



From the Los Angeles Times

THE SPECIAL ELECTION

Modest Change Seen Under Prop. 77

Redistricting would create some closer races, a study says, but a power shift is thought unlikely.

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September 27, 2005

SACRAMENTO — The number of true tossup races for the Legislature and Congress would increase sixfold in California if voters passed Proposition 77, according to a new academic study of the initiative. But redistricting experts caution against expecting a dramatic shake-up of political power.

Retired judges rather than lawmakers would draw political boundaries under Proposition 77. The new districts probably would create competition in 10 congressional districts, seven Assembly districts and eight state Senate districts, according to research released Monday by Claremont McKenna College's Rose Institute of State and Local Government.

That would be a major increase in competitiveness, the researchers said. At present, there are no competitive congressional districts in California, three in the Assembly and one in the state Senate.

Rose Institute researchers acknowledged that even if Republicans were to win all of the hypothetical new competitive seats, they would still not control the Legislature.

But even a slight increase in the number of highly contested districts could help break down political polarization, said Rose researcher Douglas M. Johnson.

"San Francisco is always going to have a very liberal Democrat and south Orange County is always going to have a very conservative Republican," he said, "but the [legislative] caucus leaders will have to focus every year on those competitive seats, which will force the caucus as a whole to look at pragmatic solutions to problems instead of pandering to the extremes."

Redistricting usually occurs once a decade, based on new census data. Proposition 77, which will be on the Nov. 8 special election ballot, would require new lines to be drawn for the June 2006 primary election.

California's current political maps are the product of a 2001 deal made by Democratic and Republican lawmakers to ensure easy reelection for incumbents. Proposition 77 supporters, including Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger, decry the arrangement as undemocratic: In November 2004, not one of the legislative or congressional seats at stake changed party hands.

Nobody can know what future political districts would look like if voters passed Proposition 77. But the Rose Institute attempted to predict an outcome by following the same mapmaking methods used by retired judges in the 1970s and 1990s, when they were recruited to draw political boundaries because Republican governors had blocked plans drawn by Democratic lawmakers.

Researchers said their study also followed the mapmaking rules spelled out in Proposition 77. The measure would require that districts be as compact as possible and minimize the splitting of cities and counties.

Some current districts are wildly skewed to lean heavily Republican or Democratic. Some were drawn to help a particular politician. For example, the districts of Rep. Howard L. Berman (D-Valley Village) and Rep. Brad Sherman (D-Sherman Oaks), divide much of the San Fernando Valley's Latino population to spare Berman from facing a strong Latino challenger.

Berman's brother, Michael, a political consultant hired by the Legislature, was the primary architect of those boundaries.

The report predicts that three congressional districts would see a jump in the number of voting-age minorities. Berman's district could change from 49% Latino to 66%, the report says. In San Diego, one district could go from 49% to 56% Latino. In the Bay Area, one district's Asian American population would likely increase from 30% to 35%.

"We found that districts drawn according to Proposition 77 are likely to split many fewer communities, create more districts likely to elect ethnic minority representatives and create significantly more competitive districts," the report says.

It defines districts as "competitive" if they meet two criteria: The voters there chose either Republican George W. Bush or Democrat Al Gore by a less than 10% margin in the 2000 presidential election, and party registration in the district shows an advantage of less than 5% for Republicans or less than 10% for Democrats. The difference, Johnson said, takes into account that Republicans historically vote more regularly than Democrats.

By ignoring the advantages of incumbent politicians — such as name recognition among voters — the Rose Institute report probably exaggerates the number of competitive districts the judges could draw, said Rob Richie, executive director of FairVote — the Center for Voting and Democracy in Maryland.

Politicians seeking reelection can count on a roughly 7% advantage over candidates trying to break into office, he said.

"That can move a district that looks competitive on paper to being uncompetitive," said Richie.

And in at least two states that use independent commissions to draw political boundaries — Arizona and Iowa — incumbents have still been reelected easily, Richie said. In Arizona, 15 of 16 congressional races have been won by margins of 20% or more since the independent redistricting commission plan went into effect.

Changing redistricting, Richie said, "still hasn't created any nirvana of competition."

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