

Editorial: Reform overdue

Ohio should have bipartisan system to map legislative districts

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Voting reforms never include fixing the process of redrawing Ohio's legislative districts. Gerrymandering hurts the party out of power and the voters, who are thrown into congressional and General Assembly districts that have little logical basis.

State leaders periodically discuss how to end gerrymandering, but making it happen requires a bipartisan commitment. Unfortunately for Ohioans, whichever political party perceives that it has the upper hand balks at changes.

Republican lawmakers have revived efforts to slay this monster. Rep. Larry Wolpert, R-Hilliard, introduced a plan similar to one that failed two years ago when House Democrats refused to back it. A different measure is being introduced in the Senate by Sen. Gary Cates, R-West Chester.

Wolpert's plan would form a seven-member commission assigned to redraw state legislative and congressional districts after new census information is available every decade. The plan creates an independent board with two members of both major parties. Those four members would have to agree on the other three.

Cates' simpler plan would add a member from each party to the current five-member State Apportionment Board, which consists of the governor, secretary of state, state auditor and a lawmaker from each party. Because the Senate bill requires five votes to approve the legislative map, the party holding just two of the seats would not control the process. Bipartisan cooperation would be needed unless one party holds all three elected positions.

Currently, General Assembly districts and congressional districts are drawn by different bodies, but both systems are deeply rooted in power politics. The Ohio legislature, with the governor's approval, redraws boundaries for congressional seats. The Apportionment Board redraws Ohio Senate and House districts.

Democrats, now in control of the Apportionment Board, are unlikely to support either proposal. Rep. Chris Redfern, the state's Democratic chairman, calls the redistricting reforms "dead on arrival," questioning why Republicans didn't push these reforms before they faced the loss of statewide offices in the 2006 election.

Although the Democrats regained two of the Apportionment Board offices -- governor and secretary of state -- in the 2006 election, they have no guarantee they'll still hold two of the three offices after the 2010 election. They should be open now to depoliticizing the process rather than waiting for their turn to stick it to Republicans the way the GOP did to them after the 1990 and 2000 censuses.

Demographic research has advanced to the point where compact yet competitive districts can be drawn without splitting communities of interest into several pieces, as now happens to benefit the party in power.

Lawmakers should put the voters' interests ahead of blatant partisanship.