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Study downplays effects of Prop. 77

UC Berkeley report says redistricting initiative wouldn't hand Republicans the reins in Bay Area, L.A.

By Steve Geissinger, SACRAMENTO BUREAU
Inside Bay Area

SACRAMENTO — Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger's redistricting initiative in the upcoming special election would create some closer races — even in the populous Bay Area and Los Angeles Democratic strongholds — but would not shift decisive power to Republicans, a new report will show today.

The study by the Institute of Governmental Studies at the University of California, Berkeley is foreshadowed in research papers obtained by the Oakland Tribune and roughly matches previous findings by institutes at Claremont McKenna College and the University of Southern California.

In a study of one East Bay legislative seat, currently held by Sen. Liz Figueroa, D-Fremont, undergraduate researcher Miguel Manriquez concluded that Schwarzenegger's reapportionment proposal would "not threaten the Democratic seat in (the East Bay's) Senate District 10."

"It may have more of an effect inland where there are more conservatives, but Los Angeles and the Bay Area are significantly Democratic and there would not be much of a threat to Democratic safety in these regions," he concludes.

Competitive boost

The Republican governor's initiative, Proposition 77 on the Nov. 8 special election ballot, would create a panel of retired judges to draw district lines for congressional, Assembly and Senate seats, rather than have the Democrat-dominated Legislature draw the lines.

Then the new lines would be taken before voters.

The Rose Institute at Claremont McKenna College, which has prepared GOP-supported redistricting plans in the past, recently concluded that Proposition 77 would lead to seven competitive Assembly districts, eight competitive state Senate districts and 10 competitive congressional districts.

The USC California Policy Institute reached a similar conclusion about competition.

In the 1990s, California had more than 50 legislative and congressional districts out of 153 that could be remotely described as competitive; that number has dropped to about 30.

Researchers believe Proposition 77 would boost that number back into the 50s.

California's current political maps are the product of a 2001 deal made by Democratic and Republican lawmakers to ensure easy re-election for incumbents.

Bruce Cain, who as head of the Institute of Governmental Studies at UC Berkeley oversaw the report due for release today, has concluded that the Rose Institute's numbers appear to be reasonable, based on his own research.

"Their numbers are an estimate; all our numbers are an estimate, but they're perfectly sensible," Cain told McClatchy News Service.

Don't expect a shake-up

Proposition 77 could even boost competitiveness around the edges of the Bay Area, such as in the southern Peninsula's 21st Assembly District, now held by Sen. Joe Simitian, D-Palo Alto, according to Berkeley researchers.

But despite the predicted increase in competitiveness, experts caution against expecting a dramatic shakeup of political power.

In Sacramento, Democrats are firmly in control of the Legislature and are expected to remain dominant in this Democratic-leaning state.

Supporters of Proposition 77 say it would bring much-needed reform, while opponents say it is unfair and unworkable.

On Monday, the two sides withheld judgment of the Berkeley study until its formal release today.

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