

Why You Need to Care About Redistricting Reform, Part II

Sandra Slifer, May 2009

How Gerrymandering can influence electoral results on a [non-proportional system](#).

Example is for a state with four districts and a 36:28 Green (G) party majority.

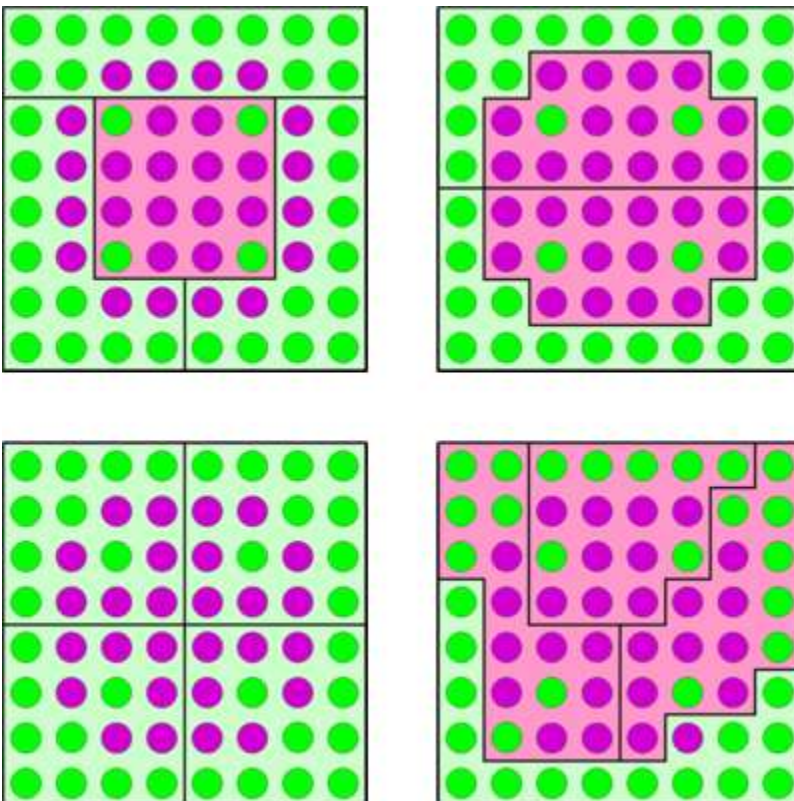
Top left: Magenta (M) party wins the urban district, while G party wins the three rural/suburban districts — the result expresses and enhances the fact that G is the state-wide majority party. (Example of packing)

Top right: by redesigning the four districts, there is a 2:2 tie, with G dominating the two new rural districts and M dominating the two new urban/suburban districts — closer to

proportionality, but masking the fact that G is the state-wide majority party.

Bottom left: Creating four mixed-type districts can yield a 4:0 win to G — a disproportional result considering the state-wide reality. (Example of cracking)

Bottom right: With classical Gerrymandering techniques it is even possible to ensure a 1:3 win to the state-wide minority M party.



Last month, I discussed some of the terminology related to redistricting, reapportionment, and gerrymandering. After laying this groundwork, it's time to learn more about the Public Affairs Research Council proposal and a quick summary of what other states are doing to reform the Legislature-dominated process. The full PAR report is available online at www.la-par.org.

PRESENT SYSTEM

Redistricting is treated as regular legislation. The meeting dates and locations of the committees are released along with the standard legislative committee schedule. The legislation is subject to a veto by the governor. Each house assigns the task of drawing their own district lines to a committee and generally, doesn't interfere in each other's redistricting. In the House, the Subcommittee on Reapportionment of the House & Governmental Affairs committee Rep. Greg Cromer, District 90, is on this committee. The Senate and Governmental Affairs Committee is responsible for drawing new Senate districts. Sen. Jack Donahue, District 11, is on this committee. The redistricting/reapportionment bills then must flow through the normal legislative process, be signed or vetoed by the Governor and then be forwarded to the Justice Department. And all of this must be completed during a forty-five day regular legislative session that begins April 25 and ends June 24.

PAR PROPOSAL

1. INDEPENDENT COMMISSION

PAR examined the pitfalls of some of the other state commissions and is proposing a commission that overcomes many objections that opponents and supporters of commissions have expressed. The commission members are nominated by the same private university officials that nominate the Ethics Board. The commission is composed of nine members and three alternates (odd number of members so no tie votes). The commission includes long-time Democrats, Republicans, and No Party voters (three of each) and thus achieves a partisan balance (a minimum of one of each group will be a licensed lawyer). At least one member of the commission will be selected from each of the seven congressional districts providing a geographical balance. The commission would be established no later than December 31 the year before the Census (2009, in this case).

The Commission may use outside Counsel, mapping consultants, and redistricting software as needed.

They will be required to produce a first draft map within fifteen days after receiving the Census 2010 data. Outreach coordinators will help publicize the regional public hearings. After receiving input from the public, including public officials, the commission shall have fifteen days to submit a finalized map to the Legislature and the public. The map would be available on the Commission's web site.

The Legislature may pass or reject the plans, but not change them. The Commission would attempt to draw new maps based on the legislators' comments. The Legislature would be able to accept or reject the revised maps, but not amend them. If the legislature rejected the second revision, the Commission would have the option of submitting the plan to the state's Supreme Court. The Governor shall have no veto power over the redistricting plans.

2. TRANSPARENCY

All meetings shall be open to the public, broadcast live on the Commission's web site and archived. All of commission's meetings, documents, communications, and work products shall follow the open meetings and public records laws.

I attended a House hearing in New Orleans during the 2001 reapportionment/redistricting process. It was held in a school auditorium that could have accommodated hundreds of citizens. Only about six people showed up for the mid-afternoon meeting. Public education and citizen outreach are requirements of the new plan.

3. TIMEFRAME

The Commission should be in place by January 2010 and each decennial census year henceforth. By giving the commission members a full year to build their staff, hire consultants, and put in place the technology and the citizen outreach and education programs, the commission will be ready to devise the maps shortly after receiving the final census data.

Will we have more competitive congressional, legislative, and regulatory districts if this plan is passed? There are no guarantees, but the process will be out of the hands of those individuals who stand to benefit the most from the current the system: the politicians.

There will be a clarification of the redistricting/reapportionment goals. What are the priorities for drawing fair districts? Besides population equality and compliance with the Voting Rights Act what is the ranking order of the other principles: contiguity and compactness, utilizing natural boundaries, preservation of political subdivisions, protection of communities of interest, respecting current boundaries, and protection of incumbents.

Redistricting and reapportionment reform proposals have been introduced in eighteen of the twenty-eight states where legislators currently are responsible for redrawing the lines. Reforms are being pursued in Florida, Texas, Ohio, Virginia, Colorado, Georgia, Maryland, Massachusetts, New York, North Dakota, Pennsylvania, and Rhode Island.

The reformers may not succeed in all of these states, but the one criteria for successful reform in every state so far has been the active engagement of the citizens and organizations pushing and supporting reform agendas. Time is not on our side. Key legislators dismissed the very idea of reform and our Governor has not commented on the report at all. One thing is certain, this upcoming redistricting/reapportionment process will be challenging due to the demographic changes. There is very little chance that it will be accomplished quietly behind the scenes. It is very likely that legislators will be demanding citizen involvement and protest regarding the changes. It sure would be nice to see Louisiana's name on that list!

For those of you who would like more information, please visit the League's web site, www.lwvst.info for links to redistricting resources.

If you'd like to try your hand at redistricting, I can recommend two web sites where you can play "Redistricting King Maker": www.fairvote.org/wheel/ features the Redistricting Roulette Wheel. First developed by the Proportional Representation Society of Australia, Matthew Pierce from FairVote designed the web-based version. www.theredistricting.game.org It has several levels of difficulty based on your knowledge and experience level. The University of Southern California Game Innovation Lab developed the program. It's an interactive game that rates your district boundaries and provides you with opportunities to change your mind and your lines!