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## **The case for unsafe election districts**

By John H. Bunzel

JOHN H. BUNZEL is a former member of the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights and a political scientist at Stanford's Hoover Institution.

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IT IS NOTHING less than a scandal that 90% of the seats in Congress and the California Legislature are not competitive. It is also why Democrats, who have long championed a level playing field in elections as an important progressive goal, should be leading the call for an end to the "incumbent protection racket."

Democrats strongly supported the concept of "one person, one vote" established in 1962 by the U.S. Supreme Court in *Baker vs. Carr*, a ruling that also required equal representation in all legislative bodies in order to reflect the interests and wishes of the people in a fair and balanced manner.

The reality has been just the reverse. The court-ordered mandate to reflect the popular will has been subverted by the openly self-serving agreement between Democrats and Republicans to create safe election districts that would protect every incumbent from a serious competitive race. As Ed Kilgore, vice president for policy of the Democratic Leadership Council, has put it, "politicians are choosing voters, rather than voters choosing politicians."

This blatant gerrymandering by partisan politicians tends to disenfranchise independent voters who might choose to cross party lines to support a candidate. But it also increases, as Kilgore emphasizes, the power of the extremes of both parties and the "ever-growing and ever more toxic partisan and ideological polarization of American politics."

The rapid decline in competitive districts is especially clear in the House. The number of safe seats rose from 281 in 1992 to 356 in 2002, according to Kilgore. Congressional elections expert Gary Jacobson of UC San Diego says that just 15 seats were considered real tossups in 2002. In 2004, only three incumbents lost outside of Texas, where a mid-decade redistricting manipulated by Republicans drove out four Democratic incumbents. In California, where the most recent state redistricting was controlled by the Democrats, not one incumbent candidate for the Legislature lost in 2004.

Redistricting reform is an uphill struggle. Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger supports Proposition 77, a measure on the Nov. 8 ballot that would hand the responsibility to an independent commission of retired judges. The Democrats, who oppose his plan, have proposed that the Legislature appoint four of the members. Republicans immediately criticized the plan because "it does not put enough

distance between the Legislature and the commission."

Passage of the measure could increase the number of competitive races for Congress and the Legislature in California six-fold, according to a study released Monday by Claremont McKenna College's Rose Institute of State and Local Government.

There is another argument for competitive districts. An analysis of California elections since 1992, as reported by Catherine Hazelton of UC Berkeley's Institute of Governmental Studies, shows that both Democratic and Republican women are more likely to run for and win competitive seats than seats considered sure winners or losers. Among other reasons: Women face major barriers — including the power of the old boys' network — when running for safe seats.

Women make up less than one-third of the Assembly. Democratic women hold 40% of their party's seats, and Republican women hold 19% of theirs. In the last decade, Hazelton notes, the growth in the number of women in the Legislature seems to have stalled, perhaps because "there are now fewer competitive seats." Creating competitive districts would not only improve the election possibilities of female candidates, it would signal a determination to fix the broken pieces of our political system.

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