

Editorial: Time for reform State needs bipartisan effort next year to end gerrymandering

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Ohioans deserve cohesive legislative districts, not the misshapen variety drawn to favor the party in power. Yet the state's leadership rarely summons the gumption to adopt a fairer and smarter method of remapping districts.

That should change before districts are redrawn the next time, after 2010 census data is available. At that time, the state will lose at least one, and possibly two, congressional seats to states that are outpacing Ohio in population growth. That makes it all the more important that redistricting be done with the public, not the political hierarchy, in mind.

In mid-2006, the last time a meaningful attempt was made to end gerrymandering, Democratic lawmakers blocked a GOP plan that was remarkably similar to earlier versions offered by Democrats. After being forced to run in GOP-designed districts, Democrats relished the opportunity for payback.

The key factor in this tug-of-war is control of at least two of three seats on the State Apportionment Board. Democrats gained that advantage in November 2006 by winning the offices of governor and secretary of state, while the auditor's office remained in GOP hands. But Democrats have no assurance that Republicans won't gain the upper hand in the 2010 elections.

The five-member Apportionment Board, which includes one legislator from both parties, determines the districts for the Ohio House and Senate, while the legislature, with the governor's approval, remaps congressional districts.

The 2006 reform would have created a seven-member bipartisan commission to redraw state-legislative and congressional boundaries. New maps would require approval of five members, four of whom would be appointed by the legislative leaders of both parties. Those four would have to unanimously approve the candidates for the other three commission seats.

With that level of bipartisanship, the process could not be slanted to favor one side, shifting the focus from partisan advantage to designing districts that serve the public interest.

While competitiveness is of value, it should not trump the preservation of communities. To the extent possible, districts should avoid splitting municipalities, counties and other units of shared interest. A redistricting proposition, State Issue 4, was voted down in 2005 because it emphasized competitive races to the detriment of how the districts would be shaped.

Opponents successfully argued that districts under that plan would be more misshapen than they are now.

The 2009 off-year election cycle will be an ideal time to revisit redistricting reform. As Ohio draws closer to important 2010 races, reform will become more difficult.

