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REDISTRICTING: Redrawing the political boundaries
Bring back competitive elections

- Steve Poizner
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The political left alleges that Proposition 77 -- the "Voter Empowerment Act" -- is a vast right-wing conspiracy. Meanwhile, the political right has claimed that Prop. 77 is part of a grand liberal scheme to oust conservative Republicans.



They are both dead wrong. Prop. 77 would stop the politicians from rigging their own district boundary lines and force them to compete for votes in districts in which they must be accountable to the voters if they expect to win. Last fall, we had 80 Assembly, 20 state Senate and 53 congressional races in California. Not a single one of those contests ended with a seat changing party hands. Not a single incumbent politician lost. Here's why: In California, it's the politicians who decide how their districts are drawn -- not the voters.

The two political parties got together in secret and divided up the state in 2001. To no one's surprise, the politicians designed the map in such a way that any challenger, no matter how qualified, simply can't compete and can't win. And that's not democracy.

Sadly, this leaves the Legislature free to behave its worst. Instead of tackling major issues like transportation, the environment and better preparing California for natural disasters, Sacramento politicians raise money and kowtow to special interests. Meanwhile, back home in the districts, voters have lost faith in the political system. Why should citizens care enough to vote when they know elections are preordained, and their votes really don't count?

This would change once voters approve Prop. 77. Politicians no longer will be able to choose their voters by rigging the redistricting process. Instead, a panel of three retired judges will draw districts. Those judges will be both Democratic and Republican. Neither party can claim that this is a partisan play. Once the judges come up with a design for new districts, that plan will have to be approved by a public vote.

What does this mean for the average Californian? Here are three predictions.

First, we will have more competitive races in California. The Rose Institute at Claremont McKenna College has studied this issue more than any other academic institution in this state. It conducted a simulated redistricting using the rules spelled out in Prop. 77 and has published its results. The conclusion: Elections will be more contested, with as many as 25 highly competitive seats and an additional 25 potentially competitive seats, for a total of 50 contested seats. The more evenly matched the two parties in any district, of course, the more independent voters are empowered. Competitive elections will force the two parties to listen to Californians and compete for votes. What a refreshing change.

Second, we'll have political representation that more resembles California, the world's most diverse society. Latinos, Asians and Pacific Islanders all were shortchanged in the last redistricting process. That ends with Prop. 77; politicians no longer can suppress minority representation by dividing the voting blocs of their districts. The Rose Institute study found the likelihood of at least two more districts with a majority of Latinos. This is because the politicians in 2001 deliberately divided Latinos between districts in order to protect white incumbents from possible primary challenges from Latino candidates.

Finally, because legislators will have to pay attention to the folks back home, we will see a return to better government in Sacramento. The last time California had court-ordered redistricting, which was in 1991, the Legislature ended up doing its job. It passed a budget compromise that pulled California out of a recession. Lawmakers approved needed reforms to education, welfare and the criminal-justice system.

Do you honestly believe that any of that can happen in today's Legislature? Not a chance, because the way it is today, the incumbent's re-election is secure. Legislators don't have to be accountable to the people.

This is why Prop. 77 is an all-important first step on the road to reform. California's system of drawing election districts is rigged. There's no other way to put it, when the voters batted a collective 0-to-153 in last fall's election. A vote for Prop. 77 is the simplest way for voters to express their disenchantment with the partisan gridlock. It's a convenient reminder to politicians: Once you head off to Sacramento, you should not turn your back on your district.

To learn more

The Voter Empowerment Act is designed to make politicians more accountable and ensure competitive elections.

For more information on the campaign, go to

www.YesOn77.com

Or to

Californians for Fair Redistricting at

www.redistrictnow.com

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