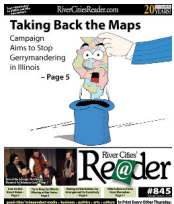


Taking Back the Maps: Campaign Aims to Stop Gerrymandering in Illinois

Written by Jeff Ignatius

Thursday, 12 December 2013 06:01

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Practically speaking, there are two ways party leaders draw state-legislative districts in Illinois: domination and dumb luck.

A key phrase in that sentence is “party leaders,” because regardless of whether redistricting is accomplished through one-party rule or a name literally being drawn from a hat, it’s controlled by those with a vested interest in remaining in power – and it’s controlled by one party. Functionally, Illinois’ system is institutionalized gerrymandering.

“Republicans and Democrats want to draw the maps to protect incumbents and punish their political foes,” said Michael Kolenc, campaign director for Yes for Independent Maps (IndependentMaps.org). “We’ve seen them do it in this state. We’ve seen them do it in other states. They do it at any level that they can. And right now they have the data and the technology where they can do it very, very well – where they can slice and dice neighborhoods” to craft maps that benefit them.

Kolenc’s campaign aims to put a constitutional amendment on the November 2014 ballot that would change the way Illinois draws its state-legislative maps. (The process of drawing districts for the U.S. House of Representatives would not be affected.)

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In the current system, “the politicians are choosing the voters,” said Ryan Blitstein, president and CEO of Change Illinois, the group with which this amendment originated.

“The voters of Illinois shouldn’t be the losers in this system,” Kolenc said. “And right now they are.”

The Yes for Independent Maps amendment is designed to wrest control of the process from power brokers and give it to ordinary citizens – and to remove partisanship nearly entirely.

This is obvious even in a brief outline of the proposed reform. The 11-member commission that would draw the maps would have no elected officials or lobbyists and would include four Democrats, four Republicans, and three people with no party affiliation. To pass, a map would need the support of at least two people from each of those three groups.

Self-Evident Stupidity

Article IV, Section 3 of the Illinois Constitution mandates that the legislature draw state-legislative maps by June 30 in the year following the census, with the requirements that districts be “compact, contiguous, and substantially equal in population.”

That’s simple enough, but this is Illinois. So, history says, the only way this will actually happen is if one party controls both chambers of the General Assembly and the governor’s office. That’s what happened following the 2010 census.

If the legislature fails to adopt a map, an eight-member commission is picked, with two members chosen by each of the four legislative leaders. This commission has until August 10 to submit a map, but being evenly split between Democrats and Republicans, it inevitably fails to meet that deadline – which happened after the 1980, 1990, and 2000 censuses.

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In that situation, two names – of people not from the same party – are submitted by the Illinois Supreme Court to the Secretary of State. By September 5, one of those names is drawn from a replica of Abraham Lincoln’s stovepipe hat to be the ninth member of the redistricting commission, which then has a month to come up with a map. Because one party has a majority on the commission at that point, it’s relatively painless to draw the legislative districts.

To review: To determine how voters are grouped geographically – which has a major impact on who represents them – Illinois effectively requires one-party control of the legislative and executive branches of government. Failing that, it treats the process with the seriousness of a raffle.

The first scenario is self-evidently stupid because the party in power gets to set the table for remaining in power. The second scenario is self-evidently stupid because it turns what should be a serious, thoughtful, rigorous process into a game of chance.

One can understand why the framers of the Illinois Constitution chose this method – and one can also fault them for failing to anticipate how the state’s notoriously rough-and-tumble political climate would bastardize it. In short, they expected the parties to work together. As Kolenc said: “From what we understand from the framers of the 1970 constitution, they put that [drawing-a-name element] in there to keep them from getting to that point. They thought that would be such a ridiculous way ... to draw a map that the legislators would not let it get to that point.”

Clearly, it hasn’t worked out that way. And because the parties aren’t working together to draw maps – which would likely result in compromises and potentially a greater number of competitive districts – protecting and punishing have defined the redistricting process.

Protecting incumbents is obvious. The party that draws the maps does so with the goal of getting the largest number of its members elected and re-elected – by drawing districts with safe majorities of people likely to vote for its candidates. The Democrat-drawn map following the 2010 census, for example, resulted in veto-proof majorities in both chambers – and nobody would claim that’s because Democrats have done such a stellar job of governing the state.

Punishment is a little more nuanced. The party that controls the process of course tries to

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minimize the number of districts that the other party can expect to win.

But there's also in an *intra*-party dynamic at work. Rank-and-file legislators are wise to stay in their leaders' good graces, lest they find themselves, post-redistricting, in an unfriendly district, or facing another incumbent. In other words, a process already led by legislative leaders further cements their power.

This is one way that redistricting affects actual governance, rather than merely the composition of the legislature. "Whatever the leader of the party that's in power wants, they can do," Blitstein said. "And whatever they don't want to do, they don't have to do."

Asked whether the constitutional amendment would loosen the grip of legislative leaders, he said: "I don't know that we can say that for certain, but I think it's likely."

Yet Elliot Richardson, CEO and past president of the Small Business Advisory Council (which supports the Yes for Independent Maps campaign), wrote in an e-mail that if the amendment passes, "politicians will no longer need to fear being targeted by their own leaders, via redistricting, because they deviate from the party line."

The current redistricting process also detracts from legislators' willingness to compromise and work with the other party. Blitstein said that in two-thirds of state-legislative districts, candidates run unopposed in the general election. "When the competition moves to the primaries, the winners are the people who can cater to the most extreme beliefs and visions and interests of their party," he said. "And so what you get is two sides that aren't really interested in talking to each other."

He added that because legislators are "insulated from competition, ... there's no disincentive for them to be corrupt."

Emergent Best Practices

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The proposed constitutional amendment is modeled after California's redistricting system, although Change Illinois' Blitstein said a panel of experts studied many options. "What we saw was an emergent set of best practices," he said. "And so California ... was the template because it's the most recent reform" and "the latest of a long line of high-quality redistricting reforms that have happened ... during the last several decades."

While the process that would be created is complicated (the [amendment](#) totals more than 1,500 words – slightly shorter than this article), in outline it has several key features.

The 11-member commission would be drawn from an initial pool of 100 applicants selected by an Auditor General-appointed review committee. Each legislative leader will have the right to remove five people from the pool.

No member of either the review committee or the map-making commission can within three years have been an elected official, a candidate for elected office, a government employee, a government contractor, or a lobbyist.

Through a random drawing, seven commissioners will be selected – with some conditions. Those seven commissioners must include two Democrats, two Republicans, and three independents. (The criteria for what constitutes a party member or independent would be done through a rule-making process, Kolenc said.) Proportional geographic representation will be created by using the state's judicial districts, which would mean three representatives from Cook County and one representative each from the other four judicial districts. If a person is selected when relevant quotas have already been filled – for example, if a Democrat is drawn when two Democrats have already been picked – that name is discarded.

Each legislative leader will then be able to select one person from the remaining pool – bringing the commission size to 11.

The commission must hold 10 public hearings – in each of the five judicial districts before and after a proposed map is released.

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Safeguards and transparency, Kolenc said, are meant to assure citizens that the process is open and fair. “Faith in the process is very, very key to faith in government,” he said.

The amendment includes four criteria for drawing a district: “(1) the district plan shall not dilute or diminish the ability of a racial or language minority community to elect the candidates of its choice, including when voting in concert with other persons; (2) districts shall respect the geographic integrity of units of local government; (3) districts shall respect the geographic integrity of communities sharing common social and economic interests, which do not include relationships with political parties or candidates for office; and (4) the district plan shall not either purposefully or significantly discriminate against or favor any political party or group.”

“The proposal itself isn’t simple,” Blitstein said. “But the impact is very simple. The idea here is to create an independent system that is transparent, uses nonpartisan criteria, and puts the voters back in charge.”

“Illinois Needs Fixing”

The amendment push grew out of dissatisfaction with the redistricting process following the 2010 census, Blitstein said.

Kolenc said the amendment language was finalized this past summer, at which point Yes for Independent Maps was formed as an independent group for legal reasons.

The campaign will need to collect 298,000 valid signatures by May 4 for the issue to be on the November 2014 ballot. Kolenc declined to say how many signatures had been collected (“We don’t have 298,000, I can tell you that”) but pledged a multi-million-dollar effort. He said \$400,000 has been raised so far. (In 2010, the similar Illinois Fair Map Amendment – led by the League of Women Voters – failed to garner enough signatures to appear on the ballot.)

The Yes for Independent Maps effort already includes 25 regional volunteer teams, and those will be augmented by paid staffers collecting signatures. The campaign has already attracted significant bipartisan support, including statewide organizations such as Common Cause Illinois,

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the Illinois Chamber of Commerce, and the League of Women Voters of Illinois. Kolenc said there's also support down to the local level, including the party chairs of both the Rock Island Democratic and Republican parties.

In an e-mail, Mary Kubasak, president of the League of Women Voters of Illinois, wrote that "the League feels that the only way meaningful reform can be achieved is through a citizen-initiative process. ... The best, least-expensive way to change the way ... legislative districts are drawn would be a legislature who would follow simple guidelines about compactness, contiguity, public hearings – an impossible task given that the guidelines often work against the self-interest of the map-drawers."

That was echoed by the Small Business Advisory Council's Richardson, who also wrote that the amendment could reduce the role of money in campaigns: "Small-business owners that cannot provide large sums of money to politicians speak with their votes. Fair and transparent redistricting will ensure the votes of the small business community count."

"This coalition is simply working to improve the process," Kolenc said. "Illinois needs fixing, and this is an excellent way to start this process."