

Editorial News

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OUR OPINION: Cutting up ribbons of shame

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We urge support for Proposition 77 to bring back competitive races to California.

Party bosses on both sides of the aisle have attacked the political redistricting measure on the Nov. 8 ballot because it scares them. Voters, not the parties, finally would be more in control of sending people to Sacramento and Washington to represent them.

Right now in California, as many have noted, extreme gerrymandering means politicians pick their voters rather than voters picking their representatives.

The News-Press supports immediate redrawing of state and congressional districts by an independent panel of retired judges. We urge readers to support Proposition 77 to bring back competitive races to the Central Coast and the rest of California.

Sacramento lacks moderates, and gerrymandering has created a polarized statehouse. Gerrymandering to create safe Democratic and safe Republican seats means people tending to be at the extreme ends of politics get elected.

Santa Barbara County is a poster child for the need for reform now. If our county were to send a single representative to the Assembly, that person wouldn't be Assemblyman Pedro Nava, the beneficiary of a district drawn to elect a Democrat. Mr. Nava got only a slight majority of votes on the South Coast and in the Santa Ynez Valley, but the vote from Oxnard and other parts of Ventura County cemented his victory.

A 35th District that corresponded more with our county's boundaries would have a more moderate representative in the statehouse.

But now representing our community is Mr. Nava on the left fringe and State Sen. Tom McClintock on the hard right.

In Congress, the coastal district represented by Rep. Lois Capps, D-Santa Barbara, has become an object of national scorn. Newspapers from the Wall Street Journal to the Sacramento Bee have editorialized about its outrageous, contorted shape.

Researchers at Claremont McKenna College's Rose Institute of State and Local Government have just come out with a study that finds redistricting would result in more competitive races statewide. The

study also highlights our congressional district.

The researchers note: "Here in California, the need for reform is clear and almost universally acknowledged. The 2001 gerrymander is likely to live on as a lesson in the abuses that can occur when incumbents are in control, exemplified here by California's Ribbon of Shame."

(See below for more from the institute on our congressional district.)

With the new Claremont McKenna College report, it couldn't be more clear: Vote yes on Proposition 77.

COLLEGE STUDY ON OUR CONGRESSIONAL SEAT

The following is an excerpt from a report by Claremont McKenna College's Rose Institute of State and Local Government titled "Restoring the Competitive Edge":

No discussion of California's 2001 gerrymander is complete without a discussion of the "Ribbon of Shame."

Congressional District 22 was a highly competitive district in the 1990s. Republicans Michael Huffington and Andrea Seastrand won the district in 1992 and 1994, while Democrat Walter Capps won it in 1996 and, after his untimely passing, his wife won it in a March 1998 special election and the 1998 and 2000 general elections.

Walter's four percent margin of victory in 1996 and Lois' 12 percent in 1998 and nine percent in 2000 kept the district drawn by the judges in the competitive category. Its configuration in the 1991 redistricting kept it in the compact, community-oriented category. ... The district consisted of San Luis Obispo and Santa Barbara Counties: only a tiny corner of southeast Santa Barbara County removed for population balancing.

The gerrymandering incumbents wanted to make this district safe for Democrats in 2001. They removed the interior portions of both counties and extended the district south into Ventura County. While an argument can be made theoretically that the coastal region is a community of interest distinct from the inland areas, this district -- which is only 100 yards wide at one point and only 500 yards wide in another -- takes that concept to an absurd extreme. The City of Arroyo Grande, located less than a mile and half from the ocean, is considered "inland" in that twisted logic. Clearly the only purpose was partisan advantage and incumbent protection, and in that respect the gerrymander succeeded: Representative Capps was re-elected by margins of 21 percent in 2002 and 29 percent in 2004.

In fact, the incumbents and party leaders -- of both parties -- won under the 2001 sweetheart gerrymander. Once party control of each district was established in the 2002 election, not a single district changed hands in 2004. Of the 153 districts up for election (53 Congressional, 80 Assembly, and 20 State Senate seats), not a single one changed party control. In the history of the Rose Institute's tracking of California election results (starting with 1974), this is the first time that has ever happened. In fact, when the 1980s sweetheart gerrymander was in place at least three districts still changed hands each election.

The conclusion regarding the incumbent protection gerrymander of 2001: the incumbents and their

party bosses won. The only losers in this sweetheart gerrymander were the voters, residents, and communities of California.