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ANALYZING REDISTRICTING

PROP. 77 WOULDN'T GREATLY BENEFIT EITHER PARTY.

One of the most succinct, accurate descriptions we've heard of California's gerrymandering problem is that elected officials are now choosing their voters, instead of voters choosing their elected officials.

That assessment is repeated, and confirmed, by a new study examining the probable outcome of Proposition 77, the redistricting reform measure on the Nov. 8 ballot. The study is useful because it is the first academic analysis of the proposition, and comes at a time when the measure is being framed by opponents as a Republican power grab.

The **Rose Institute** for State and Local Government study dismisses that notion as pure propaganda, and corrects it with solid estimates. Though no one can predict absolutely how a panel of judges would reshape political districts under Proposition 77, it's safe to make certain assumptions based on 77's core requirements: that districts must be drawn along logical geographic boundaries of counties and cities, and be as compact as possible.

The result would be "significantly more competitive districts," the study found, that would be more responsive to voters and more representative of their communities. It wouldn't create a major political upheaval, but it would correct a grievous wrong that began with the 2001 redistricting.

Proposition 77 is likely to create 10 competitive congressional districts, the study found, where none currently exist. Seven state Assembly districts would be competitive, versus the three that are now competitive. The state Senate, where only one seat is now competitive, would have eight competitive seats under Proposition 77.

Importantly, the study found that Proposition 77 wouldn't hand any more power to one party or another. It reports that the number of safe Democratic and Republican seats are likely to be reduced by about the same number (five each for Congress and state Assembly; four Democratic and three Republican seats in the state Senate). Most California districts have a natural partisan leaning, with more Democrats in coastal areas and more Republicans inland.

But gerrymandering isn't a partisan issue, and ought to be equally distasteful to members of either party. It had been a fairly nonpartisan matter in Sacramento, until Gov. Schwarzenegger got behind it and his opponents came up with the "Republican power grab" propaganda. But that argument doesn't hold up to the slightest bit of scrutiny. The Rose study points out that even if the newly competitive seats went entirely to Republicans it wouldn't change the balance of power in the Senate or Assembly one bit.

But the partisan calculations are beside the point. No political seat should be "safe" for one party or another.

And who would defend a system in which voters can be ignored? Only one group: the politicians who benefit from it.