

Most CA Voters Against Towing the Same Lines

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California's voters are more concerned than not that the state's legislative districts were drawn to provide "safe seats" for lawmakers and are overwhelmingly in favor of handing over redistricting duties to an independent commission, a study released Friday said.



Almost three out of four voters polled by the Rose Institute of State and Local Government at Claremont McKenna College believe it is a conflict of interest for legislators to draw election districts for California's State Senate, Assembly and U.S. House delegation. Nearly 60 percent of the respondents said they would rather reform the way the seats are divvied next year than wait until 2011, the year after the U.S. Census numbers are gathered when districts are normally refigured by the state Legislature.

In 2004, party control of all 153 California federal and state legislative districts up for election was preserved. The apparent lack of competition has spurred Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger to include a district-drawing initiative in the package of reforms he said he will put before the state's voters.

"Where there is no competition there is no accountability and no motivation for ultimate performance," Schwarzenegger told the Public Policy Institute of California in February when introducing his proposal. "Look at how competition affects business. "

Schwarzenegger's plan includes giving a panel of retired judges the responsibility to redraw the state's legislative boundaries with the intention of respecting cities' limits and geographical communities.

Safe seat proponents argue that securing House elections in California allows legislators from the state to build influence within Congress' lower chamber. Whereas 12 percent of the nation's congressmen are Californians, 26 percent of the leadership positions in the House's permanent committees hail from the Golden State. Of the 42 committee chairmen or ranking members, 11 are Californians, including Rep. Duncan Hunter, R-El Cajon, chairman of the House Armed Services Committee.

In 1980, Hunter ousted Lionel Van Deerlin, a Democrat who held the seat for 18 years. His constituency seat has since been drawn to be more Republican in nature, and Hunter was elected to his 13th term in November with 69 percent of the vote.

Hunter's status as a leader in the military community is vital to San Diego County, where nearly 10 percent of residents are affiliated with the armed services and the defense industry is the second largest sector, the San Diego Regional Chamber of Commerce reports.

Respondents to the poll generally disagreed, as 50 percent said districts should better respect the boundaries of unified cities and communities whereas 36 percent supported carving districts to preserve a lawmaker's longevity and boost his prestige.

Another argument that has been made for gerrymandering is that lawmakers are forced to spend too much time campaigning and not governing when their seats are toss-ups, not safe. The House's two-year terms make it difficult for members not to look ahead to an upcoming election, and critics contend that short terms coupled with competitive races force lawmakers to waste time kissing babies and cutting ribbons for campaign photo-ops instead of working on meaningful legislation.

Doug Johnson, a consulting fellow at the Rose Institute who led the field research on the study, said the most important observation the study made is that voters want politics out of this stage of elections.

"It shows that voters want to vote as unified communities," he said.

Please contact Evan McLaughlin directly at evan.mclaughlin@voiceofsandiego.org with your thoughts, ideas, personal stories or tips.