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And now for something completely different for California elections: Other views: Commission would ease politicking

By R. Michael Alvarez and Thad E. Hall -- Special To The Bee
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It's time for Californians to think outside the box regarding how we run elections.

Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger and the Democrats controlling the Legislature are negotiating changes to a fundamental part of the electoral process: how we draw legislative district boundaries. The nakedly political way in which legislative districts were drawn in 2001 has given the governor plenty of fuel for this reform frenzy.

Also, Secretary of State Kevin Shelley, California's chief elections official, has announced that he will step down March 1. His resignation comes after months of accusations that he mishandled federal "Help America Vote Act" funds, allegations of mistreatment of employees in his office and an investigation of possible campaign finance irregularities. The problems that led to Shelley's resignation have undermined the credibility of his office, and unless handled judiciously, could diminish Californians' confidence in how elections are administered in our state.

In both cases, we have a basic problem: Partisan political interests can and do affect how elections are run. Although elections should be (and typically are) administered in an even-handed fashion in California, concern is rising about how politicians can control the process that elects them to office.

There is a basic solution to this problem, one that fits well with California's long tradition of nonpartisan practices in many local elections. The solution: Take the politics - and the partisanship - out of the secretary of state's office and the redistricting process. Turn over the administration of California's election practices to an independent state Electoral Commission.

Commissioners could be appointed in a manner of the University of California Board of Regents: some by the governor, some by legislative leaders, some by county elections officials. Commissioners could be elected in nonpartisan races, from a small number of regional districts, as they are on the state Board of Equalization. Alternatively, we could have a mixture of appointed and elected commissioners. Members must be selected to ensure a diversity and balance of political perspectives, diversity that is now lacking in the administration of elections from Sacramento.

Members should also serve relatively long terms of six or more years, to promote independence, and vacancies should arise on a rotating basis, for continuity.

The Electoral Commission should have a broad portfolio, with the power to draw both state legislative lines and congressional district lines following each reapportionment of congressional seats. It should also have the election-related powers currently held by the partisan secretary of state: the regulation of election administration in the state, as well as the collection and disclosure of campaign finance information. All of these activities would be better conducted by a commission that represents the diversity of political beliefs in California, rather than being

controlled by a single political party or single partisan elected official.

Finally, the commission should have a strong research capacity to base decisions on the best information available. One of the charges leveled against Shelley was that he made decisions about the expenditure of HAVA funds based on personal political factors, not in an effort to make good policy. The commission should have the resources to study the state's election needs, evaluate innovations and recommend how the state's elections can be run even better than they are today.

The governor's calls for redistricting reform, and Secretary of State Shelley's resignation, give Californians a historic opportunity to reform their government. We have a long history of such reforms, dating back a century ago when the Progressives gave us the initiative and recall, and when many cities and counties started electing their leaders using nonpartisan practices.

Combining redistricting reform with a fundamental elections reform could produce fairer and less-partisan administration of elections, and, we hope, would lead Californians to have more trust in the process that elects our representatives to Sacramento and Washington.

About the writer:

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