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House Dems from California could face rocky waters in '06
By [Peter Savodnik](#)

Several House Democrats from California are likely to face more competitive races next year if, as expected, a state redistricting initiative qualifies this month, advocates of the measure say.

Most of the competitive races would be in Los Angeles, Orange and San Diego counties, said Reps. Darrell Issa and Devin Nunes, both California Republicans.

The most vulnerable members would likely be Reps. Bob Filner, Linda and Loretta Sanchez, Jane Harman and Lois Capps, other redistricting-reform advocates have said.

Mark Abernathy, Rep. Bill Thomas's (R-Calif.) political consultant and one of the initiative's leading backers, added that Reps. David Dreier and Ed Royce, both California Republicans, strongly oppose the reform measure. Thomas gave \$50,000 to the reform effort earlier this year.

Abernathy and Bill Mundell, a Los Angeles entrepreneur who spent his own money pushing the initiative, said that, as of yesterday, backers had submitted just under 1 million signatures to California's 58 counties, easily surpassing the 598,000 they needed to qualify.

If Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger (R), who supports reform, calls a special election for the initiative, and if voters back it, the reform would take redistricting out of the hands of lawmakers and turn it over to a panel of retired judges.

Schwarzenegger has said he will call a special election this year; Abernathy and Mundell believe that will be Nov. 8. While the governor recently backed away from a firm deadline, Nunes said

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Schwarzenegger remains committed to the cause.

A survey conducted in April by the Rose Institute of State & Local Government at Claremont McKenna College showed an overwhelming majority of California voters, including majorities from both parties, supporting redistricting reform that would take effect by the 2006 elections.

Ralph Rossum, the institute's director, said in a statement that the "the Rose Institute has studied redistricting reform for more than 30 years. These results are the most convincing we have ever seen that a large majority of the electorate is now prepared to back reform."

The reform measure — which is backed by many of the conservative activists who spearheaded the 2003 recall of Gov. Gray Davis (D) — would likely shake up California's "incumbent-protection racket," as critics put it.

In 2004, not a single congressional or state legislative district in California switched party hands, even though Schwarzenegger, who successfully championed several ballot initiatives, campaigned aggressively against some Democratic state lawmakers.

The new districts, as advocates foresee them, would better respect city and county lines. The idea, they say, is to group communities together, forcing members to be more responsive to those communities' needs.

The current system, critics insist, provides for gerrymandered districts, packed with either D's or R's, that pay little, if any, respect to local community boundaries or interests, routinely giving incumbents 65-percent-plus reelection victories.

"They're all grotesque," Abernathy said of California's congressional districts.

The new political landscape would also almost certainly alter the racial and ethnic composition of the congressional delegation.

A California Republican source added that "any white Democrat" in Southern California could very well face a primary with a more conservative, Hispanic Democrat.

Some Hispanic activists have complained that the 53-member congressional delegation does not proportionately reflect their numbers in the general population.

Nunes, echoing comments of other California Republicans, said recently that the seven Jewish Democratic members from Southern California — Filner, Harman and Reps. Susan Davis, Adam Schiff,



Brad Sherman, Howard Berman and Henry Waxman — could likely be replaced by Hispanics.

Some Republicans have privately complained that the reform measure threatens the California GOP delegation's stature on Capitol Hill: With so many senior lawmakers from the state, Californians chair five House committees, including Appropriations, Defense and Ways and Means.

Issa countered that a congressional delegation with more centrist Democrats would be better at working together to bring home more federal money for the Golden State.

Democrats have sought to stay out of the redistricting battle, voicing limited support, like many Republicans, for reforming the system in 2010, when the next census is due. At least seven Republicans of 20 in the congressional delegation support the reform measure.

Shannon Lohrmann, Capps's press secretary, acknowledged that her boss's district is "long and skinny" — at points the coastal district is just a few miles wide — but said that Capps had nothing to do with drawing the boundaries. "She runs in the districts that are drawn for her," Lohrmann said.

However, most House Democrats from California, including Capps, paid several thousand dollars to redistricting consultant Michael Berman, Rep. Berman's brother, who crafted the 2001 redistricting plan that was ultimately passed by the California Legislature. Nunes and Issa put the price tag at \$25,000 per member.

Rep. Berman's spokeswoman, who asked not to be named, conceded that members had paid for Michael Berman's services but added, "He is well-known as the premier redistricting consultant in the state of California. He has participated in redrawing the lines in the last three, maybe four redistrictings." She could not confirm the fee paid by members.

Redistricting reform could affect not only House races but gubernatorial, Senate and presidential contests as well, Nunes said. "Right now, with no competitive districts, the political machinery is parked and rusting," the congressman said. Competitive House seats could stir up the waters, he said, adding new voices to the mix.

One of those voices may be Mundell, the Los Angeles entrepreneur, who said that while he is focused on redistricting reform for now he is open to challenging Sen. Dianne Feinstein (D-Calif.) next year.

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