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Study: Redistricting measure brings competition

By Jim Sanders -- Bee Capitol Bureau

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A hotly disputed study of Proposition 77's likely effects concluded Monday that California's redistricting initiative would produce an additional 11 competitive seats in the Legislature and 10 in Congress.

The Rose Institute study, likely to become a centerpiece of debate over Proposition 77, was immediately touted by supporters of the initiative as a boost to their campaign and by opponents as one-sided propaganda.

The 36-page study, using computer modeling, predicted that passage of Proposition 77 in the Nov. 8 election would boost the number of competitive seats in California politics to:

- * Ten in the U.S. House of Representatives, compared with none today.
- * Seven in the state Assembly, compared with three today.
- * Eight in the state Senate, compared with one today.

Proposition 77 supporters say competition would make politicians less secure and force them to be more responsive to constituents. None of 153 legislative or congressional seats on the 2004 ballot changed party hands.

Redistricting also would produce a majority of Latino voters in congressional districts currently represented by Reps. Howard Berman, D-Mission Hills, and Bob Filner, D-San Diego, the study concluded.

The Rose report marks the first attempt by an academic institution to assess the likely impacts of Proposition 77, which would remove from the Legislature and give to a three-member panel of retired judges the power to draw political boundaries.

Douglas Johnson, who coordinated the study for the Rose Institute, a branch of Claremont McKenna College, said the results suggest Proposition 77 would play a significant role in restoring competition to California politics.

"By these numbers, neither party would clearly benefit - but the voters certainly would," Johnson said.

The vast majority of California's legislative and congressional seats would remain strongly tilted toward one party, however, in a state where large cities such as San Francisco and Los Angeles are strongly Democratic and suburban regions tend to be Republican.

The Rose study found that neither the GOP nor the Democratic Party would be affected inordinately in changing safe seats to competitive ones.

Bruce Cain, a redistricting expert who was involved in Democratic remapping efforts in the 1980s, lent credence to the Rose Institute report by saying its conclusions appear to be reasonable based upon his own research.

"Their numbers are an estimate, all our numbers are an estimate, but they're perfectly sensible," said Cain, director of the University of California Academic Center in Washington, D.C., and head of the Institute of Governmental Studies at UC Berkeley, which operates the state's publicly accessible Web site for redistricting data.

Cain said his research, on behalf of the Irvine Foundation, has shown that Proposition 77 could create between nine and 15 competitive congressional seats.

The Rose report used voter registration and results of the 2000 presidential election to define a competitive district.

It defined a competitive district as one in which either presidential candidate in 2000 received less than a 10 percent advantage; or one in which district registration does not favor Republicans by more than five percentage points or Democrats by more than 10 percentage points.

Opponents of Proposition 77 branded the Rose Institute report as speculative, meaningless and partisan, noting that the institute has been linked to GOP redistricting efforts in decades past.

"The Rose Institute is a wholly owned subsidiary of the Republican Party," Steve Maviglio, a spokesman for Assembly Speaker Fabian Núñez, said in a prepared statement.

"Proposition 77 is a political power play," added Paul Hefner, a spokesman for Californians for Fair Representation, which opposes Proposition 77. "It doesn't surprise me that partisan groups behind it would conjecture to support it."

Contributors to the Rose Institute's redistricting efforts, although not specifically to the newly released study, include R.B. "Buzz" Wooley, who also has donated \$25,000 to the campaign to pass Proposition 77; and Steve Poizner, chairman of the Yes on 77 committee.

Poizner said the study bolsters the case for Proposition 77. "I think it (the study) provides the analysis for something we already knew: When you have fair and free elections, you're going to get a lot of competition. And competition is a healthy thing," he said.

Johnson said his study is nonpartisan and neither supports nor opposes the initiative.

"There's been a lot of talk about a Republican power grab," he said. "Looking at how many districts would be competitive, (the study) does not put Republicans in the majority in any of the three groups - the Assembly, state Senate or Congress.

"It does put Republicans in shooting distance, but it equally puts the Democrats in shooting

distance of a two-thirds majority."

Democrats currently hold majorities of 48-32 in the Assembly; 25-15 in the Senate; and 33-20 in the state's delegation to the U.S. House of Representatives.

The study showed that in the congressional delegation, the 10 competitive districts would be drawn from five safe Democratic seats and five safe Republican seats.

For the Assembly, two safe seats from each party would be used to create four competitive districts.

For the state Senate, seven competitive districts would reduce the number of safe Democratic seats by four and safe GOP seats by three.

What Proposition 77 would do:

Change the method California uses to draw congressional and legislative district lines. Require that legislative leaders select three retired judges to redraw the boundaries. A new plan would go into effect immediately if the measure is approved, and would occur again with each national census.

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