

Isle GOP proposes election changes

New system for picking
presidential hopeful sought

By **HERBERT A. SAMPLE**
Associated Press

HONOLULU - The complex way Hawaii Republicans signal their presidential preferences every four years could become simpler if Big Island Republicans have their way.

The Hawaii County GOP last Saturday strongly endorsed a proposed rule change that calls on the state party to establish a more direct system that elects delegates committed to a presidential candidate in early February.

The county party also proposed changes to the state's primary election system so that only voters registered with a party can vote in that party's primary.

Supporters said the two resolutions would benefit the state GOP, which has experienced a steep decline in its ranks of state legislators despite having elected the state's first Republican governor in 40 years, Linda Lingle, in 2002.

"I think these are positive steps towards Republicans being really more involved as a party," said Malia Gray, the new chairwoman of the Honolulu

GOP

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County GOP.

House Minority Leader Lynn Finnegan, R-Mapunapuna-Foster Village, said she backs the proposals, saying they would invigorate the party's base.

"Right now, I don't see any negative reasons why we shouldn't consider seriously those two" proposals, she said.

State party chairman Willes K. Lee said he has no position on the proposals, which the state party's rules committee may consider in the next few weeks.

But Lee said he senses no broad dissatisfaction among Hawaii Republicans with the current party presidential delegate selection process or the state's open primary system.

"For public participation, the current system works," Lee said. "It's incumbent upon the parties, the leaders in the state and the

constituencies to get their people to register to vote and then to get their voters to submit their ballot."

Under the current state party system during presidential election years, rank-and-file Republicans gather at caucuses in each state House district in January or February to choose delegates representing presidential candidates.

Those delegates attend a state convention in May, where a smaller group of committed delegates are chosen to attend the national GOP convention.

But in most years, the major national political parties have settled on their de facto nominees by May, largely mooted the state party's decisions.

The Hawaii County proposal essentially would remove the state GOP convention from the process. Instead, Republicans meeting at their winter caucuses

would select delegates to the national convention who are committed to a candidate.

The candidate who garners the largest number of committed delegates across Hawaii would be granted all of the state's delegates to the national convention under "winner-take-all" rules.

That would attract national attention to the GOP caucuses and entice candidates to campaign here, said Dylan Nonaka, former chairman of the Hawaii County party.

The second Hawaii County proposal would direct the state party to file a lawsuit challenging the state's open primary law, which now allows any voter to choose any party's primary ballot.

Instead, the Hawaii County proposal calls for a "modified closed primary system" in which only those

voters who are registered with a political party or are registered independents could vote in that party's primary. Such a system would require a change in state law.

Daryl Smith, the newly elected chairman of the Hawaii County party, said both major political parties would benefit because their base voters would be more easily identifiable through the voter registration process.

"It would give us a base to work from, which we really don't have now," Smith added, noting that

Republican presidential nominee John McCain collected 120,500 votes from Hawaii in November when only 20,000 or so Hawaii residents had registered with the state party.

"So where's the other 100,000 people?" Smith said. "Those are the people I'd like to identify."

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