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A Trojan horse primary for the GOP

A February primary may dramatically boost Democratic turnout.

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IS MOVING California's presidential primary to Feb. 5 from June a trap for Republicans and their business allies?

Giving the state a greater say in picking presidential nominees is certainly a commendable goal. The state Senate has passed legislation moving the date up, and the Assembly is weighing the change. Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger has said he will sign the bill. But consider this scenario:

In 2008, the Republican ticket of Rudy Giuliani and Sam Brownback wins the race for the White House. In February 2012, President Giuliani is unopposed in the primary as he seeks a second term. With no other electoral races on the ballot, most Republican voters can be expected to stay home. At the same time, a spirited Democratic presidential primary promises to bring out Democratic voters. In anticipation of the big Democratic turnout (and the absence of Republicans), backers of pet liberal causes – public financing of campaigns, higher taxes on the rich to finance various social programs, tougher environmental regulations on business – rush to qualify their initiatives for the ballot. The Democrats' "wishlist" is voted into law.

In theory, a Democratic presidential victory in 2008 would offer sponsors of conservative initiatives a similar opportunity in 2012. But the Democrats have a backup plan. Because they dominate the Legislature nearly 2 to 1, they can avoid a Republican-dominated primary simply by moving the presidential vote (once again!) to June, when races for legislative and congressional seats and a U.S. Senate seat would better equalize party turnout.

There is no convenient backup plan for Republicans to avert a Democratic-dominated primary in 2012 should the GOP claim the presidency next year.

What might the effect of all this be on the GOP and its allies? Last year, Chevron and other business interests spent about \$100 million to defeat Proposition 87, which would have taxed oil companies to pay for research into alternative fuels. The measure lost by 9 percentage points in an election with a Democratic turnout of 45%. How much would it cost business to defeat a similar proposition if Democratic turnout was 65%, as might be expected in a highly contested Democratic presidential primary in 2012?

If you think this is farfetched, consider what happened in 2000, when lack of competition in the Democratic presidential primary may have kept Democrats home. Vice President Al Gore faced no real challenger, while Republicans had to choose between George W. Bush and John McCain. Even with competitive congressional and legislative elections on the ballot, Democratic turnout was only 46%, down from 53% in 1998, when there was a spirited gubernatorial contest on the Democratic side.

With other big states considering moving their primaries to Feb. 5, California Republicans may be on the receiving end of a sucker punch if the current legislation is not revised to make it a one-time experiment.