Calif. Voting Change Could Signal Big Political Shift

By JESSE McKINLEY

SAN FRANCISCO — The time for tinkering is done.

That was the message Californians sent when they voted Tuesday to radically rejigger elections in the nation’s most populous state. Under Proposition 14, a measure that easily passed, traditional party primaries will be replaced in 2011 with wide-open elections. The top two vote-getters — whatever their party, or if they have no party at all — will face off in the general election.

Supporters argue that without parties picking candidates for the general election, moderates and independents will move to the fore, and voters will pay more attention to the electoral process.

Critics of the measure say it will give a huge advantage to candidates who have the most money or the widest name recognition.

That no one actually knows what the real effect of Proposition 14 will be seems almost beside the point to frustrated voters. What mattered, supporters said, is that something fundamental about politics — anything fundamental — had been changed.

As supporters celebrated, they promised to bring the so-called “top two” system to a state near you, with Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger leading the charge — though his second term, plagued by budget meltdowns and plunging popularity, was, analysts said, one of the leading motivators for the measure.

Whether the measure will empower more independent voters — who were already allowed to vote in Democratic or Republican primaries, provided they requested a ballot — remains to be seen. But what did seem certain was that California was again poised to capture the mood of the country, just as it did in 1978 with Proposition 13, which distilled widespread antitax sentiment

into a cap on property taxes.

This time, it is the anger of the electorate that Californians have bottled, experts said, even if they are not totally sure what they are doing.

“I don’t know that people really knew what they were voting for,” said Bruce Cain, director of the University of California Washington Center, based in the District of Columbia.

Mr. Cain said the state of the state — high unemployment, record foreclosures and a palpable anger at legislators — had primed the pump.

“When people get mad,” he said, “they lash out.”

But just as with Proposition 13 — which required a two-thirds majority for the Legislature to increase revenue through new taxes — Proposition 14 could come with a raft of unintended consequences, opponents say. They cited a potential rise in fringe candidates as well as the marginalization of small parties.

“Big business and big government won yesterday,” said Christina Tobin, chair of StopTopTwo.org, a leading opponent of the measure, which was heavily outspent by the “Yes” side.

One probable impact was an increase in litigation; both major parties suggested that they were weighing how to stop the implementation of Proposition 14 before its scheduled start in 2011.

Proposition 14 is based on a system in place in one other state, Washington, which the Supreme Court upheld in 2008. Louisiana uses a similar open system, but requires state and local candidates to gain a majority in primaries to win election or face a runoff.

On Wednesday, Mr. Schwarzenegger was being hailed by backers as a political winner and an agent of change, as he trumpeted Proposition 14’s promise of encouraging moderates — who, the argument goes, are shunned by highly partisan primary voters. He also acknowledged the rising role of independents, who now make up one in five voters in the state.

“We in California have said we’ve got to come to the center, we’ve got to bring everyone together in order to solve problems,” Mr. Schwarzenegger said at a news conference in Los Angeles. “And I think the rest of the nation eventually will find out this is exactly where the action is.”

What is also certain is that voters liked Proposition 14; it won in 56 of the state’s 58 counties, with the only two detractors coming from opposite ends of the political spectrum: Orange, the
conservative bastion in the south, and San Francisco, the liberal paradise in the north.

Despite that mandate, Ron Nehring, the chairman of the Californian Republican Party, which opposed the proposition alongside the state’s Democrats and four smaller parties, said the measure would actually take power away from the mass of primary voters and hand it instead to a smaller group of party leaders and loyalists who would decide their candidates in conventions and caucuses. A single handpicked candidate would then get support, he said, while challengers would be shunned.

“Ninety-nine percent of the Republicans that were involved in choosing our candidates are now excluded from choosing our candidates,” Mr. Nehring said. “In the future this decision will be made by no more than a few thousand and, in most cases, a few dozen.”

California voters may not be finished with their shake-up. The November ballot, after all, will include a measure to tax and regulate marijuana, as well as possibly including proposals to eliminate the two-thirds majority for passing a budget and further limit legislators’ time in office. (California was one of the first states to adopt term limits in 1990.)

All of those elections will likely pivot on the ability to draw independents, who were ecstatic about Proposition 14’s passage.

“There is now a new political force in California,” said Royce D’Orazio, a stand-up comic who works as the Los Angeles chapter organizer for the group independentvoice.org, who spoke at the governor’s side on Wednesday. “To all our brothers and sisters in states across this country, help is on the way.”

For his part, Mr. Schwarzenegger seemed pleased by his victory — “this is, by the way, national news,” he said — but still tried to temper expectations for an electorate hungry for anything new.

“It will not solve all the problems,” the governor said. “But it will change a lot.”