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Minorities press for representation in redistricting

Lawmakers urged to avoid splitting up minority communities

BY PATRICK YEAGLE

Minority groups in Springfield and statewide are calling for better representation as the Illinois legislature mulls redistricting plans.

At an Illinois Senate Redistricting Committee hearing April 4, groups representing African Americans, Asian Americans and Muslims shared concerns about "packing, cracking and stacking" – gerrymandering tactics that dilute minority voting power. Illinois draws new electoral districts every 10 years following census counts, and the process can affect election outcomes and much more.

Teresa Haley, president of the Springfield branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) told lawmakers her organization expects to see districts drawn in which people of color can be elected more readily.

"We want to make sure that our districts are represented well, in terms of the minority community," Haley says. "We want to make sure there is no packing, stacking and cracking going on in Illinois. That is very important."

Packing is the practice of bundling more minorities into one district than are necessary to win elections, in order to reduce their influence in other districts, while cracking refers to splitting small numbers of minorities into various districts to dilute their voting power. Stacking is the practice of concentrating low-income minority populations in districts with high-income white populations with the expectation that low-income populations are less likely to vote en masse.

Archie Lawrence, former president and current second vice president of Springfield NAACP told lawmakers that districts including Springfield should be drawn to increase the diversity of local representation in state government.

"It is especially important that areas such as Springfield that we have as diverse a representation as possible," he says. "Often times, we're overlooked since we're downstate districts, and we don't get our fair share of having an opportunity to elect a minority, especially to the Statehouse."

But ethnic minorities aren't the only ones vying for representation in the redistricting process. Ahlam Jbara, associate director of the Council of Islamic Organizations of Greater Chicago, says there are about 400,000 Muslims in Illinois, including Arabs, African Americans, Asians, Latinos, Eastern Europeans and more. Despite the large number and diversity of Illinois Muslims, Jbara says the religious minority lacks representation in government and access to appropriate social services.

"The division of our community through redistricting will erase our voices and make it even more challenging to organize on our common issues," Jbara says. "This will in turn affect our abilities to conduct voter registration...campaigns like census outreach, voter education, mobilizing our community around issues like racial profiling and education."

Nia Odeoti-Hassan, a member of the Islamic Society of Greater Springfield, estimates there are about 400 Muslim families in the Springfield area. That adds up to about 2,500 to 3,000 Muslims total, she says, because Muslim families tend to be large. Many Muslim families come to Springfield for education in the medical field, according to Hassan, who says that most Muslim families live in Springfield's west side or in Chatham.

Currently, Springfield is split between two state representatives, Republicans Rich Brauer and Raymond Poe, as well as being divided between three different U.S. Representatives – Republicans John Shimkus, Aaron Schock and Bobby Schilling. While there are African Americans and Latinos in the Illinois Senate and House, as well as the U.S. House, there are currently no African Americans in the U.S. Senate.

The Illinois Voting Rights Act of 2011, which passed the Illinois General Assembly in January and took effect in March, requires lawmakers to create special districts to achieve better minority representation.

The act calls for crossover districts, in which a minority group is large enough to elect its own representation with help from majority group voters; coalition districts, in which various minority groups can unite to elect a candidate; or influence districts, in which a minority group can influence an election even if its preferred candidate does not win.

"If you divide communities of interest, you promote social and cultural ailments," said Mujahid Ghazi, president of the Chicago-based Asian Broadcasting Network, speaking at the redistricting hearing. "If you keep them together, you promote a healthy environment for their social and communal growth."

For more information on the redistricting process, visit www.ilsenateredistricting.com.

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