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Editorial | Island Voices

Vote 'no' on Amendment 19

By Corie Tanida

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On Election Day, Nov. 8, Honolulu voters will be asked to decide on several proposed amendments to the Honolulu City Charter, the city's constitution.

One of these, No. 19, asks this question: "Should the requirement be repealed that no more than five of the City Council Reapportionment Commission's nine members be from the same political party?" Because passing this amendment would result in removing a critical safeguard that helps to ensure fairness for all Honolulu residents, Common Cause Hawaii urges that you vote "no."

Every 10 years a Reapportionment Commission is appointed to use census data to redraw Honolulu City Council districts so that each district includes an equal number of people. This ensures that communities of equal population have equal representation on the Council to defend their interests.

Unfortunately, across the country, redistricting is often used to "gerrymander" districts by slicing and dicing communities to protect incumbents or to increase the number of seats one political party is likely to win.

Unlike many states and localities that allow elected politicians to draw the new districts, in Honolulu, nine city/county residents who are not county officials or candidates are appointed to the City Council Reapportionment Commission by the Council chairman with the approval of the Council. The commission has the sole power to draw Honolulu City Council districts without requiring the approval of Council members.

The Honolulu City Charter currently allows the appointment of no more than five members of a single party, which constitutes a one-vote majority of the nine seats. This provision protects the rights of Honolulu residents in other parties by making it harder for one party to dominate the process and put partisan interests first.

Amendment No. 19 would change this vital provision by allowing the appointment of a dominant majority — or even every seat on the commission — to members of one party. It is important that we protect the rights of all voters, regardless of their political ideology, and we must not let the foxes guard the henhouse.

A major rationale put forward for Amendment No. 19 is that the Honolulu City Council is nonpartisan — that is, candidates for the Council do not run in party primary elections, as candidates for the state Legislature must.

However, that does not mean that political parties are irrelevant. Candidates usually draw their campaign organization from their political party, and often mention their party affiliation in campaigns, much as Mayor Kirk Caldwell this year made a point of the fact that he was the only Democrat running in the nonpartisan mayoral primary.

Defenders of Amendment 19 might say that the existing charter's ban on drawing districts for political advantage is all the protection Honolulu residents need, but we disagree. In Florida, Common Cause was a plaintiff in a case challenging the state's congressional and state Senate districts. The Florida Constitution also banned political gerrymandering, but that did nothing to require partisan balance. As a result, the majority party in the Florida legislature ignored the law and drew gerrymandered districts anyway.

Although Common Cause ultimately prevailed in court, taxpayers spent \$11 million because of the Florida Legislature's insistence on defending illegal district maps. Getting redistricting right on the front end by ensuring partisan balance and a fair process is a lot easier than getting it right on the back end through costly and time-consuming litigation.

We urge you to vote "no" on Amendment 19 to keep the drawing of Honolulu City Council districts from becoming a partisan battle that puts the interests of politicians above those of the public.

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