Prop. 77 Makes Elections Fair

Democracy is an interesting thing. It is a concept that embodies the voice of the people being heard and counted in the halls of government. Politicians say they are all for it, yet they don’t always act like it. A case in point is the way they draw legislative district boundaries.

Since California’s acceptance into the Union in 1850, the political boundaries for state legislators and our members of Congress have been drawn by politicians and, nowadays, by their political consultants. This is a blatant conflict of interest that protects incumbency by providing politicians with districts that are often irregular and irrational.

Prop. 77 finally gives Californians an opportunity to reclaim our democracy. It must be passed.

Here is what Prop. 77 does: A bipartisan panel of three retired judges will be assigned the task of drawing the legislative boundaries. Their proposal will be submitted directly to the voters for approval, thereby bypassing the legislators and their consultants.

What will this accomplish? Plenty!

For starters, Prop. 77 will get the legislators’ attention. Prop. 77 is really a referendum on the state legislature, a body that accomplished little this year. Previous displays of bipartisanship, such as last year’s workers’ comp reform, are apparently a thing of the past.

Prop. 77 will also guarantee that voters are placed in districts because they have something in common with each other, not because legislators have something in common with them. Communities of interest, city and county boundaries and other elements will be what is considered, rather than drawing districts to re-elect incumbents. That is our job and our right to choose whether to do so.

In last year’s elections, 153 state legislative and Congressional seats were at stake and not one changed party! That is because the parties worked it out that way when they last redraw the districts. Only one of those races (Assembly District 35 in Santa Barbara) came within five percentage points in the final tally.

Is this democracy?

The other reason to support Prop. 77 is to produce more centrists in Sacramento, ones who are not necessarily wed to a strictly partisan ideology and can work with others on solving problems as opposed to promoting gridlock.

The theory behind judges drawing the legislative boundaries (as was done in 1992) is that they will be immune from the political pressures of ambitious officeholders and their hired guns trying to influence the redistricting process.

Will each district become a swing seat? Hardly. The best estimates are that 10-12 seats will become competitive, and not all of those will produce centrist legislators.

But it is worth the exercise. The scarcity of centrists in Congress and the legislature is so pronounced, that—with a few exceptions—there is no longer a bridge between Democrats and Republicans, at least in Sacramento. This must explain why the legislature continues to poll worse than every governor since polling began. We may not like the governor, but we can at least run a competitive race to replace him/her. That is not the case with the legislature, at least with the way political boundaries are now drawn.

And for those Democrats (with a capital D) who argue that they won’t support Prop. 77-type reforms until similar reforms are adopted in Republican states, I say that we should lead the nation in promoting reform, not wait for others. It is wrong when Texas Republicans gerrymander their Democratic officeholders out of office, just as it is wrong that Democrats in California want to protect incumbency by providing politicians with districts that are often irregular and irrational.

Prop. 77 is not a partisan issue. It’s an issue of fairness and an issue of democracy.

I hope you will join me in voting for Prop. 77.

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