

How the GOP Landslide Helped Democratic Map-Makers

Written by Rich Miller

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The official U.S. Census numbers were released not long ago. The statistics revealed that Illinois will lose one U.S. congressional seat when the new district maps are drawn.

It's impossible to know exactly what will happen with the new maps since block-level Census numbers aren't yet available. That very specific, hyper-local data is plugged into computer programs so mapmakers can draw the new congressional and legislative boundaries. The data should arrive in late March or early April.

Once that happens, the Democrats will go to work.

Ten years ago, when the governor's office and the Illinois Senate were controlled by Republicans and the House was run by the Democrats, the powers that be compromised by allowing incumbent congressmen to draw their own district maps.

That was a huge mistake. The incumbents did what incumbents do: They protected themselves to the point where the districts were gerrymandered worse than they've been in a century. The zig-zagging district running from Rock Island to Decatur made Illinois a laughingstock – as if we needed any more of that.

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This time, the Democrats control all three branches of state government, so they'll be drawing those congressional districts themselves. Senate President John Cullerton has vowed to not make the same mistake committed by his predecessor, so we hopefully won't see anything too weird.

What we will see, however, are as many Democratic congressional and state legislative districts as humanly (or, more to the point, computerly) possible, because the Republicans are cut out of the process.

The 2010 election, with its national Republican landslide, was a blessing of sorts for Democratic mapmakers. They now have a very good idea what and where their baseline support is, since they did so poorly outside Chicago and Cook County.

Illinois has voted so solidly Democratic since the last district maps were drawn in 2001 that it was difficult to know who the true swing voters were. But with Republicans voting in near-record numbers and Democrats losing all over the place last November, now they know.

Will and Kane counties have experienced major population growth over the past couple of decades, and we'll almost surely see more state legislative districts in those areas. Both counties are far more "swing" now than their nearly solidly Republican days before the great exurban migration began.

Few if any Downstate districts actually grew in population. All districts have to contain the same population, so that means all Downstate state legislative and congressional districts will have to be much larger geographically than in the past. Some districts will be downright huge because of population problems.

Some Chicago districts have also seen population declines, and many suburban areas haven't experienced population growth to match the rapidly expanding exurbs, so most of those districts will expand as well. Chicago districts near the city's border will most likely be extended even further into the suburbs. That could crowd out some Republican incumbents.

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The state's Latino population has increased, so we will likely see more Latino districts, partly because the Democrats want to avoid a lawsuit against the new map by some historically legally aggressive Latino groups. Chicago's China Town won't be split up between several districts any longer because of new state legislation. Chicago's African-American population has continued moving into the south suburbs, but it's not certain yet whether the migration has been enough to create new black districts, as it did 10 years ago.

Then there will be all the little games. House Speaker Michael Madigan, for instance, is expected to go after state Representative Dennis Reboletti (R-Elmhurst), who has survived some close calls. Many of Illinois' newly elected Republican congressmen could also find themselves out of a job.

But some Republicans will actually be helped by redistricting.

Democratic mapmakers often try to make a district competitive by poaching as many of their own voters as they can from surrounding GOP districts and packing Republican voters into those same Republican districts.

And some heavily Democratic districts could actually lose partisan strength as mapmakers move some of their voters to nearby districts in order to make those districts more politically competitive. Democratic incumbents might not like it, but that's how it goes.

Also keep in mind that we will likely see the first actual General Assembly vote on a "real" state legislative district map since way back in 1971. Every map since then was drawn by a special commission because the two parties couldn't come to an agreement.

The new maps are probably the least interesting aspect of politics to voters, but incumbents and wannabes watch this as closely as they can for obvious reasons. So you should, too.

Rich Miller also publishes Capitol Fax (a daily political newsletter) and CapitolFax.com.