

SNG-One way to help Illinois-9-14-15-revised version

Third time's a charm, say reform backers

By Jim Nowlan

This column runs the risk of being boring (“So what’s new?” readers wonder) because we have been here before. But the topic of redistricting reform is important. It represents the one fundamental thing you can do to refresh Illinois politics, say its backers.

In Illinois, members of the state legislature draw their own districts, and as a result in the last election, 97 percent of incumbents who ran for re-election won; most ran without opposition.

Surprised? We call it a process in which legislators select their voters rather than vice versa.

In California, in contrast, a scrupulously independent commission draws the lines, without regard to political party or incumbency. As a result, in 2014, half the members elected to the legislature there were new.

Illinois civic leaders have embarked on a “third time’s a charm” effort to create in our state a system similar to that in California.

In 2010, the League of Women Voters mounted an under-powered effort to do this, yet failed. In 2013-14, a coalition of civic groups tried again, yet the effort came up short again, primarily because of a botched petition drive.

Now, a broad coalition that includes the League, the Farm Bureau, AARP, the Latino Institute, former governor Jim Edgar, and some deep-pocket contributors is at it again, and I predict the well-organized and well-funded effort will succeed in getting the issue on the ballot next year.

The present drive is different from the last one. In 2014, scores of thousands of petition signatures, many gathered in the brutal cold of winter when fingers were stiff, were successfully challenged as illegible.

This time the petition from the Independent Map Amendment group asks voters to include both a signature *and* a printed version of one's name. And the drive organizers are validating the names of signers as petitions come in.

But it won't be a walk in the park. About 300,000 valid signatures are needed. The reformers are shooting for 675,000 signatures to ensure a more than adequate number of unchallengeable signers.

And this time volunteer petition circulators are being buttressed by paid professional circulators, who earn \$2-3 a signature. Almost 300,000 signatures have been gathered thus far, and the drive has until May of next year to turn in the fruits of its labor.

As in the past, rather shadowy opposition, this time called the People's Map, has developed (I couldn't find a website for the group on Google Search), probably encouraged as in the past by three-decades-long Speaker of the House Mike Madigan.

The opposition basically says a new system will hurt minorities and boost Republicans. As to the first charge, the proposed constitutional amendment emphatically prohibits discrimination. As for hurting Democrats, I can understand why Madigan might be worried.

In 2014, Democrats tallied half the votes for legislators, according to a friend of mine who toted up the numbers, yet—again, surprise—Democrats have 60 percent of the seats in the House and two-thirds of those in the state Senate.

This is called gerrymandering. For example, if you look closely at the House districts drawn for Chicagoland, you see gnarled fingers that reach out from Chicago (heavily Democrat)

into suburbs (less so) to pick up enough voters to make a district and still keep it Democratic, and in the hands of incumbents.

Recently I observed a meeting of the Peoria League of Women Voters at which Cindi Canary, the pert, feisty and skilled executive director of the independent map drive, rallied the mostly-older but enthusiastic troops.

“Illinois is in a rough spot,” declared Canary. “Voters have lost confidence in Illinois. We want to give Illinois politics back to the voters.” The crowd cheered.

Canary directed those who might want to circulate a 10-line petition for the redistricting drive to go to [mapamendment.org](http://mapamendment.org) where one can download a petition. However, the petition must be printed on both sides of a single sheet, so if that is a problem the drive will send you petitions, said Canary.

A new redistricting system that takes incumbency-protection out of politics won't cure all that ails us in Illinois, but it will be a good shot in the arm, say backers.