

SNG-State of democracy in IL-10-17-16

State of democracy in Illinois uneven at best

By Jim Nowlan

My sample election ballot offers me slim pickings in terms of votes I can cast that might make a difference. We can do better.

The presidential camps long ago conceded Illinois to Hillary. As you have probably noticed, there is little active campaigning in our state.

As most readers know, ours is not a popular election for president. Instead, it is a contest in which most states cast all their electoral votes based on the winner of the state's overall popular vote. (Electors are apportioned to states somewhat proportionate to population.)

Thus the candidates ignore states where the popular vote outcome is, based on intensive polling, a foregone conclusion. The candidates instead focus their time and money on so-called "battleground states" such as Florida, Pennsylvania, Ohio and a few others, where the outcome can go either way.

You might say we have already voted for president in Illinois, at least indirectly, through the representativeness of our fellow citizens who have previously been polled on the matter.

Still, I hate being left out of all the hullabaloo of a campaign.

No electoral system is perfect. In 2000 (Bush over Gore) and several times in the late 1800s, the winner of the Electoral College vote received fewer popular votes than his opponent.

Going to a pure popular vote system sounds appealing, even commonsensical, yet it would probably be disastrous. Our presidential election victory margins are often so thin that

national recounts might be demanded, which could tie up a final decision for months and months.

Rather, Illinois could do as Nebraska and Maine do. Those states allocate their electoral votes in part on the basis of congressional district rather than statewide tallies.

In 2012, Barack Obama's team campaigned hard in one of Nebraska's three congressional districts and won the electoral vote for that district. Obama would have ignored Nebraska totally otherwise, just as candidates ignore Illinois.

If Illinois were by state legislative action to allocate 18 electoral votes by the winner, respectively, in our 18 congressional districts, then there would be presidential campaigning in six or more Illinois districts where the two major parties are competitive.

Mention of congressional districts surfaces another problem with democracy in Illinois, to wit: gerrymandering of our U.S. House and state legislative districts.

On my ballot for these districts, I have nothing to vote for, as there is no competition. As we know, gerrymandering by the state legislature creates districts in which George Washington couldn't defeat most incumbents. Thus many who would make outstanding candidates decide not to waste the time to contest them.

I am intrigued by the idea I passed on recently in this space—that we should petition onto the ballot a proposal to eliminate the Illinois House of Representatives, the primary culprit in the gerrymandering.

Many jurisdictions around the world and in the U.S. operate, quite effectively it would appear, with only one legislative body.

At the bottom of the ballot in my tiny rural county, there are offices such as for the county board for which there are no candidates whatsoever. This may not be a problem in your more populace county, of course.

Stark County has one unit of local government for every 300 residents! As a result, we have trouble finding good citizens to fill all the governmental posts. We are looking at ways to reduce the number of governments, but change comes hard.

Finally, there is an unnecessary proposal on our ballot that would clutter up the Illinois Constitution. The “safe roads initiative” (who can be against that?) would prohibit the use of money derived from vehicle and motor fuel taxes for any other purpose.

This is at heart a proposal to save lawmakers and governors from themselves. They are the ones who determine how to spend our tax revenue.

If they decide that in one difficult budget year it makes sense to allocate tax monies from one use to another, then I think they should have, in their good judgment, the right to do so.

This proposed amendment simply ties the hands of those we elect to use their considered judgment in budgeting. Maybe they don’t trust their own judgment, as they voted overwhelmingly to protect themselves from their own actions, thus putting the idea on the ballot.

This column is a tad shorter than most of mine, just like the ballot is in effect shorter than I would like it to be.