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Election-map initiative helps voters, state progress

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California's current redistricting system, in which legislators draw the political districts for which they also compete at election time, is truly counter to voters' best interests.

The ballot may appear to provide a range of candidate choices, but in reality, most of those elections have been decided long before anyone gets to the polls. We should know. As former party leaders in the state Assembly and Senate, we're pretty familiar with how the process works, and how it doesn't.

In the 2001 redistricting process, we held public hearings and we listened to public input. We did our constitutional duty to draw new political lines in strict accordance with the letter of the law. But by allowing legislators to determine their own districts, there is no denying that today's system protects sitting legislators before all else.

The problem is that too often this is at the expense of tens of millions of regular voters in local communities that get split into two, three or even four districts to help ensure the re-election of those incumbents rather than being kept whole so voters can elect champions of their own choosing – incumbents or not.

After years of elections built on gerrymandered districts, we face debilitating partisan gridlock – health care, education, jobs and the economy, infrastructure and water all remain serious policy challenges in desperate need of better solutions. Even more insidious is the resulting erosion of public confidence in state government, which in turn motivates voters to further tie the hands of legislators, who desperately need more – rather than less – flexibility if ever they are to solve our looming policy problems.

The good news is that there is something we can do to start reversing this trend – and we urge you to consider joining us in doing so. This November, voters will have the chance to dramatically improve our redistricting system by supporting the Voters FIRST Initiative.

Even though we come from different political parties and have had our share of differences over the years, we strongly believe that fixing our broken redistricting process is a critical first step in smart government reform. Some have dubbed this initiative a "political power grab." But as a Democrat and a Republican who endorse this initiative, we are confident that this measure represents much-needed good government reform that will serve voters across the state by putting control over this critical process back in their hands where it belongs.

The California Voters FIRST Initiative will create a 14-member independent citizen commission to redraw state legislative district lines based on strict nonpartisan rules and through a highly transparent public hearing process. The commission guidelines are designed to ensure that applicants are chosen who represent the diversity of California, and who possess relevant analytical skills and the ability to be impartial. In fact, diversity considerations are required at three stages of the selection process: recruitment, creation of the initial pool, and selection of the final six commissioners. We envision that demographers, city planners, lawyers, civil rights leaders, academics and people who are civically active would apply and be considered.

This new process will protect community and neighborhood boundaries. It also goes much further than current law to protect the rights of minority voters. And, it excludes individuals with obvious conflicts of interest – including elected officials, their staffs, and other political professionals – from serving on the

commission.

Voters deserve to have their voices heard. They deserve representatives who understand and respond to their concerns and priorities. And they must have the power to hold their representatives accountable. Voters FIRST will do these things and is a significant improvement to the current system. It will establish clear and fair redistricting standards, open the process to the bright light of public and media scrutiny, and ensure all Californians the opportunity to participate in this critical process.

As former California legislators, we are proud to join in a bipartisan effort with Gov. Schwarzenegger, former Controller Democrat Steve Westly and many other community groups, including AARP, the League of Women Voters of California, California Common Cause and the California Chamber of Commerce, to support this initiative. We urge all Californians to vote "Yes" for redistricting reform this November.

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