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California is branded among a 'Dirty Dozen' on gerrymandering

George Skelton, Capitol Journal, June 19, 2008

SACRAMENTO — Here's an indication of how rotten Democratic-led gerrymandering is in California:

A national Democratic organization is branding us one of a "Dirty Dozen" states that has rigged elections and significantly suppressed voter participation.

Gerrymandering is the infamous practice of legislators choosing their own voters, rather than allowing voters to fairly choose their elected representatives. It's the once-a-decade drawing of legislative and congressional districts, usually with the aim of protecting -- or increasing -- majority party seats, which in California means Democrats.

In 2001, Democratic and Republican legislators conspired to protect each other. Consequently, in the last three election cycles, only four seats have changed parties in 495 California legislative and congressional races.

That's real rigging.

"There's a direct correlation between the competitiveness of an election and turnout," writes Marc Dunkelman, vice president of the Democratic Leadership Council, in a report titled "Gerrymandering the Vote: How a 'Dirty Dozen' States Suppress as Many as 9 Million Voters." The DLC is a slightly left-of-center policy group that promotes political moderation and pragmatism. It was founded after liberal Walter Mondale was crushed in a landslide by President Reagan in 1984. Bill Clinton served as DLC chairman before he ran for president. The current chairman is former Rep. Harold Ford Jr. of Tennessee, who narrowly lost a U.S. Senate election in 2006 and intends to run for governor in 2010.

Dunkelman studied only gerrymandering of congressional districts nationwide, but the same principle of voter turnoff applies to legislative races. If contests aren't competitive, he notes, the news media yawn, the public goes to sleep, and many people don't bother to vote.

When elected representatives "can't lose, voters do -- because it takes pressure off" the politicians to do their jobs, Dunkelman asserts.

Studying the November 2006 elections, Dunkelman found that the average margin of victory in California congressional contests was 43%. That ranked ninth-biggest -- or worst, from a competitive standpoint -- in the nation.

Figuring the average turnout in competitive races nationwide -- those with victory margins under 10% -- and applying it to all contests, the researcher calculated that gerrymandering

suppressed 3.1 million potential votes in California. The vote total was about 8.9 million, or roughly 35% fewer than what might have been.

Nationally, almost 11 million votes were suppressed by gerrymandering, Dunkelman asserts. Of these, 9 million were in the "Dirty Dozen" states. Besides California, they're Alabama, Georgia, Hawaii, Louisiana, Mississippi, New Jersey, New Mexico, New York, North Carolina, Virginia and West Virginia.

Dunkelman says the constitutional framers "intended for the House of Representatives to be the organ of government most in tune with the electorate's opinion. Unfortunately, gerrymandering has put a wedge between the will of the people and their voices in Washington. The result has been a drop-off in the number of Americans who choose to participate in democracy."

The same applies, of course, to the state Legislature.

Allan Hoffenblum, publisher of the California Target Book, which handicaps legislative and congressional races, estimates that only "about a half-dozen" out of 80 Assembly contests will be competitive in November. Probably just one of 20 Senate races will be close -- and likewise merely one of 53 congressional elections.

"The point of gerrymandering is to prevent competition under any circumstances," says Hoffenblum, a former GOP consultant.

The "Dirty Dozen" report is especially timely because an initiative qualified Tuesday for the November ballot that would seize the Legislature's power to draw its own districts and give the job to an independent citizens commission.

Congressional lines, however, still would be drawn by the Legislature -- a strategic move aimed at heading off campaign opposition from House Speaker Nancy Pelosi (D-San Francisco). She wouldn't trust the fate of Democratic seats in California to a bunch of citizen noncombatants.

In only 12 states is the legislature denied ultimate power over its own redistricting. Just six states give congressional redistricting to another entity.

The California initiative is the product of nonpartisan good-government groups that got fed up waiting for the Legislature to reform redistricting, as it had promised: Common Cause, AARP, the Los Angeles Area Chamber of Commerce and the League of Women Voters. The proposal also is supported by the ACLU of Southern California and a new reform group, California Forward.

Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger gave \$550,000 from his political kitty for signature-collecting. He's a campaign co-chairman with former Democratic state Controller Steve Westly.

The initiative is opposed by several civil rights groups -- the Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund, the NAACP -- because, for one thing, it would set up two different redistricting processes for Congress and the Legislature. That would dilute their lobbying efforts, the groups argue.

I suspect that they would prefer to deal only with their political buddies in the Legislature.

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Gerrymandering is good for Democratic leaders, bad for democracy.