

SNG-Your chance to have impact-3-26-18

Here's your chance to reshape Illinois politics

By Jim Nowlan

You and I have an opportunity, right now, to help reshape Illinois politics. The issue is redistricting of state legislative and congressional districts in Illinois.

First, some background.

Our 50 states are responsible, respectively, for redistricting. In 1812, Massachusetts governor Elbridge Gerry approved boundaries for a state senate district that outlined a salamander. Voters in the tortuous, non-compact district did elect a solon favorable to Gerry's party.

Thus, "gerrymander," a term that lives in political infamy.

Drawing districts has always been about benefiting those who draw the maps.

Starting with the US Supreme Court case of *Baker v. Carr* (1962) and many since, states have been required to draw districts that are equal in population, and in one piece. The result has been that the majority party in a legislature has drawn districts that meet those criteria, but otherwise are often contorted, incomprehensible.

Even small counties and cities are split into multiple districts in the quest to create as many safe, secure districts as possible for the party in charge. The result of concentrating the majority party's voters into safe districts is that minority party voters are necessarily also pushed together in fewer, but also safe from challenge, districts.

In safe districts, most elected lawmakers have little fear of challenge at November general elections[, so often feel little need to be responsive to the concerns of voters of the other party].

Ironically, and this is a little difficult to follow, lawmakers in safe districts *do* tend to worry about challenges from within their own party in primary elections, generally from the Far Right for Republican lawmakers, and the Far Left for Dems.

The Left and Right of each party do not, respectively, constitute a majority of all voters, yet they often represent a majority of the smaller number of primary voters in their own party.

Thus, lawmakers tend to kowtow to the respective wings of their parties in order to avoid primary contests. The result is polarization, which often leads to gridlock.

A simpler way of saying this: The present process allows politicians to select their voters (by drawing lines to include voters desired and exclude those not), rather than allowing voters to select their lawmakers at elections.

But here come the guys (and gals) in white hats, riding to the rescue.

In the House, Rep. Ryan Spain (R-Peoria) has introduced a proposal to amend the Illinois Constitution. Spain would take redistricting away from self-interested lawmakers and give it to a bi-partisan commission of non-elected Dems, GOPers and Independents appointed by state Supreme Court justices.

In the other chamber, Sen. Julie Morrison (D-Deerfield) and Heather Steans (D-Chicago) have introduced the same proposal. (By the way, both Spain and Morrison are former students of mine: Ryan at the U. of I. and Julie at Knox College.)

Democratic Speaker of the House Mike Madigan will fight these proposals tooth and nail.

[Above all else, Madigan craves political control. If a Democrat is elected governor in November, that party would control the redistricting process after the 2020 Census.]

But both Democrats as well as Republicans across the nation have come to see the process as unfair to voters. California and Arizona recently moved to the bi-partisan commission approach, and Ohio just did so. Iowa has long had nonpartisan technocrats draw its lines.

I have promised Ryan that I would help see his proposal put onto the November ballot by the legislature, when you and I can decide the future of redistricting.

The 20 newspapers that carry this column cover all or big parts of most of the downstate Senate and House districts. If you concur with me on the need for this redistricting reform (and not everyone does), I ask you to consider the following simple steps:

1. Identify your senator and house members. At the bottom of the Illinois State Board of Elections homepage (<http://www.elections.il.gov>), find District/Official Search and follow the easy directions.
2. The site provides phone numbers but not email. Call to ask for his or her email address.
3. By email, ask the lawmakers if they will support the constitutional amendment proposal to reform redistricting (HJRCA 43).
4. Since Speaker Madigan will try to bottle up these proposals, ask your lawmakers if they will also vote to discharge the House and Senate proposals from those chambers' rules committees, so they can be voted upon.
5. If within a week you receive no response to your emails, call their offices and politely request responses to your questions.
6. Then, please report responses to me at jnowlan3@gmail.com as soon as possible, and I will forward the valuable information to my former students.

Don't despair of politics. Instead, have an impact.