

THE PANTAGRAPH

Change way Illinois draws political maps

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Illinoisans must stand up and be counted - not just in the 2010 census but by insisting that a constitutional amendment is on the 2010 ballot to change the way political districts are drawn after that census.

Without a change in the Constitution, your chance to select who will represent you in Springfield and Washington will be all but decided behind closed doors or by a flip of a coin.

Oh sure, you will still get to vote and there might even be a competitive district or two.

But, overall, the redistricting process is skewed toward protecting incumbents and the parties in power, with little concern for voters.

That's a prescription for more business as usual in a state where "business as usual" means a dysfunctional political system where about the only people guaranteed full employment are those investigating political corruption.

An Illinois Senate committee looking into redistricting met Wednesday. Another hearing is scheduled this month in Peoria.

The Illinois Reform Commission appointed by Gov. Pat Quinn already addressed the matter.

The commission described the system as "rife with unfairness, inefficiency and self-interest" and concluded it "deprives Illinois voters of fair representation."

We won't take space here to attempt to explain the state's convoluted system. Read Article 4 Section 3 of the Illinois Constitution. In essence, if one party dominates both houses of the Legislature and the governor's office, that party gets to decide how the districts are redrawn after the census. If the Legislature can't agree, the process moves to a commission evenly divided between Republicans and Democrats and, ultimately, a flip of the coin or other random selection winds up determining who gets to draw the map - and favor their party.

There are much better ways to draw maps that focus on giving voters choices and party competition while following federal laws such as the 1965 Voting Rights Act.

A proposed constitutional amendment sponsored by Sen. Dale Righter, R-Mattoon, roughly follows recommendations of the Reform Commission in turning to an independent, non-partisan Redistricting Consulting Firm to draw maps for the state House, Senate and U.S. House.

Under SJRCA 69, map-drawing criteria would include minimizing districts that cross county or municipal boundaries while encouraging districts that are compact and contiguous. Excluded from consideration would be the residency of incumbents, political affiliations of registered voters and previous election results.

This is much better than pulling names out of Abe Lincoln's hat or having incumbents draw weirdly shaped districts to increase their odds of re-election.

If the Legislature doesn't put this proposed amendment on the November 2010 ballot, then, as the Reform Commission recommended, the citizens of Illinois should rise up to put it on the ballot. It's that important.