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Let's see the map



6:27 p.m. CDT, May 11, 2011

The once-a-decade process of redistricting is usually framed as a struggle between Democrats and **Republicans**. The party that holds the upper hand gets to stack the new legislative maps in its favor, carving out districts designed to maximize its numbers at the expense of the other party.

This year, lawmakers have had plenty of input from the outside — from ordinary citizens who jumped at the chance to help draw the maps. Those people are eager to see if their voices were heard.

Democrats are holding the crayons this time. They control both houses of the **Illinois General Assembly** and the governor's mansion. They can approve a map with no interference from Republicans, as long as they finish by the end of the regular legislative session.

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But they're under a lot of pressure to release the maps well before a vote is taken. The citizen mapmakers want to study the drafts and weigh in again. And May is ticking away.

A state law championed last year by Sen. **Kwame Raoul**, D-Chicago, requires lawmakers to hold public hearings before passing a map. It also requires them to create districts that respect racial and ethnic communities, instead of splitting them haphazardly to build safe districts for incumbents.

So redistricting committees from both houses spent months touring the state, listening to public testimony about how the maps should be drawn. Citizens were invited to submit their own maps. Lawmakers even provided the tools.

But the endgame is what matters most. Will the final maps reflect all that earnest collaboration? Or will lawmakers say, "Thank you for your time," and pass the incumbent protection map they've been working on behind closed doors?

The public exercise has provided lawmakers and citizens with a healthy appreciation for the challenges of drawing a fair map. Redistricting is tedious and time-consuming work, complicated by many competing agendas.

The **Illinois** Constitution requires districts to be compact and contiguous — yeah, we know, that hardly describes the current map — and roughly equal in population. The new law also requires lawmakers to try to keep racial and ethnic communities intact, even if they aren't big enough to constitute a majority. If the population is large enough to influence an election, it shouldn't be split.

At the hearings, lawmakers heard from groups who complained that the last redistricting map busted their neighborhoods, and therefore their voting power, into many bits. Chinatown, for example, was parceled into four House districts.

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But doing right by those communities is easier said than done. Some neighborhoods are diverse enough that they could be included in separate districts proposed by Latino and Asian groups, for example. At least three groups worked on maps meant to assure fair representation for the state's growing Hispanic population; each of them has its own approach to that objective. No, you can't please all of the people all of the time.

That's a big reason almost everyone who testified at the hearings pleaded for a chance to weigh in again before lawmakers vote on a map. Many of the maps submitted by the public were collaborative projects, crafted by coalitions and/or negotiated between neighbors with competing goals. The groups want the chance to work out similar conflicts in the legislature's draft maps. That takes time.

But the law that mandated hearings doesn't require them to take place after the maps are drawn. That leaves the door open for party leaders to hustle the maps through both houses at the last minute, along with every other bill they don't want to take heat for.

As chairman of the Senate's redistricting committee, Raoul has committed to holding hearings as soon as the maps are ready, though there's no word on when that will be. Majority Leader Barbara Flynn Currie, who chairs the House committee, is making no promises. May is a busy month in Springfield, with the budget and everything else coming down to the wire. "We can't make any guarantees at this point," she said.

Here's the thing about that May deadline: It's baloney. The constitution gives the General Assembly until June 30 to pass a map before a bipartisan commission takes over. Once the regular legislative session ends, though, it takes a supermajority to pass a bill. The Democrats don't have that many votes. That's what the May 31 deadline is about.

Revealing and voting on the map at the last minute will show that keeping Republicans out of the drawing room is far more important to Democrats than letting the public in.

Let's see the map.

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851-520017

rick7890 at 8:52 AM May 12, 2011

Why should any "group" be protected? What is this affirmative action for voters? Sounds racist to me.

wedriscoll at 6:19 AM May 12, 2011

Why do I think that the map will be kind of like Nancy Pelosi's take on the health care bill. "Let's vote on the map, so once we accept it, we can see what it looks like"?

SnarkyAkimbo at 6:07 AM May 12, 2011

Just go court now, it's where it will end up anyway. No one believes that actual citizen input matters at this point.

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