

CTA, unions impose their will

 ireader.olivesoftware.com/Olive/iReader/FresnoBeePress/SharedArticle.ashx

The Capitol has a long, sometimes unsavory history of attaching extraneous matters of uncertain lineage to the state budget at the last minute.

That's how, for example, California came to shift its primary elections to the "top-two" system that we just experienced, for better or worse. Republican Sen. Abel Maldonado insisted that the top-two system be placed before voters as a condition of voting for a 2009 budget package that included new taxes.

In 2010, Democrats and public employee unions persuaded voters to decrease the vote requirement for budgets from two-thirds to a simple majority, thus cutting Republicans out of the game. But the practice continued.

One provision of the budget-vote measure extended the simple majority vote to so-called "trailer bills" supposedly needed to implement the budget, and it became a big loophole that allowed major legislation to be placed in the ancillary measures with little public notice.

This year's poster child for budgetary sneakiness is a brief passage in a lengthy trailer bill dealing with education finance. Last week, at the last possible moment, language putting a cap on financial reserves that local school districts can maintain popped to the surface.

Superficially, the local reserve cap was tied to a pending ballot measure to create a state "rainy-day fund." But it quickly became evident that Gov. Jerry Brown and Democratic legislative leaders were doing the bidding of the powerful California Teachers Association and other school unions.

Why? Almost certainly, it was to counter an implicit threat by the unions to oppose the rainy-day fund measure that they fundamentally dislike as a de facto spending limit. Limiting school district reserves could compel them to place more money on the table in contract negotiations.

School district trustees and administrators began hammering lawmakers not only about its sneakiness, but the evident conflict between the proposal and Brown's frequent proselytizing about local control, which he calls "subsidiarity."

The issue got its first public airing Sunday in the Senate Budget Committee, just hours before a midnight deadline to enact the budget, and school officials were highly critical, saying it would penalize thriftiness and could force them to spend money unnecessarily to meet the cap.

Brown's deputy budget director, Keely Bosler, and her education aide never offered even a thin rationale in response to questions and criticism, just repetitively describing how the limit would work and insisting its impact would be scant.

"The policy makes no sense," Sen. Richard Roth, D-Riverside, said. "Why the rush to enact it right now?"

No one answered, and Roth joined other Democrats on the committee to send the trailer bill along for approval.

› Dan Walters writes for The Bee's Capitol bureau. Email: dwalters@sacbee.com; mail: P.O. Box 15779, Sacramento, CA 95852.

