Describing the real candidate on your ballots

When you step into the voting booth on Tuesday, March 5, there are two words you won’t find anywhere on your ballot — community volunteer.

Candidates for office will describe themselves as butchers, bakers and candlestick makers; or more likely as doctors, lawyers, and electrical engineers. But you won’t find candidates describing themselves as “community volunteers” — because they can’t.

State law requires that a ballot designation be limited to the candidate’s principal profession, vocation or occupation. A “community volunteer” is out of luck, and left with limited options.

Homemaker is allowed, if one cares to use it. Mother or father is allowed, and available to some (no matter how little or much time they’ve devoted to this essential role). Otherwise, hard-working community volunteers who run for office are obliged to leave their ballot designations blank, suggesting to voters an utter lack of experience relevant to their candidacy.

To remedy this situation I’ve introduced Assembly Bill 400, which would simply allow bona fide community volunteers to identify themselves as such when running for office. I’ve done so because the current practice is ill advised on at least three counts.

First, it ignores the critical work performed by non-profit agencies throughout the state. Non-profit community organizations provide an extraordinary range of essential services, and are in and of themselves “big business,” contributing more than $28 billion annually to the California economy. And many of these non-profits rely heavily on volunteers.

California is blessed to have an estimated 10 million volunteers contributing service on a regular basis, half a million of whom are full-time volunteers. Yet these millions of volunteers, including those who generously volunteer on a full-time basis, are precluded from identifying themselves as community volunteers on the ballot.

Second, the current law works a particular disadvantage on women, who for years have done more than their share of community volunteer work. The president of the League of Women Voters, for example, can’t describe herself as a “community volunteer” on the ballot as a candidate for City Council.

Likewise, the head of the PTA is precluded from using the “community volunteer” designation as a candidate for school board. Whether it’s the chair of the local Sierra Club, a volunteer staffor at the Suicide Prevention hotline, or a full-time volunteer who serves meals to the homeless, none of these folks may describe themselves on a ballot as a “community volunteer.”

Finally, the current law, by withholding information, does a disservice to the voters. Ballot designations are provided precisely because voters want to know what skills and experience candidates bring to their candidacy.

When someone is identified as a doctor, lawyer or educator, we know something about their training and experience. That’s helpful information. So too would it be helpful to know that an individual’s candidacy is informed by experience working in and on behalf of the community — and that such work has been done out of a charitable impulse.

Surprisingly, although AB-400 has passed the Assembly and is on its way to the Senate, it met with some skepticism on the floor of the state Assembly. Some members of the Assembly worried that the term “community volunteer” was vague and potentially subject to abuse.

But the same could be said of terms like “businessperson,” which could lawfully be used to describe a hardware store owner, high-tech CEO, Kmart cashier or the neighborhood paperboy/girl. Similarly, the term “teacher” could legitimately be used by a high school English teacher, a judo instructor or someone who teaches traffic school.

More importantly though, the law already provides a well-developed procedure for establishing the legitimacy of a ballot designation, and for challenging ballot designations that are false or misleading. That same process could easily be applied to the use and potential abuse of the “community volunteer” designation.

Two little words — community volunteer. I’d like to see them on the ballot to recognize the importance of our nonprofits, to give volunteers the credit and encouragement they deserve for their good works, and to give voters the information they need and want to make informed choices. If AB-400 passes, and is signed by the governor, it will do just that.

State Assemblyman Joe Simitian, D-Palo Alto, represents portions of San Mateo and Santa Clara counties.
Simitian bill clears Legislature

A bill introduced by Assemblyman Joe Simitian, D-Palo Alto, to allow candidates to use “Community Volunteer” as a ballot designation has cleared the state Legislature and is headed to the governor for signature.

Current law only allows candidates to designate a principal profession, vocation or occupation. A candidate may not be identified as a “Community Volunteer” on the ballot, even though that is his or her principal activity outside the home.

“AB-400 is one small way to recognize the real contributions that volunteers make in our community each and every day,” said Simitian.

“It’s not fair to devalue their good works simply because they’re generous enough to contribute their services without compensation. Worse still, it’s a disservice to the voters. This is helpful information most voters would like to have.”

Simitian said he was surprised when he learned that community volunteers running for office were precluded from identifying themselves on a ballot as such. “I think the current law does a disservice to community nonprofits who do so much good work. It does a disservice to women, who have historically provided the bulk of such service. And perhaps worst of all, it does a disservice to the voters who are deprived of important information about the candidates.”

Dildar Gill Pisani, vice president of the San Mateo County Commission on the Status of Women, said.

“Assembly member Simitian’s bill is good for women. Women shoulder a disproportionate share of volunteer work. Being a ‘mother’ and ‘homemaker’ are vital roles, yet some women may not find these adequately describe their community involvement and activities. Allowing a term like ‘Community Volunteer’ to be used as a ballot designation recognizes an individual’s unpaid contributions to our society.”