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SECTION: EDITORIAL; Pg. B11**LENGTH:** 549 words**HEADLINE:** ELECTION 2005: THE NOV. 8 VOTE;
GUARDING THEIR POWER;
Prop. 77 would restore competition to balloting**BYLINE:** KEN STREAM; THE PRESS-ENTERPRISE**BODY:**

California is in peril. Instead of dealing with major issues such as transportation, the environment and preparation for natural disasters, Sacramento politicians raise money and bow to extremes and special interests.

But incumbents are still automatically rewarded with re-election. Last November, there were 80 Assembly, 20 state Senate and 53 congressional races in California. Not one of those races ended with any seat changing party hands. Not a single incumbent politician lost. The reason: In California, it's the politicians who decide how their districts are drawn - not the voters.

A RIGGED SYSTEM

To no one's surprise, the politicians designed the map so that any challenger, no matter how qualified, simply cannot compete or win. It is a conspiracy-like practice that often keeps qualified people out of politics. In fact, the rigged system keeps them from even being competitive against an incumbent of the opposite party. That's not democracy.

Hiram Johnson, the great reformer who launched California's initiative process with a special election back in 1911, said:

"I do not by any means believe the initiative, the referendum and the recall are the panacea for all our political ills, yet they do give to the electorate the power of action when desired, and they do place in the hands of the people the means by which they may protect themselves."

We all have a historic opportunity to make reform a reality and move our state forward. It is crucial that the public support Prop. 77, the Voter Empowerment Act.

Prop. 77 simply says that a bipartisan, three-member panel of retired judges will determine the new lines and then put them to a vote of the people instead of continuing to let politicians draw their own districts. The prestigious **Rose Institute** at Claremont McKenna College believes that as many as 50 districts

could become competitive. Competition is a good thing, particularly in politics. It will force politicians to be more responsive to their constituents. And that would be good news for long-awaited political reform in California.

BEWARE SELF-INTEREST

Beware, however, the strong alliance between many Democratic and Republican politicians who care only for their own survival at any cost. They have put together a campaign funded by special interests and are positioning their forces to defeat reform. Rather than promote more diversity in the Legislature, they would rather keep the old, corrupt system in place.

The bottom line is that elections should be competitive and devoid of gerrymandering regardless of one's party identification. Both competition and competence are bipartisan ideals - ideals not very popular with the status quo. It is a very simple concept: There is a right way and a wrong way, and rigging elections for those already are in power and keeping reformers out of the process is the wrong way.

For too long, we've allowed politicians to sacrifice democracy at the expense of the people. It is time for them to do what is right and good for the people of California.

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Ken Stream is a member of the Executive Committee of the Greater Riverside Chambers of Commerce Board of Directors.

GRAPHIC: MAGGIE DELBON/THE PRESS-ENTERPRISE; ILLUSTRATION

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