

Dayton Daily News

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EDITORIALS

THE VIEWS OF THE DAYTON DAILY NEWS

New map rules not a threat to blacks

SOME REPUBLICANS ARE SAYING THAT IF OHIO changes its system for designing legislative districts, fewer blacks might be elected. And some black Democrats are asking whether the Republicans are right.

In fact, real reform would help minority communities.

A group called Reform Ohio Now is gathering signatures to get a specific reform proposal on the November ballot. It would upend the system in which almost all legislative seats stay permanently in the hands of one political party. It would encourage the creation of as many competitive districts as possible.

But the definition of "as possible" is a little complicated.

Under the federal Voting Rights Act, map-drawers are forbidden from diluting the strength of minority voters. The drawers have generally found that they stay out of trouble with the U.S. Supreme Court if — without going to extremes — they maximize the number of districts that are likely to elect black representatives.

Ohio Republicans have been happy to do this. The Dayton area's situation demonstrates why. The region sends three blacks to Columbus, but those are the only Democrats. Limiting the number of Democrats is the GOP goal.

So the Democrats in Columbus have no power. The editorial below, about the Republican leaders needing Democratic votes, highlights a *very* rare exception. When was the last time you heard of any Dayton-area Democrat having any major impact on policy?

Under Reform Ohio Now's proposed constitutional amendment, anyone could submit maps for the state to adopt. The winning maps, basically, would be those that offer the most political competition, consistent with certain rules.

One of rules would be the Voting Rights Act. Complying with that would require maintaining some district in which minorities have great power. Such districts would be considered Democratic.

But contestants would lose

points if they didn't also set aside the same number of safe Republican districts.

Then competitive districts would have to be carved out of the rest of the state.

The plan offers a lot to minorities. Take the Columbus area. Franklin County is Democratic. Yet all three U.S. House districts that reach into that county are locked in the hands of Republicans, because they are controlled by voters outside the county.

Under the new rules, any county that is big enough to have a complete congressional district — as Franklin is — would get one. Given that the mayor of Columbus is black, the new representative could easily be black.

Speaking of Mayor Michael Coleman: People used to assume that, to be elected, a black politician needed a black district, or one with nearly a black majority. No more. Columbus is only about 25 percent black.

Ask Secretary of State J. Kenneth Blackwell whether a black politician can get white votes. Or ask Sen. Barack Obama of Illinois. (True, his opponent in 2004 was black, but everybody thought Mr. Obama would beat anybody.)

The Ohio Republicans are putting up Lt. Gov. Jennette Bradley for state treasurer without worrying much that her race will hurt her.

So there shouldn't be much concern that small reductions in the number of black voters in some districts would be catastrophic to black politicians.

All incumbents — black and white — are likely to be nervous about change, just because they're in office under the current rules. But the change that Ohio voters might be asked to consider in November would, on balance advance the interests of minorities in Ohio, not set them back.

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FOUNDED IN 1898,
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OPINION