

## Let the People Speak on Nonpartisan Redistricting

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***Senator Kathleen Vinehout has heard from many people who are clamoring for the state to change the current partisan redistricting process to one that is nonpartisan. She is the lead Senate author on a bill that calls for an advisory referendum on this issue. Republicans have not yet scheduled a hearing for the bill.***

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MADISON - “Look at this map,” the man directed. “There are lots of squiggly lines in Wisconsin and Illinois but Iowa has real neat boxes.” The maps he showed me were the lines of Congressional Districts in the three states.

For many years Iowa has used a nonpartisan process to draw the district lines for state and US elected officials. Wisconsin, controlled by Republicans, and Illinois, controlled by Democrats, still uses the old partisan system of drawing lines.

What seems to be an archaic state activity comes up more and more in my discussions with voters. The word “gerrymandered” has found its way into the Wisconsin lexicon in a big way.

Some say the word has its origin in an 1812 election when a Massachusetts newspaper accused then Governor Elbridge Gerry of creating district lines to help his party dominate the state Senate. One district in the map resembled a salamander. Combining Gerry and (sala)mander became a popular expression to describe the drawing of legislative districts to gain a political advantage.

Two hundred years later the process dominates Wisconsin political discussions.

During 2011 a law firm was hired by Republican leaders to maximize Republican advantage. Some lawmakers signed secrecy agreements under threat to see their new districts before the proposal was made public. Subsequent elections demonstrated the effectiveness of the maps in maintaining a Republican majority.

Statewide editorial boards criticized the process and called for public hearings on a bill I cosponsored to implement a nonpartisan process – like that used to create the neat boxes on the Iowa map. Republicans are loath to hold public hearings to change the process. They feel they won the right to draw districts and correctly counter that Democrats did not change the process when they had control.

A group of freshmen representatives, led by Eau Claire Representative Dana Wachs and Wausau Representative Mandy Wright are traveling the state holding public hearings to bring attention to a proposal that would put the nonpartisan redistricting question on the November 2014 general election ballot.

Announcing their efforts, Representative Wachs stated, “Attempts to fix our flawed, partisan system of redistricting have been ignored in the Legislature, so we feel that now is the time to give Wisconsin voters the chance to speak up.” I support this approach and signed on as lead author of this bill in the Senate.

Government reform groups suggested partisan redistricting is one cause of the current hyper-partisan environment. Jay Heck of Common Cause recently told the Chippewa Herald, “The current process has produced too many uncompetitive general elections in which the winners are really determined in partisan primary elections. This has often allowed the most extreme partisans from their respective parties to be elected. Bipartisan compromise becomes virtually nonexistent. Instead, we have bitter partisanship, paralysis and polarization.”

Representative Wright recently told Wisconsin Radio Network, “I actually have an unusual district, where’s it’s basically 50-50, and I have to be very conscious of listening to both sides of the aisle, and really actively seeking out ways that we can work together, and I appreciate that, and I think it’s a good thing but it’s never going to be resolved if I don’t have more of my colleagues that feel that same sort of pressure.”

Judging by the letters I've received, citizens' support for a nonpartisan process runs deep. Some of those letters are sharply worded and deeply critical of the current process. For example, an Eau Claire man recently wrote me saying, "How can one defend a process that was done in the dark, in secret (even to having legislators sign secrecy contracts) at a cost of millions to taxpayers of Wisconsin, divided the citizens of Wisconsin and more - all for one and only one purpose - to allow representatives to choose their voters rather than the other way around for obvious political gain!"

Wisconsin does not allow direct legislation by ballot initiative – meaning a vote by the public would be advisory to the Legislature. But a lopsided public vote in favor of nonpartisan redistricting would send a strong message to elected officials they'd do well to heed.

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