

OPINION > COMMENTARY

Opinion: California redistricting should serve as national model

Presidential candidates should embrace it to help defend our republican democracy for the next generation

By **KATHAY FENG** |

December 26, 2019 at 6:10 a.m.

It is absolutely critical that we ask presidential candidates how they plan to lead the country out of the political impasse and take-no-prisoners battle ground that America has become.

Much of the analysis has centered on who can win against Trump, and some of the candidates have made this their only measuring stick. But if we are to defend our republican democracy for the next generation against internal chaos and foreign interference, the real question is, after the election, what does group therapy for our national trauma look like?



Kathay Feng



California has a lot of lessons to offer the nation on how to walk that path toward national healing.

Let's start with redistricting, the process of drawing voting maps using decennial census data that, in most states, makes mixed martial arts cage fights look tame.

When a UFC match is finished, one fighter advances and the other goes home. In redistricting, incumbent politicians not only win an election, they get to set the rules for the next match and every election for a decade.

Here in California, until 2008, we drew election district lines the same way most states still do, giving lawmakers the power to draw voting maps for themselves and for members of Congress. Instead of voters choosing their politicians, politicians chose their voters.

I was a young attorney in 2001 organizing the Asian American and Pacific Islander communities to tell their stories at legislative redistricting hearings. For many people we helped, this was the first time they testified before any group of lawmakers.

I remember getting a phone call from a Democratic lawmaker from San Francisco. I was so excited that maybe this politician listened to our testimony. Instead that lawmaker said, "Kathay, you're not going to put another ... Asian in my district."

It was clear that politicians having the power to draw their own election maps and ensure uncontested power for the rest of the decade bred arrogance, privilege and even racism—and was poisoning our democracy.

In 2008, I led efforts to fundamentally change California's redistricting process.

With an unusual coalition of left, right and center allies, we created the nation's first independent citizens redistricting commission. The power to draw voting maps was taken from politicians and given to people like you and me.

Today our redistricting process is independent and community-led with the goal of keeping communities together in the new maps. No longer behind closed doors, drawing voting lines is conducted openly and transparently.

Fourteen commissioners—Democrats, Republicans and independents—listen to testimony from people around the state, and then have to talk with each other to work through hard decisions and come up with a common solution.

This is a model for the rest of the country. Oregon, Nevada and Virginia could be the next states to adopt redistricting reforms, and they're all states where Democrats hold power. The question is, will any of the Democratic candidates embrace this model—and not just for red states, but for states where Democrats hold power as well?

At the national level, there is a bill, The For the People Act, HR1, by Rep. John Sarbanes, D-Maryland, and 236 co-sponsors. HR1 would make these reforms that already are law in California a national standard.

It passed the House, where Democrats are in control, but stalled in the Republican-controlled Senate. Do any of these Democratic candidates have a plan for how to bridge the partisan canyon in Congress to pass important bills such as HR1?


We are in a time when there are so many people who seek to sow divisions among Americans. I'm looking for the presidential candidate who presents a vision for how people can find common ground through uncommon solutions to create a democracy that works for all of us.

Kathay Feng is executive director of California Common Cause and Common Cause's national redistricting director. She wrote this commentary for CalMatters.

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