

Editorial: Political puzzle

Contest could show how to redraw political districts free of party favoritism

Monday, March 23, 2009 2:56 AM

The Columbus Dispatch

Legislative redistricting in Ohio involves high-tech demographic analysis, in which voting and census figures are crunched to determine how districts will be designed for the next decade. Can any person or group, if given the right computer software and technical assistance, do this specialized work? And can it be done without the political bias of Ohio's current system?

That's what the League of Women Voters, the Ohio secretary of state's office and their partners in a special project hope to find out.

They have opened the process of redrawing congressional districts to any group or individual with the gumption to come up with a plan. The competition, announced on March 12, is intended to generate congressional districts that aren't gerrymandered to benefit one political party or the other.

Also sponsoring this project are Ohio Citizen Action, Common Cause, State Rep. Dan Stewart, D-Columbus, and former state Rep. Joan Lawrence, a Republican.

It's an intriguing idea, separating this process from the bodies empowered to do this work. The General Assembly redraws congressional districts, while the State Apportionment Board reconstructs districts for Ohio's House and Senate. In both instances, the results favor the dominant party.

The competition is intended to produce a nonpartisan product. The winners will be announced on May 11.

Contest rules require that districts be free of unfair political bias. The other main criteria are compactness of districts, keeping communities intact and competitiveness.

Competitiveness is the hardest criterion to achieve if, as most Ohioans hope, misshapen districts become extinct. Compact, rationally shaped districts, which always should be the priority, would be competitive in some parts of Ohio but overwhelmingly Republican or Democratic in other sections of the state.

The winning plan must have districts with contiguity and equality of populations, and it must conform to the National Voting Rights Act. The contest will use 2000 census data, the latest available, and computer programs made available by Ohio State and Cleveland State universities. It will be based on the current 18 U.S. House seats, though Ohio is likely to lose one and perhaps two seats after the 2010 census.

Proponents would like to see the winning plan incorporated into a redistricting-reform constitutional amendment this fall or next year, but election reform isn't a legislative priority as the General Assembly struggles to find money to fund state services for the next two years.

The competition might sound farfetched to some in the legislature, but it could be a useful exercise in sustaining momentum for a system that's not partisan.

