

# Redistricting changes unlikely

**DARCY COSTELLO**

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INDIANAPOLIS - An effort to change who is responsible for drawing Indiana's election maps is unlikely to gain approval this year after a legislative panel declined to take a vote on the issue.

Congressional and legislative districts are drawn by state lawmakers, a process that critics say is too political. A plan from Republican state Rep. Jerry Torr, co-authored by Republican House Speaker Brian Bosma, would establish an independent commission to draw the maps, which would still be subject to approval by the Legislature. Its passage, though, would require Republicans who currently control the Legislature to cede some control over a process that can determine whether they are re-elected.

The bill faces a Tuesday deadline for a panel vote, or else it will be dead for the year. Its prospects dimmed Wednesday when GOP Rep. Milo Smith refused to allow a vote in the Elections and Apportionment Committee he chairs. In explaining his decision, Smith said lawmakers on the panel hadn't had sufficient time to prepare amendments to the proposal.

Supporters of changing how redistricting is done say it's not shocking incumbent legislators would oppose the idea, but they expected the measure to at least get a vote in the House panel.

"There are extremely high levels of support in redistricting reform, and the numbers don't vary much in terms of partisanship," said Julia Vaughn, policy director of Common Cause Indiana. "Outside of the walls of the limestone, people get it — yet it's very different inside."

Bosma said it's "unlikely" the proposal will get a committee vote before Tuesday's deadline. He had asked that a hearing occur, he said, but left a final decision up to Smith and other panel members.

"To weigh in heavily on a bill that is not likely to receive attention in the Senate — that is the clear message we received — you can only pick so many fights in a match," he said.

The proposal is the culmination of roughly a year of study by a group the Legislature charged with examining redistricting practices. Democrats held Indiana House majorities for most of a 20-year period after they had control of drawing up districts following the 1990 and 2000 censuses. But Republicans had control of the Legislature after the 2010 census, and their drawing of GOP-friendly maps helped them build massive General Assembly majorities — now 70-30 in the House and 41-9 in the Senate.

Those sizable majorities allow them to take action even if no Democrats are present and have been built even as Republicans won the 2010 gubernatorial race with just under 50 percent of the vote and the 2016 gubernatorial election with 51 percent.

Supporters say having an independent panel draw election maps could lead to fairer districts and more competitive races, which could in turn lead to higher voter turnout. But lawmakers on Smith's panel, including Republican Rep. Jim Lucas, appeared to harbor doubts about whether the proposal would violate the Indiana Constitution.

In a letter distributed to lawmakers on the panel, two former state Supreme Court justices, Brent Dickson and Theodore Boehm, wrote they believe the proposal is consistent with the Indiana Constitution since the Legislature "retains the ability to approve or disapprove the Commission's proposed plans."

Still, to Sen. Brandt Hershman, who sat on the study committee and doesn't feel the group identified a concrete problem, the constitutionality of the proposal is an "open question." Attributing Republican supermajorities to gerrymandering, he said, neglects to take into account significant policy issues.

Vaughn is telling residents to reach out to Smith, Bosma and other representatives to ask that the measure receive a vote.

"A significant chunk of the electorate feels like they don't have a voice in the process," she said "They feel angry and, right now, they're channeling that anger into political action."



**A plan from Republican state Rep. Jerry Torr, co-authored by Republican House Speaker Brian Bosma (not shown), would establish an independent commission to draw Indiana's election map, which would still be subject to approval by the Legislature.**