

Impacts felt of term limits, top-two primary

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News



The state Capitol, Sacramento. (Photo: David Monniaux)

by **SAMANTHA GALLEGOS** posted 06.06.2014

An intra-party showdown in November between legislative incumbents for a state Senate seat is a rarity and may be even less likely in the future.

Sacramento-area Assemblymembers Roger Dickinson and Richard Pan, both Democrats, finished in the top-two spots for their primary election and will face off in November to succeed Sen. Darrell Steinberg in the 6th Senate District. Steinberg, D-Sacramento, is the Senate's leader.

But this week's primary is not historically typical for a California election.

"It would really be inconceivable that two sitting Assembly members would risk running in a competitive race against each other when it doesn't add to the number of years they can serve and probably only reduce the number of years they could serve," Mitchell said.

Revised term limits and the top-two primary system — which pits candidates against each other regardless of party affiliation — appear to have lessened the likelihood of such contentious battles, according to one analysis. That's because it all comes down to timing.

"It is used to be the norm, but now it's a relic of the pre-term limits extension that we probably won't see a lot of going forward," said Paul Mitchell, a political strategist and vice president of Political Data, Inc., which

markets campaign information.

Under the old rules for legislative terms, members of the Assembly could anticipate which of their colleagues would be their primary challenger for a future place in the upper house. They could also be sure that after defeating their party colleague in the primary, they would face someone of the opposite party in the general election.

“The consumer attorneys came in for Roger and the medical folks were all over Pan,” Democratic strategist Andrew Acosta said. “That race really became a doctors-versus-lawyers race.”

But this isn't the case anymore. And neither is the motivation to compete for place in the state Senate, considering that a lawmaker would not gain more time in the Legislature by moving up. Voter-approved rules now allow a lawmaker to spend 12 years in office, and the entire time may be spent in one house. The earlier rules, approved in 1990, allowed more time in Sacramento – 14 years – but required that no more than six years be spent in the Assembly and eight years in the Senate.

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Willingness to face fellow incumbents in a primary in order to maximize overall time in the Legislature might be less likely now, but the top-two system also allows for an intra-party battle in the general election.

This means Dickinson and Pan are again competing for votes and campaign cash.

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In their primary campaigns Dickinson and Pan together raised and spent about half a million dollars. Now the two head toward a general election campaign expected to exceed a million dollars.