

CHICAGO SUN-TIMES

Legislature's challenge: Fix bizarre redistricting

May 03, 2009

This week, a commission given the task of recommending ways to clean up Illinois government gave us yet another reason to be jealous of our neighbor, Iowa.

Iowa has been in the news since same-sex marriages became legal there earlier this month, continuing a long history of progressive politics, with its courts and legislature also taking the lead nationally on such issues as desegregation and the right of women to practice law.

The Hawkeye State also has, as the Illinois Reform Commission points out, one of the nation's cleanest and most democratic systems for drawing congressional and state legislative districts, a process done every 10 years.

That contrasts with Illinois and other states where incumbency protection and partisanship guide redistricting. Our state's politicized system often leads to illogical, gerrymandered congressional and legislative districts that all but guarantee re-election for many incumbents, discourage competition and further voter apathy (why vote if the outcome is preordained?).

Compare the two maps above, if only for the shock value. One shows Iowa's orderly congressional districts. The second shows one of Illinois' most egregious examples of gerrymandering, the 17th Congressional District.

In its report, the independent reform commission, set up by Gov. Quinn, calls on Illinois to adopt the Iowa redistricting model as part of a sweeping call for government reform.

With just one month left in the legislative session and no reform bills passed yet, many would argue that Springfield should focus first on fixing the broken structures that helped give rise to the George Ryan and Rod Blagojevich fiascos, namely campaign finance, contract procurement and enforcement. And so, understandably, redistricting reform may not be a top priority this spring.

But ultimately, if those other reforms are to take root, a fix for our state's system of drawing legislative and congressional districts -- essential to healthy political competition -- cannot be ignored for long.

In Illinois, redistricting is done by the legislators. Though guided by rules that call for compact and contiguous districts with roughly equal population that fairly represent minority groups, politics still dominate. If legislators and a commission of equal numbers of Democrats and Republicans can't agree on a map -- which almost always happens -- a bizarre tie-breaker scheme kicks in. Two names, one Democrat and one Republican, go into a hat. The winner tips the voting power in his party's favor, giving that party final say on redistricting.

Iowa lives on another planet. There, a nonpartisan group, with help from a computer software program, creates the maps. The legislature then votes to accept or reject. Out of that process, Iowa created a map in

which 64 incumbents were thrown into districts to face other sitting incumbents, said James Nowlan, a senior fellow at the Institute for Government and Public Affairs at the University of Illinois.

We believe the Iowa model can work in Illinois, despite considerable differences in population and geography from Iowa, and we urge the Illinois General Assembly to seriously consider it. At the very least, the Legislature should approve a more modest proposal advanced by the Paul Simon Public Policy Institute that replaces the tie-breaker system. Rather than pick a name out of a hat, a tie would be resolved by a neutral expert.

The reform clock is ticking, with just four weeks left until this legislative session ends. We've said it before, but we'll say it again:
If not now, when?

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