

Redistricting reform no longer matter of if, but when

Fresno Bee, The (CA)

March 27, 2005

Author: Jim Boren THE FRESNO BEE

Estimated printed pages: 3

Even the most ardent supporters of the backroom way California's legislative and congressional districts are drawn have suddenly become quiet. On an intellectual level, their position was indefensible, but they counted on maintaining the status quo because the topic was too boring for the public to even care.

But there's been a significant realignment in thinking as Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger and others pushing **redistricting** reform have begun getting traction on the issue. Finally, there seems to be agreement on the basic issue: Members of the Legislature have a huge conflict of interest in drawing the boundaries of their own districts.

Now the argument has shifted from whether the system should be changed to the timing of that change. Under most scenarios, **redistricting** duties in the Golden State would be done by an independent commission.

Some, including the governor, would still like to make the change effective for next year's election, while others, including Democratic leaders, argue that it's more reasonable to use population numbers from the 2010 census.

Instead of a stalemate on the basic issue, they're negotiating. That's a good thing in an institution noted for its gridlock on difficult questions.

A win for voters

Surprisingly, no one seems to be claiming victory in the **redistricting** battle. But getting legislative leaders to admit that a commission is the best way to go is a major change in attitude. The good-government folks, who have long battled to take **redistricting** out of the hands of the Legislature, have triumphed.

Now Democratic legislators and Schwarzenegger should work out a compromise that would serve the public interest and end the many initiative attempts aimed at changing the **redistricting** process. Resolving this issue in the Legislature is preferable to putting flawed initiatives on the ballot.

There are many details to be worked out, and any compromise would have to be ratified by voters. The governor wants a commission of retired judges to handle **redistricting**. Legislative Democrats want commissioners who reflect the diversity of the new California. Others would like to see a combination of judges and everyday citizens.

In the end, though, any commission is better than the current system. In the November election, 153 legislative and congressional seats were on the ballot in California. Not one changed parties because every district was carefully created to be a "safe seat."

Robert Stern, president of the nonpartisan Center for Governmental Studies, put the issue simply: "The system is bad because, basically, the legislators are picking the voters, as opposed to the voters picking the legislators."

Stern and several other **redistricting** experts participated in a forum on the issue in San Jose recently as part of a public-policy project between the Commonwealth Club of California and seven newspapers, including The Bee.

A key question was raised in the forum about whether it's even practical to make a change in time for next year's election.

Logistical obstacles

Kathay Feng, incoming director of California Common Cause, doesn't think it can be done. "I think it's close to logistically impossible because if the ballot initiative happens and is passed in November, you would have to have lines into the county registrars by mid-January at the latest. So that leaves you with one month to have hearings in a state the size of California over the holiday season."

Douglas M. Johnson, a consulting fellow for the Rose Institute, said he would like to see reform in place as soon as possible. But he added that his group has been working on **redistricting** reform for 30 years. "Waiting four more years? We'll take it if it makes it a much more sure thing on the ballot. I think anything is better than the legislators drawing it themselves."

Bruce Cain, director of the Institute of Governmental Studies at the University of California at Berkeley, doesn't think the current system is "so horrible and evil," but believes a commission system would give the public a clearer view of the **redistricting** process. He calls it "greater transparency and openness."

Feng said that when legislators changed lines in 2001, they did it in closed-door discussions, and "the public no longer had an ability to speak to the changes that were going to be made in all of the backroom deals that went on."

This really should be an easy issue. A commission -- no matter what the makeup -- would be fairer to citizens than the self-serving way legislators do it now. Voters would actually get to see the maps being

drawn and how the changes would affect their communities. Legislative elections would mean something again.

What we're really arguing about now is when to make the change. It seems that if the governor and legislators are worth the tax dollars we're paying them, they could work that out rather quickly.

Jim Boren is The Fresno Bee's editorial page editor. His column appears Sunday. E-mail him at jboren@fresnobee.com or write him at 1626 E St., Fresno 93786.

Memo: JIM BOREN

Edition: FINAL

Section: VISION

Page: F3

Index Terms: 3/28/2005

Copyright (c) 2005 The Fresno Bee

Record Number: 0415902383