THE BUSINESS PERSPECTIVE:

Place Redistricting Reform on the Ballot

Two efforts to improve state government are at play in Sacramento – a Constitutional amendment to shift redistricting responsibility to an independent commission and a statewide ballot initiative to revise term limits. Taken together, they provide a significant, one-time opportunity to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of the California Legislature.

Legislators now have the power to draw their own districts – essentially stacking the deck in their favor every 10 years. This is a blatant conflict of interest that has resulted in gerrymandered districts that stifle any real competition between candidates or ideas. The result is that in the last three election cycles with 459 separate races, only four seats switched party hands. This has perpetuated a system that protects incumbents and provides little incentive for lawmakers to consider voices from the political center – where the majority of Californians stand – and hurts all of us regardless of our political affiliation.

Term limits have done more harm than good for California. Under the current system, legislators may spend a maximum of six years in the State Assembly and eight years in the State Senate. These limits have created a revolving door of lawmakers who regularly move from Assembly to Senate or vice versa. The result is a body of elected officials who are unable to develop any real institutional knowledge before they move on. The unintended consequence is that the power and influence of special interests, unelected lobbyists and professional staff members has increased dramatically. And short term political victories often trump long term public policy planning.

Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger is working with the Assembly and Senate to place a constitutional amendment on the ballot to shift redistricting responsibility away from politicians and into the hands of voters. That action will inspire voter confidence as redistricting reform makes its way to the February 2008 ballot and the Legislature to work with the governor’s office to make sure that term limits without redistricting reform will be regarded as self-serving rather than suspicion.

When combined, this is a good package that will ensure greater electoral fairness, more competition of ideas, and legislation that reflects more long-term planning and experience. But extending term limits without redistricting reform will be regarded as self-serving and should not be embraced by the Legislature or the general public.

Citizens must make it clear to elected officials that they want a package of real change, not simply a revision in term limits.

And that’s The Business Perspective.

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