



Redistricting reform must be a priority

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The absurdity of Illinois' system for redrawing legislative and congressional district boundaries after each Census is perfectly demonstrated by two things:

* The 17th Congressional District, shaped like a mutilated crocodile, is gerrymandered so it encompasses Democratic areas of the Quad Cities, Springfield and Decatur. It is not compact and barely contiguous; it is the poster child for taking the power to draw maps out of politicians' hands.

* The fact that the way our state chooses who redraws district lines has been determined by a coin flip in three of the last four decades.

In a recent meeting with the editorial board, state Sen. Kirk Dillard, R-Hinsdale, called Illinois' redistricting reform the "root of all evil" in the problems at the Capitol.

That may be hyperbole, but the ability of politicians to select their voters instead of vice versa is the single most important thing that must be changed in order for the state legislature to be less dysfunctional.

"I tell people if you're tired of inaction and being ignored decade after decade, you've got to change how we elect our representatives in Springfield," said Dillard, who is also a Republican candidate for governor.

Dillard's colleague, Sen. Dale Righter, R-Mattoon, outlined three principles of reform this page agrees are central to redistricting reform:

- * Politicians should not draw the lines.
- * Those who do draw the lines should not take incumbents' residence into consideration.
- * The voting history of those who live in a district cannot be factored in.

Much of this is self-serving for the Republicans, who seem stuck into permanent minority status at the Statehouse. We continue to disagree with those who would tie redistricting reform to other unrelated issues, such as the budget. Chances are, if they had an ironclad grip on power, most Republicans would be happy with the way things are.

But that doesn't mean their proposal to change the Illinois Constitution isn't the right thing to do.

It was troubling to hear state Sen. Kwame Raoul, D-Chicago, who chairs the Senate panel examining redistricting reform, say at a recent hearing in Springfield that the changes his panel recommends may not be dramatic.

"It's possible the status quo can happen, but I think it's too early to say," he said of the potential result of his commission's hearing.

Previously, Raoul, who holds Barack Obama's former Illinois Senate seat, derided Iowa's system, which has some similarities to the one proposed by the Republicans to draw districts instead of letting politicians do it.

"We're not going to be in the business of saying there's a magic computer they use in Iowa and run hastily to say that's the magic answer for how to appropriately approach redistricting," he said.

Actually, their computer in Iowa is pretty magical. It draws competitive districts that Republicans, Democrats and independents have to compete for in a marketplace of ideas -- an uncertainty risk-adverse Illinois incumbents don't want to have to face. Four of Iowa's five congressional districts are roughly split between Democrats and Republicans.

In Illinois, 98 percent of General Assembly incumbents are returned to office and just under half of the seats are uncontested. That's democracy-lite. It's closer to a coronation.

Redistricting is as key to getting true political reform in this state as anything else on the table. The status quo is unacceptable. Illinois needs to join the 14 other states that don't allow lawmakers to draw legislative districts. It's time our state be a leader at something.

How redistricting would change

State Sens. Kirk Dillard and Dale Righter modeled their constitutional amendment, Senate Joint Constitutional Amendment 69, which they want on the November 2010 ballot, off of a proposal by Gov. Pat Quinn's Illinois Reform Commission. It would:

* Appoint a five-person temporary redistricting committee appointed by the Democratic and Republican leaders of the Illinois House and Senate. None of the members could hold a partisan elected office, a political party position or be a close relative of a member of the legislature or Congress. The four members picked by the leaders would appoint a fifth to serve as chairperson.

* The committee would draw the lines in consultation with a nonpartisan redistricting consulting firm that employs qualified software technicians.

* The congressional and legislative maps it produces would have to be approved with a two-thirds majority vote by both houses. The plans could not be amended. The governor would have no role in redistricting.

* The committee would submit up to three plans to the legislature. If legislators could not agree on one, the Illinois Supreme Court would approve the map, provided it met applicable state and federal laws.

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