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'Decline-to-state' voters add Golden State intrigue

By Dorothy Korber And Phillip Reese

As the 2008 presidential campaign's political jockeying turns from New Hampshire to California, independent voters will continue to be an intriguing wild card.

Californians, like voters elsewhere in the West, are eschewing political parties in growing numbers to register as nonpartisans, with nearly 20 percent now declaring they "decline to state." This independent trend is mirrored in the Sacramento region, whether in Placer County, a Republican stronghold, or in Democratic-leaning Yolo.

A twist in California this year will allow the state's "decline-to-state" voters to cast ballots for Democratic Party candidates in the state's Feb. 5 primary – but not for Republicans.

This could make a difference. In New Hampshire on Tuesday, analysts said nonpartisan voters significantly boosted the tallies of Democrat Barack Obama and Republican John McCain. There, independents can vote for candidates of either party.

In California, though, McCain will not be able to count on nonpartisan votes. Only registered Republicans can vote for that party's candidates – and that's how the state's GOP leadership wants it.

The decision was controversial, said Hector Barajas, a spokesman for the state party. In a July advisory vote, California Republican party leaders voted 10-8 not to allow independents to cast ballots in their primary.

"We are allocating delegates to our national convention, so the decision should be made by members of the party," said Barajas, summing up one side of the debate. On the other side, he said, some state party officials argued that opening the primary would bring new faces to the table and expand the party's influence.

Keeping the primary exclusive encourages those thinking about registering Republican to go ahead and do it, said Tom Hudson, chairman of the Placer County Republican Party. "This is one of our strongest incentives," he said.

Also, Hudson said, unaffiliated voters outnumber Republicans in several parts of the state. "It's a Republican primary, but the decline-to-state would determine the outcome (in those areas)," Hudson said.

The Democrats' strategy is to encourage independents to vote for one of their party's candidates – and hope the allegiance will stick all the way to November.

"We want decline-to-state voters to understand they have a home in the Democratic Party," said Roger Salazar, a party spokesman. "We think it's a tremendous mistake for Republicans to exclude these voters – but we're happy they're making it!"

Democratic Party leaders hope the strategy will snare such voters as Roseville resident Russ Ramey.

Ramey, 69, has been a member of a political party for much of his life. When he was younger, he registered Republican. When he retired, he registered Democrat.

But after moving back to the area from Oregon a few months ago, he decided not to state a party affiliation.

"I'm really not a party man," said Ramey. "I just vote for the people who are best rather than a party line."

Even so, Ramey said he likely would vote in the upcoming Democratic primary, though he hasn't decided which candidate to back.

Lincoln resident Charles Johnson said he's got an independent streak. That's why he decided, once again, to decline to state a party preference when he recently moved to the area.

"I've always been a nonpartisan person," said Johnson, 72. "I wait until the election, and then I decide."

Johnson wavered when asked if he planned to vote Feb. 5. But when told he couldn't vote in the Republican primary, he said, "They'll miss my vote, then."

In the Sacramento region, the number of voters who decline to state a party preference has increased by 34,000 – roughly 22 percent – in the four years since the last presidential primary. The number of registered Democrats has remained steady, while the number of registered Republicans fell 13,000 – roughly 3 percent.

About half of the increase in unaffiliated voters came in Sacramento County.

Yolo County, a bastion of Democratic support, saw a bigger increase in unaffiliated voters than it did in voters who registered as Democrats. Placer, which has the biggest percentage of Republicans of any county in the state, could soon lose that title to tiny Modoc County if the number of Placer independents continues to grow more quickly than the number of Republicans.

This primary's setup is proving a challenge for voting officials. Counties are handling it in different ways.

In Sacramento County, poll workers will give nonpartisan voters a Democratic ballot – or an American Independent Party ballot – only if they ask for one, said Assistant Registrar Alice Jarboe. Otherwise, they will receive the nonpartisan ballot, with state propositions but no candidates.

"The poll worker won't make the offer," Jarboe said. "It needs to come from the voter himself."

In Yolo County, election workers will tell nonpartisan voters they have a choice of ballots. County Clerk Freddie Oakley says she expects some to harangue poll workers when they are denied a Republican ballot.

Both Jarboe and Oakley pointed out there's still time to register, or re-register, before the election. The deadline is Jan. 22.

As for why so many California voters are choosing "decline to state," political scientist Tim Hodson cites two reasons. First, he said, it reflects the national trend away from "hyperpartisanship."

The other reason has roots that go clear back to the Gold Rush, said Hodson, who heads the Center for California Studies at California State University, Sacramento.

"California voters," he said, "tend to be grumpy and iconoclastic."