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CAPITOL & CALIFORNIA



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Is latest remap try also DOA?

In 1832, the British Prime Minister Arthur Wellesley was confronted with a parliamentary act to reform the United Kingdom's election system.

"Reform? Reform?" the prime minister was said to have cried. "Aren't things bad enough already?"

The anecdote came to mind this week with the announcement that a coalition of groups are launching an initiative drive to reform California's redistricting system.

Now, most normal people are put off being in the same room with a redistricting-reform proposal, seeing as it oozes complexity and is covered with scaly arcane details.

But the issue is most odious to incumbent legislators. It forces them not only to confront their own political mortality, but to don mantles of hypocrisy so transparent even Britney Spears wouldn't wear them.

"Of course we want to give up the power to draw our own district lines," they bleat piously, "and reform a system that currently ensures a legislature dominated by the rock-ribbed right and the bleeding-heart left. Only gosh, we can't seem to agree on just how best to do it."

They've been whining thusly for three years, while never quite reaching a bipartisan compromise on a nonpartisan reform plan.

Their protestations notwithstanding, most incumbents bask in the security of district lines drawn to favor one party or the other, their six-figure-salary jobs safe - at least until term limits force them out.

The coalition's plan would create a 14-person commission whose members would be chosen through a multistep process and whose decisions would require approval of at least three Republicans, three Democrats and three representatives of independent voters/minor parties. Failing that, the state Supreme Court would step in.

If history is any guide, this effort will fail. California voters have killed redistricting-reform proposals five times in the past 25 years and nine or 10 times in the past century.

Because the proposal does not include congressional districts, both of the major parties have a built-in excuse to oppose it. Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger will probably support it, but his campaign efforts are sometimes tepid in their level of enthusiasm. None of its key supporters so far have particularly deep pockets to finance a high-powered campaign for it.

And while voters hate complexity, this thing is fairly dripping with details.

Unfortunately, the best approach to moving the Legislature toward the political middle, where most voters are, may have died three years ago. Proposition 62, which was on the November 2004 ballot, would have created a system where the top two vote-getters in the primary moved on to the general election, regardless of their party affiliation.

It could have substantially reduced the bipolarization of the Legislature. For example, the top two vote-getters in a solid Republican district might have been a conservative Reep and a moderate one, instead of a far-right Reep and a token liberal Democrat with no chance of winning.

For all but the most liberal Democrats, the former matchup would have been more palatable, and the mirror situation would be true for voters in hard-core Demo districts.

Of course even if California voters hadn't rejected it, political parties would almost certainly have taken the proposal to court, as they have in Washington state, contending it violates their constitutional right to dominate elections.

So, good luck to the latest collection of groups trying to slay the redistricting dragon. Just be aware of the concession speech of the legendary political prankster Dick Tuck after he lost a 1964 race for the state Senate.

"The people have spoken," Tuck said. "The bastards."

Call The Bee's Steve Wiegand, (916) 321-1076. Back columns, www.sacbee.com/wiegand.

Fierce watchdog on Iraq

Waxman, leader of House committee, demands answers from Bush officials.

By Renee Schoof
rschoof@mcclatchydc.com.
WASHINGTON - The chairman of the main watchdog committee in Congress wants to get to the bottom of a few things about Iraq.

Is the Iraqi government hopelessly corrupt? Does that corruption mean taxpayer dollars end up with killer militias? Whatever became of the \$1 billion the State Department was supposed to spend on Iraqi police? That's for starters.

Rep. Henry Waxman, D-Los Angeles, is in a unique position to demand answers to Iraq's big questions as chairman of the House Committee on Oversight and Government Reform. Waxman can

subpoena officials who don't cooperate and make them testify under oath at hearings, something he didn't have the power to do when Democrats were in the minority before January. He also can put the committee's two dozen investigators to work.

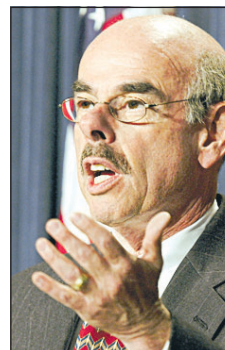
The oversight committee doesn't spend all its time on Iraq.

Waxman puts no limits on what it can investigate, and he's interested in many things, especially is-

suues concerning health and the environment - sooty air, for example, or whether the Food and Drug Administration can protect the public from contaminated food.

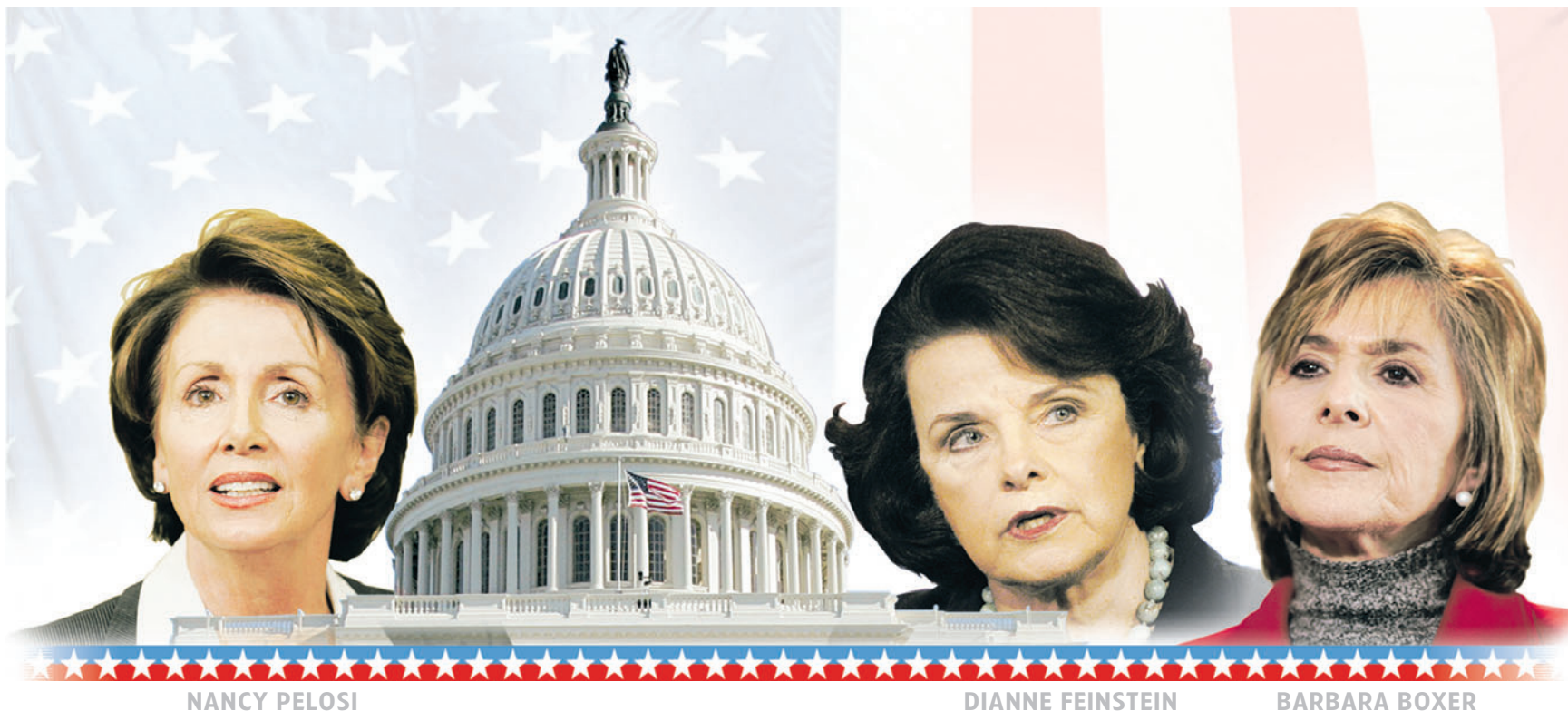
But Iraq is a priority. Waxman, who's represented the California district that includes Beverly Hills for 32 years, says it galls him that "we were talked into a war based on false information."

He means to "hold people ac-



Rep. Henry Waxman of Los Angeles says it galls him that "we were talked into a war based on false information."

RACE FOR '08



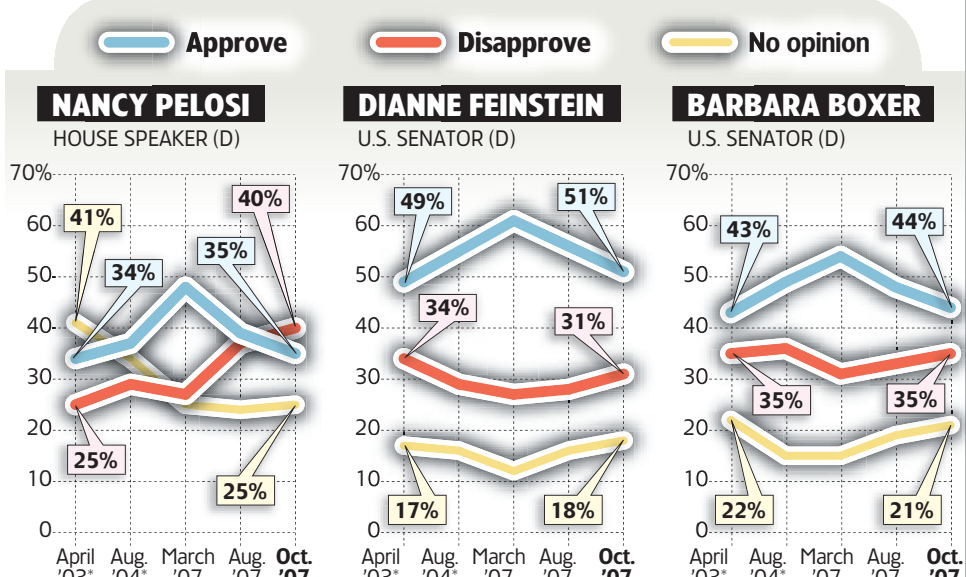
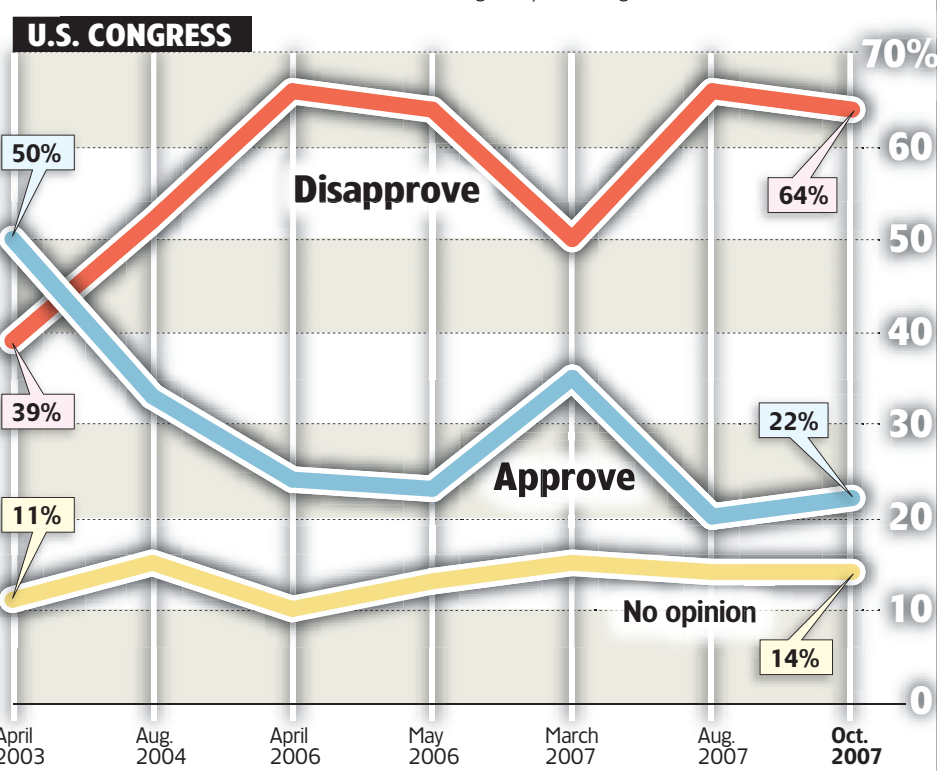
NANCY PELOSI

DIANNE FEINSTEIN

BARBARA BOXER

FIELD POLL OVERALL JOB PERFORMANCE

(among California registered voters)



* Previous measures were asked with regard to Pelosi's role as House minority leader.
Note: The congressional ratings are based on a telephone survey, conducted Oct. 11-21 in English and Spanish, of 1,201 registered voters. They are subject to an error margin of plus or minus 2.9 percentage points. Questions about individuals and parties were asked of smaller subsamples of voters, and are subject to an error margin of plus or minus 4.1 percentage points.
Source: Field Poll
Mitchell Brooks/mbrooks@sacbee.com; Nam Nguyen/nguyen@sacbee.com

Voters' views of Pelosi, Congress have dimmed

By John Hill
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House Speaker Nancy Pelosi's own party is turning on her, apparently because of a perception among California Democrats that she has not done enough to shake up the status quo in Washington, D.C., according to a Field Poll released Friday.

Congress overall is doing even worse with California voters, with an approval rating sagging to 30 percent or below for only the seventh time in the past 15 years, the poll of 1,201 registered voters found. Both Pelosi, the San Francisco Democrat who became speaker this year, and Congress as a whole have fallen short of voter expectations since taking over both houses, poll director Mark DiCamillo said.

"I think the reason for her decline and the low ratings Congress is getting is that voters here are not seeing any change," DiCamillo said.

Sen. Dianne Feinstein's approval rating of 51 percent is down 10 percentage points since March, but consistent with her average over the years. Sen. Barbara Boxer's rating also has slumped, from 54 percent in March to 44 percent. Both Boxer and Feinstein, however, still enjoy the approval of more voters than disapproval of them.

For Pelosi, it was the first time the poll showed more people disapproving than approving of her performance - 40 percent to 35 percent, with 25 percent having no opinion.

Other polls since 2003 have

For more details on today's poll, go to: www.sacbee.com/links
For exclusive statistical publications on the poll, subscribe to Capitol Alert: www.capitolalert.com

shown larger numbers of voters with no opinion, but Pelosi always won more approval than disapproval. As recently as March, California Democrats approved of Pelosi by a 5-to-1 ratio, DiCamillo said. Now it's less than 2-to-1. Nonpartisan voters also have soured on her.

Only 22 percent of voters approve of the job Congress is doing, the poll found, while 64 percent disapprove.

The six other times that congressional approval has dipped to 30 percent or below can be tied to specific events, such as the impeachment of President Clinton or the economic downturn of the early 1990s that hit California particularly hard, DiCamillo said.

During tough times, he said, voters saw Congress as a convenient target. "They were taking it out on anybody and everybody," he said.

Still, the Democrats now in charge of Congress fared better than Republicans, with a 34 percent approval rating compared to 20 percent for the GOP. California Republicans are more critical of their own party, the poll found, with only 29 percent approving of the performance of congressional Republicans.

Call John Hill, Bee Capitol Bureau, (916) 326-5543.

Armenian bill faced U.S., Turkish opposition

By Carl Hulse
New York Times

WASHINGTON - With backing from more than half of the House this summer, proponents of a resolution condemning the Armenian genocide were confident they would finally prevail in their quest for congressional recognition.

Adding to their optimism, Speaker Nancy Pelosi was a longtime backer of the resolution, which had been pushed

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mainly by her fellow Californians, and was committed to bringing it to a House vote.

But supporters of the measure were not prepared for the vehement opposition of two powerful members - Turkey, the successor state to the Ottoman Empire, which historians say conducted the genocide, and the United States,

which needs Turkey's help in Iraq. Their combined resistance caused the resolution to falter, embarrassing the speaker on a high-profile foreign policy front.

On Thursday, they surrendered, at least for now, telling Pelosi they were willing to wait until next year. "We believe that a large majority of our colleagues want to support a resolution recognizing the genocide on the House floor and that they will do so, provided

the timing is more favorable," the four chief sponsors said in a letter to Pelosi.

The faltering resolution illustrates what can happen when domestic politics collide with international affairs and how treacherous that can be for congressional leaders like Pelosi, who came under criticism earlier this year for a trip to Syria. It also turned a near triumph into a disappointment for those who believe Congress has a responsibility to send a

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