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Shake-Up!

Proposition 77 could retire Jewish reps — in the name of good government.

by Bobbi Murray, Contributing Writer

Rep. Howard Berman can work the J-circuit with the best of them. He knows who's who among synagogue presidents, what to wear at bar mitzvahs, what to say to which rabbis and which chicken-dinner fundraisers are can't miss. A smart Jewish politician in a heavily Jewish district quickly figures these things out, and Berman, 64, has represented his San Fernando Valley district since 1980.

By now, Berman knows almost instinctively where he needs to be.

So what's he doing helping organize a Veteran's Day parade in Pacoima, a working-class, Latino enclave?

The answer is that Berman's 28th District has become a lot more Latino than it used to be, and Berman knows he needs to serve those constituents, too. That combination of political savvy and attention to public service has kept Berman in office these 25 years.

But staying in office could get a lot more challenging for Berman — as well as for several other elected officials who happen to be Jewish.

Proposition 77, the redistricting measure on next week's special elections ballot, is likely to shift considerably more Latino voters into Berman's district — and perhaps give rise to a viable Latino challenger. The same pattern could play out for several other Jewish politicians, including Reps. Adam Schiff in the Glendale/Pasadena area and Brad Sherman in the San Fernando Valley. Rep. Jane Harman, in the South Bay is less likely to be threatened, although her district is historically competitive to begin with. Rep. Henry Waxman, with his Westside and heavily Jewish base, probably has nothing to fear.

California's congressional delegation also includes three other Jewish members, Tom Lantos, from Northern California, and Bob Filner and Susan A. Davis in the San Diego area. Filner presently faces a challenge from California Assemblymember and former City Councilman Juan Vargas.

So is a threat to Jewish incumbents reason enough for a Jewish voter to think twice about supporting Proposition 77 — especially when there are critics who take issue with the measure on other grounds? On the other hand, American Jews have traditionally lent support to causes that uplift marginalized communities. Wouldn't it be fair to make it more likely that a Latino would represent a community comprised mostly of Latinos?

This Jewish side effect is one of many considerations posed by Proposition 77, one of a wearying welter of measures on the Nov. 8 ballot. The initiative would take the power to redraw legislative districts away from the California legislature and place it in the hands of three retired judges. It also would accelerate redistricting — changing things almost immediately rather than waiting for the next round of census data. Proposition 77 would apply both to state legislators and members

of Congress, like Berman.

The ostensible goal of redistricting after a census is to keep the population of residents about the same in each district. Politically, a twin aim has been to keep incumbents in office, a strategy that is abetted by both Democrats and Republicans.

Up to this point, redistricting has worked in Berman's favor, sharply reducing the percentage of Latino voters in his district, although Latinos currently make up a majority of his district's residents. His current district cuts across the eastern heart of the San Fernando Valley, running east of the 405 Freeway and south of the 210 Freeway. When he was first elected, Berman's district had just a 22 percent Latino electorate. An alternative map, put forth by the Rose Institute at Claremont-McKenna Colleges as more "fair," would result in Berman representing an area in which 66 percent of the voting-age population is Latino.

Berman opposes Proposition 77, but also insists that he works hard to be, on merit, the first choice of his district's Latino voters. He is a long-time supporter of rights for agrarian workers, many of whom are Mexican nationals — an issue that has resonance even for U.S.-born Latinos — and he's served for 23 years on Congress's immigration subcommittee. Berman said he spends more effort on the bread-and-butter issues of the northern, more Latino end of his district than he does in the south.

Then there's the symbolism of the 2004 Veteran's Day parade.

"The first Veteran's Day parade in the San Fernando Valley is centered in Pacoima — not Sherman Oaks, not Granada Hills," Berman said.

So it was that veterans from both world wars, Korea and Vietnam marched down the streets of a largely Mexican-American community in the north San Fernando Valley. And they're going to do it again this year, winding up in the park named after Mexican American rock star Ritchie Valens, of "La Bamba" fame. Latinos, Mexican Americans in particular, have always signed up for the U.S. military in outsize numbers, Berman noted, despite facing discrimination and exclusion at home. The same goes, he added, for the war in Iraq — a disproportionate number of Latinos from his district, native-born and immigrant alike, headed off to serve.

Supporters of Proposition 77 assert that there is ample reason for all voters, Jewish and otherwise, to shake-up the status quo.

The conservatively inclined Rose Institute doesn't take a position on Proposition 77, but it released a study in September calling for an overhaul of the present system.

"Here in California, the need for reform is clear and almost universally acknowledged," the report's executive summary says. "The 2001 gerrymander is likely to live on as a lesson in the abuses that can occur when incumbents are in control...."

The study makes its case with maps of zigzagging districts, including one, California Congressional District 23, that it dubs the "Ribbon of Shame." District 23 has become a narrow band that twists south along the coast from San Luis Obispo County down to Ventura, connected at places with a razor thin slice of territory. It is represented by Democrat Lois Capps.

Redistricting cuts many ways. The 2001 plan suddenly made the seat of Brad Sherman shakier, shifting thousands of Latino voters to him from Berman, leading to some public sniping between Berman and Sherman.

At one point, the mapping marooned Sherman's home at the end of a sliver surrounded by Berman's new district. To top it off, the architect of the re-draw was veteran political consultant Michael Berman — to be sure, he's well qualified, but he's also the brother of incumbent Howard Berman. In the end, Sherman was able to keep his residence within a larger swath of his district.

The Democratic head of California's Senate Redistricting Committee told Sherman, in effect, to shut up and accept it. A majority of the Latino legislative members, 16 of 19, voted in support of the redistricting plan — a show of fealty to the California Democratic caucus and Democratic control of the legislature. And both Sherman and Berman have survived in office.

But the Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund (MALDEF) sued. MALDEF argued that the redistricting could have concentrated Latino voters in a new district instead of splitting them between Sherman and Berman. A panel of three federal judges ruled against MALDEF, saying the overall results of all the redrawn districts did not discriminate against Latinos.

But the issue never subsided. Author and commentator Joel Kotkin, who supports Proposition 77, said that the current lines have polarized the California legislature, contributing to governmental gridlock with politically safe ultra-liberals opposed by politically safe ultra-conservatives.

"What we have done is dysfunctional," he said. "We have too many liberal Democrats and too many conservative Republicans."

In that argument, Kotkin is echoing Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger, who has endorsed Proposition 77 as a central element of his "reform" package of initiatives.

A more moderate and effective state Legislature should matter to all voters, including Jews, Kotkin said. Besides, he added, "I don't think somebody being Jewish is the issue as much as whether that person represents the interests of the district."

Nor is he worried that that California's congressional delegation would be less pro-Israel if the Jewish Democrats were to fall.

"The old Waxman and Berman kind of politicians — liberal on other issues and good on Israel — will find it increasingly difficult as internal pressure within the Democratic Party becomes increasingly anti-Israel," Kotkin said.

There's a dose of politics embedded in Kotkin's analysis, including a presumption that, over time, Republicans will be better for Israel, better for Jews and maybe better for Californians.

In fact, to many critics of Proposition 77, the initiative is all about politics and not so much about fairness.

Schwarzenegger wants a more acquiescent legislature, and this is his way of getting it, said Peter Dreier, a professor of politics at Occidental College who directs the school's Urban & Environmental Policy Program.

"Arnold may call it a technical maneuver, but it's about eliminating Democratic safe seats," said the left-leaning Dreier, who opposes Proposition 77: "Republicans are very good at playing hardball and masquerading blatant power grabs as good government."

Another lefty analyst, Harold Meyerson, takes issue with Kotkin's implication that Jewish Democratic incumbents can be sacrificed because the best pro-Israel politicians of the future will be Republicans. While most members of the California Democratic caucus are not aligned with

“hardline Israeli politicians,” Meyerson said, there’s a consensus of support for Israel within the caucus.

For some districts, the issue isn’t Democrat-to-Republican, but it could well be Jewish-to-Latino.

“A few of these districts might have Democrats of other ethnicities if they weren’t carved the way they were,” said Meyerson, editor at large for American Prospect and political editor of the L.A. Weekly.

There are, of course, other hard-boiled political considerations. The Jewish members of Congress have accumulated seniority, which helps them play key roles in matters pertaining both to Israel and broader foreign policy.

“This is a case of five members [from Southern California] who are interested in international relations in general and U.S.-Israel relations in particular,” Berman said. He, along with Reps. Schiff and Sherman, serve on the International Relations Committee; Rep. Harman sits on the Intelligence Committee.

Berman points to his 22 years as a member of the Foreign Relations Committee: “I know Israeli leadership, Palestinian leadership, maybe some Saudi leadership. There’s a lot of time and experience there.”

Still, it’s hard to find anyone who will outright defend a system that is gruesomely gerrymandered to protect incumbents. But for leftie progressives there’s more at stake than the downside of the status quo. For them, the California congressional delegation sits as a bulwark against the George Bush Conservative Republican majority — whose own members hail from equally gerrymandered states. In better times (for Democrats), the California delegation could become the lynchpin of an emerging Democratic — and more liberally Democratic — majority. That’s not something that progressive Democrats, such as Meyerson and Dreier, want to let Schwarzenegger tamper with.

The year 2005 may prove a watershed year for Jews politicians in Southern California. In addition to the members of Congress, Bob Hertzberg nearly made the mayoral runoff; the L.A. City government has three Jewish council members (though it recently had seven) and a Jewish city controller (Laura Chick); Jewish members hold three of seven seats on the Board of Education. It hasn’t been so many years since Jews weren’t allowed on some local golf courses. But influence — or even a seat at the table — can be as fleeting as rapidly evolving demographics. Just ask African Americans, who worked so hard to win voting rights, but who have already lost majority status in many parts of town.

But does it matter for Jews, who are so thoroughly intergrated into L.A. life and commerce?

It does for Howard Welinsky, a longtime Democratic Party activist who’s also prominent in the Jewish community and civic affairs.

“What is now at stake,” he said, “is that in Los Angeles, we have five Jewish members of Congress. And they’re all at risk.”

It matters to Welinsky that, “in the history of this country — and I’ve researched it — we’ve never had five Jewish members of Congress in one county. I can’t imagine anything that has greater impact in Jews in Los Angeles than this.”

For Welinsky, it’s not exactly about being pro-Israel, even though he certainly is. He’s taken with historicity of having five Jewish members from one area. Perhaps it’s comparable to the current

reconfiguration at work in the Jewish heart of Fairfax Avenue. Why does it matter that a kosher grocery store, a shop selling Judaica and a place offering music from all over the Jewish Diaspora might fold to make room for pricey, non-Jewish boutiques that can afford the higher rents?

Only because, to some people, it does.

As for Berman's fate, "I don't think Howard Berman would lose, but those who have not been in those seats very long might find themselves facing well-funded campaigns by Latinos and other groups," said Assemblywoman Jackie Goldberg, who opposes Proposition 77, even though she thinks the present system needs improvement.

Goldberg herself represents a majority Latino voter district.

"They vote, And they picked me," she said. "Why did they pick me? Because I look out for the interests of the communities I serve. And that's what they cared about more than my ethnicity.

"There are people in the population who vote their race, their gender their ethnicity, their sexual orientation," she said. "I don't think they're the majority. People really do care about what you're going to do when you get there."

Shifting political nuances make these judgments ever more complex. Rep. Filner, a Jewish member being challenged by a Latino candidate, spent time in jail as a Freedom Rider, clearly reflecting concern for the interests of people of color. His opponent, Assemblyman Juan Vargas, is "pro-life," inconsistent on civil liberties issues, but liberal on immigration. The district's population already is 55 percent Latino, 18 percent Anglo, 15 percent Filipino and 12 percent African American.

Jewish Assemblywoman Hannah Beth Jackson, from a district that includes Santa Barbara and Oxnard, was termed out and replaced by Pedro Nava, who ran on an environmentalist platform, a position well in tune with most Jews.

Coalition politics involving Jews has frequently worked well for L.A.'s Latinos, and vice versa. Former Rep. Edward Roybal, the groundbreaking Latino who died last month, was first elected to Los Angeles City Council by a Latino-Jewish-labor coalition. And then there's Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa, who grew up in formerly Jewish East Los Angeles and rose to office with broad Jewish support.

"Jews and others can represent communities of color," said Jaime Regalado, executive director of the Edmund "Pat" Brown Institute for Public Affairs. "That has never really been the argument against apparent dilution of Latino or other minority voting strength in a particular political or voting system. It is all about fairness, in being able to elect a representative of the community's choice on a level playing field."

Proposition 77, almost inevitably, could make Congress less Jewish. But that's just a starting point for addressing the question of whether Proposition 77 is good for California.

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