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Ballot petition drives in home stretch

By Jim Nowlan

The young man was shivering from the bitter cold. He stood at a busy entrance to Union Station in Chicago, competing for good space with newspaper boys and panhandlers. Busy commuters rushed by him, preoccupied with getting back to the suburbs.

The fellow asked politely, when he could fleetingly make eye contact with a passerby: Mister, would you like to sign a petition to reform redistricting in Illinois?

As I watched, also in a hurry to get to my train, I could tell he was having a tough time.

Gathering petition signatures from strangers for statewide ballot initiatives is a hard slogging, one-on-one, one-at-a-time process.

Petition circulators are now in the home stretch to garner 300,000 valid signatures by May 4, the six-month deadline for getting an initiative onto the November 4 general election ballot. Probably 400,000 signatures would be ideal, to withstand challenges from opponents.

Two initiatives—redistricting reform and term limits—are proposed, both popular with the voters, according to the polls. But first they must qualify for the ballot.

Redistricting reform would replace the present system in Illinois in which state legislators draw their own districts to suit themselves after each decennial census.

Reform began in 1962 when the U.S. Supreme Court held in *Baker v Carr* that districts must be equal in population with all other districts.

A typical example, Illinois had not redrawn its legislative boundary lines between 1905 and 1955, which gave great advantage to rural Illinois and stifled rapidly growing Chicago and the suburbs.

Yet in subsequent decisions the nation's highest court failed to follow up with standards that would also seek the goal of compactness of districts.

As a result, since 1971 the Illinois legislative leadership has hewn to the equal population standard. Nevertheless, Democratic leaders have recently drawn districts that, for example, snake, finger-like from Chicago and close-in suburbs out into more Republican bastions.

Thus the districts pick up enough GOP votes to meet a district's population requirement, but not enough to give Republicans a chance to win.

The consequence of this legal gerrymandering is to create unassailable districts for most incumbents. (In colonial times, Elbridge Gerry was given a district that resembled a salamander, thus the term.)

Lawmakers select their voters rather than the other way round.

The districts are the American equivalent of England's old rotten boroughs, where aristocrats were given parliamentary districts with few voters.

All this can be changed, just as other states have been making change.

For example, in 2010 California voters took the task away from self-interested legislators and gave redistricting to a 14-member citizens' board.

The result: After decades in which incumbents had seldom been challenged, let alone beaten because of gerrymandering, in 2012 there was a 26 percent turnover in the state's congressional delegation.

In Illinois, should the redistricting initiative make the ballot and win approval, an 11-member citizens' commission similar to that in California would be created.

If for some reason the group could not agree on a map, the process would go to the state Supreme Court. The chief justice and another justice of the opposite party would select a special master to draw the map.

Redistricting reform would increase turnover in the legislature, as would the other initiative for which signatures are being gathered: term limits.

The term limits proposal would limit members of the Illinois General Assembly to no more than eight years of service in the two chambers. In other words, a House member could not serve eight years in that chamber and then another eight years in the Senate.

In contrast, the present Speaker of the Illinois House and state Senate President have been in the legislature for 43 and 35 years, respectively.

Both these initiatives could use help as they work toward their 300,000 signature goals. If you would care to help the efforts by circulating a petition for one or the other, go to these websites: [independent maps.org/get-involved](http://independentmaps.org/get-involved) and [termlimitsandreform.com/what-you-can-do](http://termlimitsandreform.com/what-you-can-do).

But remember, gathering signatures is hard slogging.