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Reformers face skeptics in both parties on map-drawing

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Come let us reason together. A group of political groups has issued that call on a subject that we in newspapers often call "redistricting," for want of a word that isn't such a drag.

Redistricting is the once-a-decade process of redrawing those maps you see occasionally that show which legislators represent which cities, neighborhoods, etc. It is hugely important - if elections matter at all - because the lines can often be drawn to guarantee the dominance of a particular party. Ohio's current rules put virtually all power to draw the maps in the hands of one party or the other in any given decade. This is an absurd relic of a time when people didn't understand the power the map-drawers have.

Plans are afoot to change the rules, giving the two parties equal power and creating a mapdrawing commission that has several members who are not appointed by party leaders. The plan was worked out by a thoroughly bipartisan group.

Seems a like a pretty reasonable idea, right? Fair's fair and all. But the proposal has run into problems in the Legislature.

So the League of Women Voters of Ohio, Common Cause and Ohio Citizen Action - trying to salvage the proposal, or a version of it - have invited leaders of both parties and both houses to talk about the subject for a few hours next week, along with some media people.

This list of sponsoring organizations will cause some people to suspect that reform is a liberal cause. After all, Ohio Citizen Action, which calls itself the state's largest environmental organization, gives a Howard Metzenbaum award.

However, the general reform these people are pushing was recently approved overwhelmingly by Republicans in the state House of Representatives. It was rejected by Democrats there. (They mattered for once, because the measure needed a super-majority.)

House Democrats saw some sort of Republican ploy. They noted that the measure was fostered by the Republican House leadership, and was not worked out with Democrats currently serving in the House. They noted, too, that Republicans are facing an election in which they might lose control of the redistricting process (under the current rules) and are worried.

And some of the Democrats simply said that the Republicans don't propose constructive reform out of the kindness of their hearts. There's got to be a catch.

These critics also pointed to specific aspects of the proposed reform that, they said, favor the Republicans. Getting into those specifics could make this discussion technical. That could obscure the big truths.

Specifically: The proposal was worked out with the Democrats who were behind a dramatic reform proposal on last November's ballot. This measure cannot reasonably be dismissed as a partisan Republican ploy.

Maybe the three organizations calling the meeting (which were not particularly involved in the drafting process) can play a useful role. House Democrats can't suspect them of trying to make life easier for Republicans.

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Of course, there's a possible down side to this meeting. If some House Democrats do get on board, you can bet that some Republicans in the Senate will be confirmed in their suspicions that the whole thing is a Democratic plot.

So political problems abound. And time is short. Under current law, redistricting of state legislative maps is controlled by whichever party controls two of three jobs after a census: governor, secretary of state and auditor. All three are on the November ballot, with no incumbents running. After November, one party is likely to see itself as in the driver's seat and is unlikely to be interested in reform.

On top of that, the Legislature has finished its session. It could be reconvened very briefly in August. But getting something through both houses then would be remarkable.

Still, it's worth a try. If all sides take the reason-together session seriously and show good faith, who knows?

If you accept the basic idea that redistricting should not be done by only one party, the case is overwhelming that the legislators should be willing to settle for something they find imperfect. The general proposal before them is a dramatic improvement over the current system. And the time is now.

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