

Schnur's autonomy suits Secretary of State

By The Bakersfield Californian

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Whether Americans have the opportunity to participate in fair, corruption-free elections should not be subject to the whims of a political party. That is particularly true in these troubled times: Three Democratic state senators accused of corruption have taken the "perp walk" or its humiliating equivalent; the U.S. Supreme Court has tossed out most attempts to control the political influence of big money; and political game playing has disenfranchised millions of voters across the nation.

One government official, more than any other in the state, is in a position to mitigate some of the negative effects of those and other election-related problems: the California Secretary of State. That official is, or should be, a neutral referee who preserves open and balanced elections that give all citizens the equal chance to select who will represent them in Congress, the White House, the state house and city hall.

Regrettably, that is not how it works in California today. This "neutral referee" is actually a member of either the Democratic or Republican Party. Minor party candidates can run for the office too, of course, but they have little chance against the major parties' clout.

The mighty fight that political parties wage to control the office shows how much real power it has. Besides serving as the state's chief elections officer, the Secretary of State oversees the chartering of corporations and is responsible for maintaining the state's archives. Maintaining government transparency depends on the competency and commitment of this statewide elected official.

Election laws are established by federal and state legislators, and interpreted by state and federal courts. But it is the Secretary of State who implements and enforces the laws -- and sounds the alarm when problems are found and reform is needed.

Only one candidate seeking to replace termed-out Secretary of State Debra Bowen is running as an independent. That candidate, Dan Schnur, possesses far more knowledge and savvy than the typical independent.

He will face six other candidates, all affiliated with political parties, in the June primary. A seventh challenger, state Sen. Leland Yee, a Democrat, dropped out of the race after being accused of corruption and illegal weapons dealing. The two top vote-getters in the June primary will face off in the November general election.

A recent Field Poll showed Republicans coalescing behind Republican Pete Peterson, a former public policy fellow at the Hoover Institution who now heads the Davenport Institute for Public Engagement and Civic Leadership at Pepperdine University. Coming in second in the poll is Democratic Assemblyman Alex Padilla of Pacoima. Others in the race include Democrats Derek Cressman, a former Common Cause vice president, and Jeffrey Drobman, a software developer from Westlake Village; Republican Roy Allmond, a program technician in the Secretary of State's office; and Green Party candidate David Curtis, an architectural designer from Marin County.

Schnur is no stranger to politics. He was a long-time and prominent Republican campaign strategist until he dropped his party affiliation three years ago. After his appointment in 2010 as chairman of the California Political Practices Commission, Schnur became director of the Jesse M. Unruh Institute of Politics at the University of Southern California and a nationally recognized political analyst.

As a candidate, Schnur has repeatedly called for election reforms that only can be credibly advanced by an official who is not affiliated with a political party.

"The primary cause of the culture of corruption in the state Capitol is the link between political fundraising and government action," Schnur recently told The Los Angeles Times. Schnur uses a baseball analogy to explain, "You don't want the umpire wearing a Dodgers or Giants jersey. By the same token, you want the person in charge of the election process to be one who is not beholden to the Democrats or the Republicans."

He is correct.

Californians should support Schnur in the primary and inevitable November runoff. Then they should insist that his first priority be to propose making the Secretary of State's office a non-partisan position.