



Redistricting Reform: Can It Reduce Partisanship?

Partisan rigidity and an aversion to compromise receive much blame for Sacramento's legislative deadlock, typified by annual stalemates over the state budget. In this commonly held view, the spirit of bipartisanship needed for compromise and successful governing has deteriorated, resulting in partisan standoffs and legislative inaction. Specific blame is often focused on the 2001 redistricting process, in which the Legislature created new electoral districts to reflect the changing population of the state. These districts included solid majorities of registered Democrats or Republicans—and so became “safe seats” for the dominant party of the district. In the view of critics, the 2001 redistricting process eliminated the need for legislators to take moderate positions that would appeal to as many voters as possible in a general election. Some facts seem to support this argument: Of 300 Assembly and Senate races since 2001, not one seat has changed party hands.

Disillusion with the 2001 redistricting process has created periodic movements to take redistricting responsibility away from the Legislature and give it to a potentially more objective, disinterested body. Although such efforts have been unsuccessful so far, the idea is popular—and just such a measure, Proposition 11, has been placed on the November 2008 ballot. In 2007, a PPIC survey found that 64 percent of respondents favored using “an independent commission of citizens, instead of the state Legislature and governor” to draw legislative districts. These new, more competitive districts, it is assumed, will reduce partisan rancor in Sacramento, create more willingness to compromise, and stimulate better governing.

Or will they? In a new report, *Redistricting and Legislative Partisanship*, PPIC research fellow Eric McGhee finds evidence to question the widely held assumptions about the malign effect of the 2001 redistricting: The research finds little support to indicate that the partisan

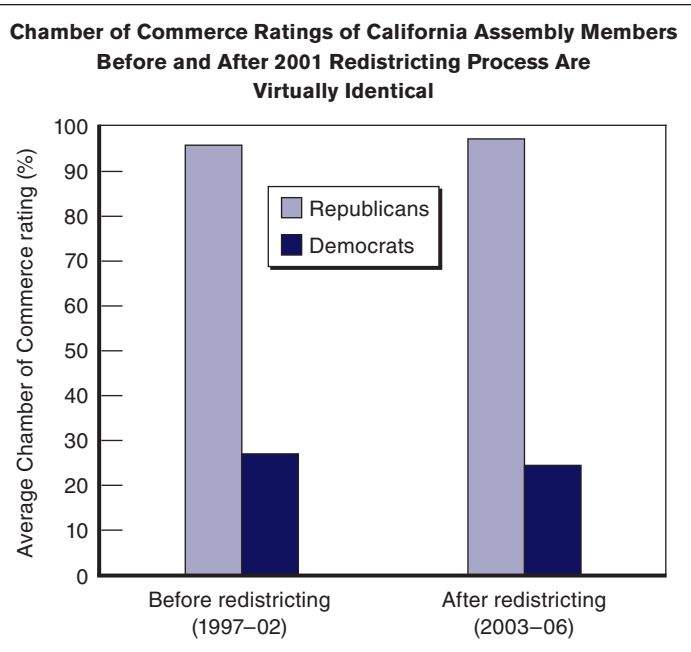
districts created in 2001 resulted in more partisan voting in the years that followed. Supporters of redistricting reform offer other reasons to favor changing the status quo. But if bipartisan compromise is what voters want, methods other than creating new election districts are likely to work better. These methods could include open primaries and campaign finance reform.

The report provides a detailed analysis of voting patterns in the Legislature since 2001 that contradicts commonly held views about partisanship in Sacramento. Its central findings include:

- Partisan behavior did not increase after 2001. It was about as common beforehand as it has been since.
- Legislators are remarkably consistent in their voting habits over time, even when their districts change.
- Changing legislative districts to resemble those in existence before the 2001 redistricting process would probably not change the outcomes of many specific votes on such issues as the budget or hotly contested business regulation matters.

It may seem self-evident that partisan districts would lead to a partisan Legislature. But partisanship occurs even when redistricting is not a factor—for example, U.S. senators are more polarized today than in the past, but senators represent entire states, where no redistricting occurs at all. Moreover, voting patterns in the state Legislature before and after the 2001 redistricting are very similar. If the 2001 redistricting had caused such a sharp turn from bipartisanship to partisanship, larger differences in voting patterns should be apparent over time.

One conclusion is that the new 2001 districts did not make California legislators more partisan—they were par-



tisan to begin with. Nor are moderates consistently found in more evenly balanced districts. In fact, about half the legislators from evenly divided districts are not moderate on any issue.

The report suggests several likely alternative explanations for the demise of bipartisanship and compromise. For one, voters themselves may be partly responsible. More voters in the political middle are refusing to identify with the political parties—or to vote at all. Also, political campaigns now are centered on individual candidates who must raise money and build a volunteer base of their own to win. These candidates then appeal to passionate single-issue activists in the party base, who are more likely to keep consistent pressure on an elected legislator not to stray from the activist position. Similarly, interest groups are a greater

factor than they used to be, and such groups tend to put additional pressure on legislator behavior. In addition, party leaders can influence their members through committee assignments and other means to keep them from wandering off the partisan path. Finally, it may be that those who choose to serve in politics are more likely to be partisan before they ever reach the Legislature, whereas those with moderate views may be less energized by political causes or less likely to see service in politics as a noble pursuit. The result is a bias toward partisan legislators in all districts.

The report suggests other avenues that may be more effective than redistricting at creating more bipartisanship in the California Legislature:

- **Open primaries.** Evidence from other states suggests that open primaries, in which any eligible, registered voter may vote in a political party's primary election to choose its candidate, are better than closed, party-only primaries at electing moderate legislators.
- **Campaign finance reform.** One way to reduce interest groups' influence would be to restrict their ability to donate to political campaigns through campaign finance reform. Tighter monetary caps on contributions might lessen their influence, or the appearance of influence, and free legislators to respond to a broader range of voters.
- **Mobilize moderates.** Moderate voters, who currently sit on the sidelines of political debate, could be mobilized through a third-party movement, through one or more interest groups, or even through a particularly dynamic and energizing candidate. Bringing these voters into the process could ensure that moderate voices are heard both during and between elections, and their presence might give certain legislators in the middle the freedom to serve as swing votes.



This research brief summarizes a report by Eric McGhee, Redistricting and Legislative Partisanship (2008, 98 pp., \$10.00, ISBN 978-1-58213-131-3). The report may be ordered online at www.ppic.org or by phone at (800) 232-5343 or (415) 291-4400 (outside mainland U.S.). A copy of the full text is also available at www.ppic.org. The Public Policy Institute of California is a private, nonprofit organization dedicated to independent, objective, nonpartisan research on economic, social, and political issues affecting California.

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