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House Democrats refused yesterday to approve a GOP plan that could have dramatically altered Ohio's politically gerrymandered districts by putting the mapping process in the hands of a bipartisan, independent panel.

Because they are in the minority at the Statehouse, it was a rare opportunity for Democrats to control the outcome of a vote on a bill. And then the Democrats rejected their own similar plan, prompting Republicans to accuse Democrats of putting politics ahead of good government.

"If you believe that one-party control of state government is wrong, as I've heard people comment about many times, you cannot vote 'no' and preserve the very system that created it," Speaker Jon A. Husted, R-Kettering, said during a rare floor speech. "If you do, you lose the right to complain about it."

Rep. Kevin DeWine, a Fairborn Republican and sponsor of the measure, said it would create a more fair, open process of drawing districts, which could have a significant effect on political-party control and the number of competitive races Ohio voters see for Congress and the legislature.

But Democrats argued that the Republican plan is flawed, placing too little emphasis on creating competitive districts. They also said that forcing federal districts to be wholly contained inside of Ohio's largest urban counties would pack Democratic votes into too few districts, leaving Republicans with an overall advantage.

"This is folly and will lead to far too many safe districts where incumbents are protected," said Rep. Steve Driehaus, D-Cincinnati.

Republicans used a procedural maneuver to force two votes on the measure. When the GOP-crafted plan didn't receive the required three-fifths majority (60 votes) to place a proposed constitutional amendment on the ballot, the bill was reconsidered and amended so it was identical to a Democratic idea from March 2005.

When Democrats realized what was happening, they called for an immediate adjournment, which was defeated.

All Democrats except for Dixie Allen of Dayton voted against the proposals.

Husted said if Democrats didn't like the GOP plan, he wanted to give them the chance to approve one that all of them had co-sponsored.

"It was clear to me that this was not an objection to substance, it was an objection based on politics," Husted said. "That is the most disappointing factor of this."

Driehaus, the sponsor of the Democratic plan, said that based on what he's learned since introducing it 14 months ago, he thinks it has many shortcomings.

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"It hasn't had any public input," he said. Yesterday's sudden vote "was nothing more than a stunt."

Groups such as Ohio Citizen Action and the League of Women Voters of Ohio have given high marks to the Republican-crafted measure, though they wanted to fix some details. Top officials with Reform Ohio Now, a Democratic-leaning coalition that unsuccessfully pushed for redistricting reform last year, also favored it.

It called for the creation of a seven-member, bipartisan panel to draw state and federal lines. Currently, the legislature draws the congressional maps, and the state Apportionment Board, consisting of the governor, auditor, secretary of state and two lawmakers, draws state legislative lines.

Leaders of both parties in the House insisted they are committed to a redistricting plan that tries to take politics out of the process.

To get a plan on the ballot this year, it must be approved by Aug. 9. Each chamber could return from its summer break to pass the measure, though Senate leaders have shown less interest in such a proposal.

DeWine said it's vital to act now, when neither party knows who will win key statewide races in November.

Driehaus insisted, "This isn't dead."

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