

SNG-Nowlan-Remap may decimate GOP in Illinois-10-17-11

GOP congressmen scramble for political lives

By Jim Nowlan

The fundamental fact about political life in Illinois—and most jurisdictions, for that matter—is that the game is not about fairness. Instead, the thinking goes, a party leader who believes in the values of his or her party should seek to maximize his party's opportunities to dominate the government.

Nowhere is this more in evidence than in redistricting the boundaries of Illinois congressional and state legislative seats.

Democrat Michael Madigan of Chicago has been in the Illinois legislature for 40 years, and Speaker of the House for almost 30 of those years. With a significant majority behind him, Madigan directed the drawing of district lines this past spring to favor his party and cause maximum distress to the Republicans in the legislature as well as those in Congress from Illinois.

The results of his map-making include a set of lines for congressmen that may take the Illinois delegation from its present 11 Republicans and 8 Democrats to one of 12 or 13 Dems and as few as 5 GOP members, according to back-of-the-envelope analysis by Shira Toeplitz of Roll Call, a Washington, D.C. insiders' political newspaper.

How did he accomplish this? First, he began his computer-aided process in Chicago (where you start is important, because it is easier to shape districts at the beginning of the process than deal with the remainders at the end). He protected those Chicago Democratic incumbents who needed additional population to make the required

700,000 person districts by adding just enough—but not too many—Republicans from the suburbs; the districts reach out into the south suburbs like tentacles.

In the GOP suburbs, Madigan and his skilled staff mapmakers are forcing GOP incumbents to force off against one another, and he has carved an open district (no incumbent) in the suburbs that leans Democratic, according to Toeplitz.

Downstate, which has become more Republican in recent elections, Madigan packed Republican voters in districts for incumbents Aaron Schock (R-Peoria) and John Shimkus (R-Collinsville), so that Democrats could compete for a seat in south-central Illinois.

In the districts that broadly straddle Interstate-80 across central Illinois, lively competition is guaranteed in the primaries of one or another party. First-term incumbent Bobby Schilling (R-Moline) finds himself in a 17th District that includes the urban, Democratic centers of Peoria, the Quad-Cities and Rockford.

Given that favorable configuration, at least three Democratic candidates are circulating primary petitions: East Moline alderman Cheri Bustos, Peoria state senator David Koehler and Freeport mayor George Gaulrapp.

The 16th District, which includes LaSalle County, will pit veteran Rockford-area Republican Don Manzullo against energetic young first-term Republican Adam Kinzinger, whose Manteno home is outside the district he hopes to capture.

Kankakee County, once a Republican bastion, now finds itself in the district drawn for Chicagoan and Democrat Jesse Jackson, Jr. There is talk that another African-American might challenge Jackson, which could divide the black vote and provide an

opening for one-term congresswoman Debbie Halvorson of Crete, who represented suburban Will County as well as Kankakee County prior to the 2010 election.

From a Republican perspective, Madigan has more than reshuffled the deck chairs on the Titanic. He has provided life preservers for his Dems while several GOP House members are going down with the ship.

Republicans have filed a lawsuit against the Democratic map, saying it unconstitutionally restricts the opportunities of Hispanics in Chicago, not exactly a soul mate constituency of the GOP. I predict the challenge will fail. Several Hispanic groups are fine with the map as drawn, thinking they are better off with one sure seat than the possibility of having none if their low-turnout constituency is divided.

Map making has always been unfair to those out of power. For generations, the Illinois Republican and downstate-dominated legislature simply ignored a state constitutional requirement that they redistrict, even as population was shifting rapidly to Chicago and then to the suburbs. Madigan is wreaking his revenge.