

Deformed democracy

By ANDREA MULRINE

Immediately following the 2010 census, Pennsylvania's General Assembly will engage in what politicians call redistricting, and what is known by the rest of us as gerrymandering — the process of manipulating electoral districts for political advantage. The term was coined in 1811 when Massachusetts Gov. Elbridge Gerry's approved creation of a salamander-shaped district.

Because of population shifts revealed by the census, redistricting is necessary to make U.S. congressional and Pennsylvania legislative districts equal in population, fulfilling our one person, one vote principle. It is a hotly partisan insider's game that is ignored by most citizens.

Yet if we ignore it we do so at our own peril because the results directly affect how we are governed during the following decade.

Those in charge of the process can determine the re-election prospects of incumbents and impact which political party will have majority control in the U.S. Congress and the Pennsylvania General Assembly. Our right to a meaningful choice when we go to the polls is denied.

The Pennsylvania Constitution gives legislative leaders (who are also leaders of their respective political parties) exclusive power to draw General Assembly district boundaries. Because the process is bipartisan the outcome is usually fairer to both parties.

However, these leaders can and do collude to create safe districts for incumbents and candidates of their parties.

Two consequences of gerrymandering may be less obvious but deserve consideration.

First, a lack of competitive elections breeds voter apathy and reduced civic participation. Why get involved when the result is predetermined? Why volunteer or vote? Why become a candidate to run on a losing party ticket?

Second, gerrymandering contributes to the division and gridlock which has dominated political discourse in recent years.

When a safe district disenfranchises the opposing party, favored candidates have no need to reach out to swing voters or engage in the bipartisan negotiation and compromise often needed to solve pressing problems like access to quality education or affordable health care.

It is time for Pennsylvanians to rise up and demand changes to past redistricting practices. At a minimum, those changes should include:

- Consideration of the interests of voters first, not the politicians;
- Public participation in the process;

- Respect for communities of common interest and existing government boundaries to the greatest possible extent;
- Drawing compact and rationally-shaped districts.

The League of Women Voters of Pennsylvania knows that if maps can be drawn to create political advantage, they can also be drawn to promote fairness and democracy. Reform requires amendment to the Pennsylvania Constitution and legislation must be passed by June, 2008 for reform to take effect in time for the upcoming 2011 round of redistricting.

Contact your state senators and representatives and demand that they work diligently to pass redistricting legislation by June 2008. Time is running out.

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