legislative leaders. A new like-minded crew thinks that they can fool California voters and hang onto power. Why does it seem that the only time Sacramento leaders rush into action is when they choose to mislead the public in order to save their sorry seats?

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