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Legislature needs antidote of redistricting to revive democracy

By Dan Walters / Bee's Capitol bureau

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An autopsy's purpose is to determine what trauma or disease caused a human being to become a lifeless cadaver — not only to satisfy curiosity, or sometimes the law, but so that the living can prevent needless deaths in the future.

The state Legislature is a brain-dead political body, incapable of addressing the issues that a fast-grow society generates. It had been withering away for a quarter-century but lapsed into a coma four years administered a dose of institutional poison — a bipartisan gerrymander of 120 legislative districts.

The gerrymander, designed to freeze the status quo in both the state's congressional delegation and ir politically expedient for leaders of both parties. It guaranteed that Democrats would remain in control Republican ranks would not be reduced.

Californians have seen little impact from fixing the partisan ownership of their 53 congressional seats l limits, all but a couple of those seats were destined to remain in their incumbents' possession. While n the gerrymander came from white Democratic congressmen in Southern California who were worried a to Latinos, the more important effect was on the Legislature.

By eliminating partisan competition for legislative seats, the scheme not only dealt a blow to democrac institution that already was in failing health. The four years that have lapsed since the gerrymander w: four years of utter failure, with the perennially deficit-ridden state budget being a prime example.

Lawmakers run up multibillion-dollar deficits year after year — Republicans refusing to raise taxes, De make major spending reductions — because they can indulge their ideological fancies without fear of l may be disgusted with the Legislature, as polls indicate, but they can't express that disgust because t

If, as we must conclude, gerrymandered legislative districts are not only undemocratic, but poisonous performance, we should embrace the antidote, which is having districts that are drawn independently.

An incidental effect of independent redistricting would be that a significant number of districts would b

Insiders who support the status quo will say that it's unlikely that a large number of districts will becor of the state's increasingly red-versus-blue nature — and that's true.

But if only a handful of districts moved into the uncertain category — say a half-dozen of the 80 Assen entire atmosphere of the Capitol could be changed by creating a decisive bloc of moderates more inter posturing.

The potential for bringing the Legislature back to life is demonstrated in a new study by the Rose Insti McKenna College in Southern California, using computerized data and drawing on the redistricting plan panels of judges after the 1970 and 1990 censuses. Rose concluded that were Proposition 77 to be en drawn by a panel of retired judges, the number of competitive congressional districts would increase t Assembly to seven, and those in the state Senate to eight.

Those who oppose Prop. 77, which is backed by Gov. Schwarzenegger, are denouncing Rose's demographic skills, but the essential accuracy of their conclusions is acknowledged by experts with a Democratic tilt. Friendly groups such as Common Cause and Cal-PIRG are endorsing the measure. And it's also evident it could reduce Republican ranks a bit — which explains why so many GOP congressional members oppose:

What would be the alternative to jolting the Legislature back to life? It's a lingering death for legislative

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