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Drawing lines big part of democracy

By Jim Nowlan

I spent a couple of days last week drawing lines. With a group of journalists, I was playing at democracy—learning how to redistrict state legislative and congressional district lines with computer help.

Democracy takes work. Parts of the process get out of kilter over time. Corruption seeps in; leadership falters; elected officials end up drawing their legislative districts to suit themselves rather than to suit you and me, the voters. When it becomes obvious that democracy is out of whack, groups like the Tea Party arise to “throw the bums out,” and try again.

The process of drawing lines is important because it affects the fundamental practice of democracy—citizen selection of their representatives.

In Illinois, 98 percent of incumbents win re-election. Many run without any opposition, which means no choice for voters. Redistricting in the past in Illinois resulted in districts for most incumbents that were so safe (packed with voters of the same party), according to David Yepsen, director of the Paul Simon Public Policy Institute, that lawmakers could become arrogant, detached from the public,. The process also creates lawmakers who are polar opposites, with few of the moderates needed to generate compromise and solve problems, such as the state budget deficit.

The process of redistricting needs fixing. Here is how it works at present:

This year and every decade, we take a census. By April 1 of next year, the Census Bureau will provide states with population data down to the “block level” (very small units). Then, in Illinois, the legislature takes that data and redistricts the state house and senate and the congressional districts. Most lawmakers enjoy being elected officials, so they take their work very, very seriously.

The mapmakers follow court decisions that mandate equal population in each district and opportunities for minorities to be elected. That done, the lawmakers then tend to create districts where A. Lincoln couldn't beat them; they also often draw possible challengers' residences outside their districts. Lots of mischief takes place, and it is done in the dark, out of public view. The voter is a pawn in the game.

Instead, groups like the League of Women Voters and the Farm Bureau generally feel that redistricting should create relatively compact and competitive districts that reflect party divisions statewide. In addition, communities should be left somewhat intact, rather than split into several districts. These and other “good government” groups also believe the process should be transparent, that is, done in plain view and that the public should be able to participate and be heard, before maps are finalized.

None of that happens in Illinois, because it is too important to incumbents to draw districts that are safe for them, no matter that the district lines sometimes look like prehistoric creatures.

With computers and the census data, just about any interested citizen group will be able to draw district lines in 2011, because those favoring reform are going to make the software widely available.

In addition, newspapers like this one ought to pressure the state board of elections to release their historical data at the precinct level, so the software available to the public is complete.

This past year the League of Women Voters and others tried to garner enough voter signatures to put onto the November ballot a proposal that a citizen commission, rather than the legislators themselves, draw the districts. The petition drive failed, primarily for lack of time and money. The coalition plans to try again, after the 2012 election, when there will be more time. If you are asked to sign a petition on redistricting reform, I suggest you do so. Anything is better than what we have.

A healthy democracy is not self-executing. It takes work. Redistricting in Illinois is out of kilter. We can't fix it in 2011, but we can pressure lawmakers to make the process more open to the public, and we can fix it for the next redistricting, a decade from now.