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California's Top Two Primary and the Challenge of Making Real Change

Sharon Cornu

Imagine you are reading an article online—maybe this one—and you come to the end. Immediately below flash alarming photos and headlines about belly fat, mortgage rates, and cat videos.

They call that *clickbait*.

It's how I feel about the Top Two: it's not going to improve your health, your finances or your productivity. The Top Two is reform of our political system in the same way that clickbait ads are reform of your lifestyle.

We're talking about California's "jungle" primary, which sends the top two vote-getters in a primary regardless of party registration to the November general election. It's just as bad as everyone predicted for three reasons. First, it allows reporters to use the word "jungle" in political coverage, which is disturbing. Second, it often requires candidates to double their fundraising, increasing the influence of money in politics. Third, arguing about the Top Two takes up time and resources that could be spent actually *fixing* our political system. Like many other proposed and implemented reforms, it fails to address the real cause of our political problems and points us down a rabbit hole—like a clickbait ad leading to an unending series of cat videos.

You've noticed that I ignored proponents' main argument: bridging our political divide by electing moderates. Supporters of the Top Two system argued it would elect more moderate candidates, and more moderate candidates would solve our current crises. They would act nice, socialize together, and compromise. They would usher in the Shangri-la era of legislative accomplishment.

Hogwash. The crisis in Washington and Sacramento is caused not by equivalent polarization, e.g., by two political parties moving equally to their respective corners. It's caused by the Republican Party falling off a far-right cliff and too many (not all, but too many) Democrats trying to balance them by moving right themselves.

Paddle a little on the left, paddle a little on the right may work in calm waters, but it's dangerous when the water is rough. Turbulent waters demand bold strokes, which historically come from the people, not politicians. The movie *Selma*, today's #BlackLivesMatter movement, Fight for \$15 and Our WalMart campaigns remind us that it's street heat by people that leads leaders to change.

We need change: we're scared, and rightly so, that extreme wealth has overcome democratic ideals. We're scared that corporate interests budget for buying legislation like acquiring property. After Obama, we're scared about the world's greatest democracy having the world's lowest voter turnout.

We pay for a diseased political culture every time our kids' schools lay off teachers, every time late-night bus service is cancelled, every time a library closes or a well-connected contractor gets the bid to privatize now-downgraded services you depend on. Who is fighting these attacks? It's not moderate political candidates—it's parents, workers, advocates, and activists. Let's stop putting excess faith and expectations in political leadership, and reclaim the popular role in making policy.

What would fix our politics? Let's stop pretending that disclosure works—knowing how bad corporate spending is just makes it hurt more, but doesn't even slow expenditures. The announcement that two Koch brothers plan to spend \$900 million in 2016 shows that the financial 1% and the political 1% have merged, and wealth has too much influence. Don't tell me sunlight is a disinfectant when we need a cure for cancer.

What it takes to cure our political cancer is serious surgery: cutting out corporate contributions. Same-day registration. Rolling back the attacks on the Voting Rights Act to expand access to the ballot. Dropping the voting age to 16. Enthusiastically registering formerly incarcerated persons. Encouraging undocumented immigrant families to participate in school elections.

Whether we have a Top Two primary matters less than whether *you* engage in the issues you care about and that impact your neighborhood. Change starts one on one, when neighbors talk to each other, and we share our hopes and aspirations. There are few things more energizing or inspiring than ringing doorbells, and asking people what they care about. It's good exercise and good democracy.

So skip that clickbait. Support public financing, organize your neighbors and—hell—run for office yourself. You'll learn and accomplish more than you ever could with those cat videos.

Sharon Cornu runs Opportunity Partners, a communications and collective impact consulting firm in Oakland, where she served as deputy mayor, union leader, and mom to two fine organizers.