

Redistricting and the ‘communities of interest’

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Paul Chinn / The Chronicle

Gayborhoods are found far from traditional gay communities like the Castro.

Do you live in a “gayborhood”? Are you part of an Armenian sub-community or do you reside among black farmers and agriculturists?

These and myriad other questions that most of us have never thought to ask will be answered Aug. 15, the day the Citizen’s Redistricting Commission is scheduled to release its final maps.

Recall that the commission is a happy result of California voters deciding to drag the redistricting process into the sunlight, replacing backroom political deals with the logic of data and the dispassion of social science. But amid the science, there remains a bit of metaphysic that is certain to create consternation and alarm once the final maps appear. Among the criteria that the commission must consider when drawing its boundaries is “community of interest,” a concept so vague as to remind one of Justice Potter Stewart’s famous definition of pornography - “I know it when I see it.”

Knowing a community when one sees it is easy with traditional ethnic minorities. Oakland proudly boasts an African American orientation, and East Los Angeles is unquestionably Hispanic. Small minority groups are often even easier to spot - San Francisco’s Little Saigon has officially recognized boundaries and a formal symbolic entrance.

But this being California, the voters adopted a definition of community that goes far beyond mere ethnicity: “A community of interest is a

contiguous population which shares common social and economic interests that should be included within a single district for purposes of its effective and fair representation.”

This definition is so broad that it is easiest to define a community by what the commission is prohibited to consider, namely, political party affiliations.

Tea Partiers who want community recognition are out of luck, but the field is open to most everyone else, and we have already seen some clever innovations. For example, it has been proposed - with ample statistical evidence - that California is home to emergent “gayborhoods,” LGBT-friendly areas far from traditional gay communities like Castro Street. Based on the maps submitted to the commission, there are gayborhoods in the suburbs of Contra Costa County and amid the conservative enclaves of San Diego.

The lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender community has done an effective job of marshaling data in making the case for gayborhoods as an important factor for the commission to consider, and the lesson has not been lost on other communities seeking to have their say in the redistricting process.

Even as the Aug. 15 deadline approaches, the commission is seeing its hearings filled by ever more groups of earnest citizens wielding arcane demographic data displayed in Google Maps, often arguing for communities few of us have ever heard of.

There is too little time for the commission to hear from groups who have just awakened to the power of this new process, so it is a sure bet that we will see plenty of legal fireworks after the final maps are published. But what I am really looking forward to is when we repeat this process a decade from now when the voiceless will have plenty of time to prepare as well as powerful new software tools to make their case.

Are you a left-handed Wiccan or an omnivore Buddhist vegan? Perhaps you are a left-coast libertarian or an ecotopian truck driver? No matter how arcane your identity or minuscule your community, you will have the opportunity to make your case the next time the political maps are redrawn.

And who knows, just as the British like to joke that theirs is a country where one person standing in line constitutes a queue, we will discover that California is ultimately made up of as many communities as we have citizens.

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