

## **Transparent Redistricting in Illinois is Still Possible (and Would be Popular)**

**By James Kuklinski and Brian J. Gaines**

In the eyes of the public, Springfield is broken. In a University of Illinois survey of 500 Illinois registered voters conducted between April 30 and May 10, one-third of the respondents said they *never* trust the Illinois state government to do what is right, more than double the proportion that gave that answer in 2006. Only 10 percent said state government does what is right "most of the time," less than half the percentage from four years ago.

Now, one of government's most important activities is on the horizon. State legislative and congressional districts are redrawn every 10 years, following publication of the U.S. Census. When one party controls the General Assembly and the governorship, it can draw any map that courts will tolerate. Following the release of census data in 1980, 1990, and 2000, Illinois had divided government, but partisan gerrymanders still prevailed. The explanation: when bipartisan compromise fails, the tie-breaker is a lottery giving one party an extra member on a previously balanced bipartisan commission. As a result, and to the detriment of serious electoral competition, the public has suffered through two decades (1980s and 2000s) where elections deliberately advantaged Democrats and another (1990s) where they advantaged Republicans.

A coalition led by the League of Women Voters recently failed to get a constitutional amendment onto the November ballot that would have changed the way that electoral districts are drawn in Illinois. Relying on volunteers, the coalition could not muster 300,000 signatures by the May deadline. Hence, it is already too late to change the procedure that will control how electoral maps to be used for the 2012-2020 elections are drawn. So is yet another rigged map inevitable?

Legislators owe it to the people of Illinois to attend to the badly decayed foundations of public trust. Most immediately, that means accounting for constituents' beliefs and feelings about fair redistricting.

Our survey for the University's Institute of Government and Public Affairs found that 80 percent of respondents could not say how the current legislative maps were drawn. But ignorance is not indifference. When asked who they would like to draw maps, nearly half chose "an independent, non-partisan commission whose members do not directly participate in politics." They won't get that wish this time, but legislators can, for a change, foster an open discussion of how to draw fair electoral boundaries.

One hallmark of gerrymandering is uncontested races, and we also asked, "About what percentage of the members of the Illinois General Assembly currently in office do you think faced no opponent in their last general election?" The correct answer is 44 percent (77/177), and respondents were fairly accurate: 51 percent was the single most popular answer, and nearly a quarter of respondents chose answers between 40 percent and 55 percent. More importantly, 30 percent of respondents characterized these uncontested races as "disgraceful" and 53 percent called them "disappointing." The failure of the redistricting amendment certainly does not mean that voters are happy with the status quo.

For Speaker Michael Madigan and Senate President John Cullerton, the power to draw districts to their own liking is surely attractive. It makes sense, in the calculus of raw political power, to wait for the outcome of the governor's race, and if Pat Quinn is re-elected, to push through maps designed to freeze in place a Democratic advantage. If Bill Brady wins, they might take their chances on the lottery; so far, Lady Luck has been kinder to the Democrats. But those are political calculations, not judgments about the best interests of the people.

In 2011, Illinois needs a wide open discussion of the pros and cons of many maps, including maps that legislators and their agents did not draw. If leaders resist transparency, rank-and-file members should insist on it. They were elected to work for their constituents, not their party leaders. Representative democracy in Illinois is in bad shape, and another decade of muffled competition on manipulated maps is the last thing we need.

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