

## It's time to end the 'Illinois Roulette' game of redistricting

The Southern Illinoisan (Carbondale)

Sunday, October 11, 2009

### Guest Editorial – Mike Lawrence

*Mike Lawrence is a retired director of the Paul Simon Public Policy Institute at Southern Illinois University Carbondale. He is a veteran newspaper professional and columnist who previously served as the state bureau chief for Lee Enterprises, which owns The Southern Illinoisan, and as the state bureau chief for the Chicago Sun-Times.*

In the decades before becoming a state senator, David Luechtefeld guided the Okawville Rockets to 738 victories, more than all but nine coaches on the fiercely competitive Illinois hardwoods of boys' prep basketball. None of those wins came without a foe. Coach Luechtefeld's teams earned their laurels in the crucible of competition.



But too many in state Sen. Luechtefeld's legislative arena have triumphed without trial. So, we need to demand lawmakers allow us in the 2010 election to amend the state constitution and junk a system that permits them to choose their constituents instead of vice versa.

If they balk, we must move to force - through citizen initiative - a sweeping constitutional change in the process to map the districts from which we elect our representatives. No reform will do more to make state legislators more responsive and responsible.

More than 20 of Luechtefeld's Senate colleagues and half the House members garnered election in November unopposed. Only a couple of the 40 Senate seats at stake were closely contested; likewise, a scant dozen or so of 118 House slots. Democrats were virtually guaranteed ample majorities - due in large measure to a profound miscalculation by framers of the state's 40-year-old constitution.

When they were developing a method to determine the new legislative districts required after every census, the framers devised an impasse breaker to scare Republican and Democratic lawmakers into bipartisan, balanced agreement. In an event of a stalemate, the party chosen through a lottery would be given control over redistricting and the other would suffer the consequences. No party leader, even in the Byzantine world of Illinois politics, would dare risk everything, the framers reasoned.

Well, this is Illinois, after all. The constitution's authors did not foresee Democratic and Republican legislative kingpins becoming mystically mesmerized by Illinois Roulette, focusing on the 50 percent chance for mastery, not the even odds for misery.

Lady Luck blessed Democrats in 1981 and 2001 and Republicans in 1991. Each time, the partisan cartographers maximized the opportunities for their party and the vast majority of its incumbents, even if it meant splintering cities, communities and neighborhoods into different legislative districts.

That, together with the traditional Democratic or Republican enclaves within the state, spawned a slew of one-party districts - even some ceded to the mapmakers' opposition. For example, the Democrats in 2001 packed even more Republicans into a traditionally GOP district, allowing Dale Righter, a Mattoon Republican, to waltz into the Senate the next year. Why? To enhance the Democrats' chances of capturing neighboring territory the Republicans also had occupied.

Righter curses his good fortune these days. He and other Republicans lawmakers have joined editorial writers and groups like the Illinois Campaign for Political Reform in touting overhaul. They have little, if anything, to lose; the combination of reapportionment and the George Ryan scandal decimated their ranks.

Democrats savoring their huge majorities are less enamored. But Senate President John J. Cullerton has expressed support for reform, and House Speaker Michael J. Madigan earlier backed a plan fashioned by a bipartisan panel formed by the Paul Simon Public Policy Institute. The proposal would have provided more transparency, given a higher priority to preserving community interests than to protecting incumbents and placed ultimate power in the hands of a Supreme Court-appointed master in the absence of a bipartisan accord.

There is no politically impregnable solution, but several of the proposed reforms would put more candidates for positions that affect the lives of millions in the same posture as the Okawville Rockets. They won't get a win without the competition.