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Redistricting from a Community Perspective

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With the filing of petitions to overturn the California state legislative and congressional maps drawn by the California Citizens Redistricting Commission, we have started to hear how the state political machinery views the recently adopted electoral maps. If the petitions qualify for the ballot, the votes cast in November 2012 may be driven by statewide party politics or goals for incumbency protection more than anything else. However, before voters go to the polls, they should consider whether the lines provide their community fair and effective representation.

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Redistricting is done every 10 years after the census to equalize population in each district so residents' voices are not diluted. Proposition 11, the 2008 initiative that created the commission, required the commission to respect neighborhoods and communities of interest to the same degree that it respected cities and counties. The proposition also required the commission to prioritize the Voting Rights Act, a federal law that requires racial groups to make up a majority of a district's citizen voting age population in areas where race tends to be a strong factor in how the electorate votes.

Why is it important to keep communities together? A community that is divided into multiple districts may not

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have the numbers to command attention from its representatives let alone elect candidates who will best serve the needs of the community. Even small communities benefit when paired with like-minded communities. For example, residents in a district with beach communities might choose to elect someone who is concerned with environmental issues; those in a district with agricultural communities might opt for a candidate focused on water issues; and those in a district with predominantly immigrant communities may elect someone who supports language access issues. While communities are not concerned with only one issue, those with similar socio-economic characteristics often have similar policy concerns.

In many areas of California with large percentages of Asian American and Pacific Islanders (AAPI), the AAPI residents make up a cohesive community of interest. They share many policy interests and needs. From our redistricting work, we found that AAPI immigrant communities in particular share needs related to their low rates of English proficiency and relatively low per capita income and educational attainment. Even AAPI communities that are not predominantly immigrant are often united by socio-economic factors and goals of preserving their culture and cultural institutions.

The commission did an admirable job conducting two sets of hearings throughout the state to learn about communities and neighborhoods in California. Unfortunately,

although the commission received tens of thousands of comments from Californians expressing their preferences, the commission did not have a systematic method to recall all the testimony and written submissions. All too often, whether a community was kept together or split apart was determined by a commissioner's memory. At times, the AAPI community had provided information on where their community existed only to hear a commissioner misstate the location of the community during a map drawing meeting. Vigilance in monitoring those meetings was vital in ensuring that communities were kept intact.

How did the commission do from an AAPI community perspective? Overall, the 2011 maps do a better job at keeping AAPI communities together than in the last redistricting process done by the legislature. For example, 10 years ago, the San Jose neighborhood of Berryessa was one of the poster children of redistricting electoral power plays. The neighborhood was split among four assembly districts even though the majority AAPI community shares many common interests and needs. In stark contrast, Berryessa is whole at all levels of government in the new maps.

Of particular note, the commission drew the state's first district where Asian Americans make up more than 50 percent of the citizen voting age population. Proposed Assembly District 49 can be found in the west San Gabriel Valley. The community there has a history of fighting English-only policies and consumer scams targeting AAPI

immigrants. The majority AAPI district was drawn in order to comply with the federal Voting Rights Act since a 2011 study commissioned by my organization showed that voting has been racially polarized in the area.

In other areas of California, the commission did a disservice to the AAPI community. Some cities with large AAPI populations, like Irvine and Fremont, were split. The most egregious example is the commission's treatment of the Little Saigon area of Orange County. Little Saigon is the largest Vietnamese community in the U.S. At the congressional level, the commission divided Little Saigon into two districts. The southern district, which includes the heart of Little Saigon, is submerged in a coastal district that extends from Seal Beach to Laguna Niguel. While the commission had to balance varied and, at times, competing interests, it seems unlikely that the needs of the low-income immigrant residents of a split Little Saigon will be heard in a district made up of wealthy beach communities.

While political parties will likely dominate any public discourse of the newly adopted maps because the political strength of the parties hinges on how the electoral lines are drawn, we would all benefit by our own analysis of whether the lines give our communities a voice in the political process.