



My Word: Time to jettison the two-thirds vote for California's budget

By Ellen Wu
Guest commentary

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AS WE review Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger's broken-record budget — the state doomed to the predictable cuts to health care, social services and parks, yet again — let us not forget the case of David Cogdill.

As just one of the many victims of our budget process, Cogdill, the Senate Minority Leader, was demoted in 2009 when he tried to find a middle ground to a budget deal — the very cornerstone of democracy.

But instead, as the only state in the country with a double two-thirds vote requirement — two-thirds to pass a budget and two-thirds to raise revenues — California has chosen to replace our democracy of the majority with the tyranny of a few.

This stringent requirement for two-thirds approval has not bestowed decision-making power to the "supermajority," but instead a small handful of policy makers — 33 percent plus one. The result of this hostile hostage situation is a chronically late budget, billions of dollars in ransom, and a handicapped leadership.

With the budget passed on time in only three of the past 20 years, our record can only be labeled dismal. Even more disappointing is the cause of these delays. As the majority of the Legislature attempts to put forth solutions, they are continually

thwarted and forced to perform backbends to win the two to three votes necessary to reach the two-thirds threshold.

So what is the ransom asked by the powerful minority? Is it the preservation of services for the poor or a better education system for our children? Is it repairing our roads, parks and bridges?

No. Instead, behind closed doors and with no opportunity for public comment, the conversation focuses on tax breaks for California's wealthiest corporations. Permanent tax cuts enacted in September 2008 and February 2009 alone will cost the state upward of \$2.5 billion a year when fully implemented. And the majority of the savings from these breaks will not go to struggling small businesses but the .03 percent of California corporations with gross incomes more than \$1 billion.

To be sure, the elimination of our two-thirds vote requirements will not solve all of our budget woes. Our current economic downturn and the resulting revenue shortfall will require a hard and balanced look at both what we spend money on and how we bring it in. But our legislators can't do their work when their hands are tied.

It is time to restore democracy to California's budget process. It is time to set our budget free and eliminate our two-thirds vote requirements.

Ellen Wu is executive director at the Oakland-based California Pan-Ethnic Health Network, the only statewide multicultural health advocacy organization that advocates for a fair and balanced state budget that represents the needs of California's diverse communities. Reach them at www.cpehn.org .

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