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Gerrymandering? Nothing to see here

The premise seems pretty easy. Instead of leaving the shape of legislative boundaries to back-room dealings that allow politicians in the majority to finesse Statehouse and congressional districts in ways designed to keep the mapmakers in power, let Hoosier citizens in on the process.

Open the process. Make it easier to explain how lines are drawn. Give voters and potential political challengers a renewed sense that elections aren't foregone conclusions, intentionally hard coded into the shape of their districts. And give legislators another layer of accountability beyond: Trust us, we've got this.

It makes enough sense, in fact, that a League of Women Voters resolution calling for a citizen-led commission to redraw Indiana's political maps once every decade cleared the Lafayette City Council, the West Lafayette City Council and the Tippecanoe County commissioners on Monday.

The consensus locally among the mix of Republicans and Democrats on those bodies: It's about time.

So, what are the chances that a special, 12-member committee looking at Indiana's redistricting process will come to the same conclusion and suggest changes to the Constitution and to the way things have always been done?

"I'm still waiting to see data proving that a problem exists, so it's too early to tell what reform would require in terms of the Constitution," said state Sen. Brandt Hershman, a Buck Creek Republican and vice chairman on the Special Study Committee on Redistricting.

Translated: It won't be easy to pry away a constitutional power that gives the party in control such an upper hand.

Sue Scholer, a former Republican state representative from West Lafayette, was one of the leaders of the League of Women Voters push to get Greater Lafayette leaders to back redistricting changes. But she said she got Hershman's stance. "That's understandable," Scholer said Monday night after meeting with the West Lafayette City Council.

"In all fairness, I think the maps have improved in some ways. Part of the problem is, this isn't easy. I'm not sure we can guarantee anyone can draw things better," Scholer said. "But as with a lot of politics, there's a lot of perception involved. Right now, the perception is that it's too easy to manipulate things in ways that don't give people confidence at all."

Here's how it works now: Every 10 years, the General Assembly uses fresh U.S. Census data to draw new boundaries for nine U.S. House, 100 Indiana House and 50 Indiana Senate districts. The only requirements for districts in Indiana are that all parts of a district be contiguous, be nearly equal in population and adhere to the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

The problem is when those lines are moved to save individual lawmakers, target others or to otherwise rig a district. How did President Barack Obama put it in a Feb. 10 speech at the Illinois Statehouse: “In America, politicians should not pick their voters; voters should pick their politicians.”

As Hershman points out, when Indiana redrew maps after the 2010 Census, Indiana’s congressional lines earned praise — along with Nevada — “as states with the least amount of gerrymandering,” from the Washington Post.

On the other hand, as the League of Women Voters and the government watchdog Common Cause Indiana will point out, a 2014 University of Chicago School of Law study determined that Indiana’s General Assembly districts are among the most gerrymandered in the country. The report gave districts some credit for Republicans taking 69 of 100 seats in the Indiana House while getting 58 percent of all votes cast in 2012 elections. (The GOP widened its supermajority hold on the House in 2014, winning 71 seats.) There are a lot of moving parts involved in that. But it’s fair to ask what sort of role map-making and the phenomenon of safe seats had in the defeatist nature of the 2014 elections, when 43 percent of the 125 Indiana House and Senate seats went uncontested. (In districts that include parts of Tippecanoe County, four of six seats in the General Assembly went uncontested in November 2014.) It’s fair to ask if that sense of why bother that contributed to Indiana’s putrid 28 percent turnout in that election is growing.

“Clearly, something is out of whack,” Tom Sugar, a member of the redistricting committee, said when the body started its work in October. Sugar is a former chief of staff when Democrat Evan Bayh was in the U.S. Senate.

“There are a lot of reasons out there for poor turnout and this sense of distress over the process,” said Sherry McLauchlan, chairwoman of the League of Women Voters of Greater Lafayette’s redistricting committee. “How the maps are drawn is just one of them. And this is just one you can fix.”

The state’s study commission has until Dec. 1 to make recommendations.

Scholer said turning the ship on redistricting is a massive chore that doesn’t necessarily capture the public’s imagination. When she arrived at the Statehouse in 1991, the first bill she filed dealt with redistricting. The bill would have tucked two Indiana House districts into every Indiana Senate district. The idea was to simplify the overlaid jigsaw puzzle effect in today’s maps and keep, as much as possible, from divvying up communities.

That went nowhere.



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