

**Title: Illinois' Opportunity to Draw Its Way Out of Gerrymandering Mess**

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In Illinois, victorious politicians secretly pick the voters, not the other way around. Political leaders, the ultimate arbiters of redistricting, game the system by designing districts to produce the results they favor.

Gerrymandering is easy to pull off. All the pols need to do is jam voters who are likely to support the opposition into throwaway districts to give the other side a few huge, but ultimately insignificant, wins. Such “packing” is complemented by “cracking,” spreading opposing groups around several districts where they will never muster enough voting power to score a victory.

“Safe” districts don't require their representatives to be strictly accountable to their constituents or responsive to their concerns. Yet, in 2012, 96 percent of incumbent Illinois legislators won their general-election races, almost half of them never facing a challenger. That's hardly a democratic outcome. When incumbents are challenged, it's more likely to be by extreme ideologues in their own party than centrist candidates from the opposition. Inevitably, politics is further polarized and the opportunity for compromise irretrievably lost beyond sensible lawmakers' reach.

With Illinois' checkered history of official corruption and political shenanigans, the case for redistricting reform is irresistible. And the power to make it happen is in the voters' hands.

An organization called Yes for Independent Maps has launched a nonpartisan grass-roots campaign to put a constitutional amendment on the November 2014 ballot. If Yes secures some 300,000 signatures by May 4 and the Illinois Independent Redistricting Amendment eventually becomes law, legislative mapping would be shifted to an independent commission. The commission's members would be screened by a nonpartisan applicant review panel appointed by the auditor general to ensure they have no conflicts of interest and are qualified on the basis of analytical skills, impartiality, fairness and diversity.

The district boundaries they draw would be contiguous, substantially equal in population and respectful of the geographic integrity of communities sharing common social and economic interests. The commission wouldn't be permitted to favor one political party over another or diminish the ability of a racial or language minority community to elect the candidates of its choice.

Redistricting would be transparent and bipartisan. Every map would need to garner the approval of at least seven of the commission's 11 members, including two Democrats, two Republicans and two unaffiliated members.

Illinois voters should support redistricting reform. It will put them back in charge, where they belong.



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