

Mich. groups eye redistricting ballot drive

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Lansing — Buoyed by a recent U.S. Supreme Court decision, advocates of overhauling how Michigan draws legislative and congressional seats plan to raise public awareness about redistricting in preparation for a potential 2016 ballot initiative.

The ruling, issued in the last week, upheld the authority of states to strip lawmakers' authority to set congressional district maps once a decade. Arizona voters had created an independent commission in 2000 to take the politically charged job out of the hands of the Legislature.

The League of Women Voters and Common Cause, groups that advocate for fairer maps, are researching other states' redistricting systems and conducting polling before ramping up educational efforts with help from local civic groups.

"That's a big undertaking. The public doesn't know much about it. They don't know what you're talking about when you say redistricting. They don't see the significance of it in their daily lives," said Sue Smith, a vice president for the League of Women Voters of Michigan.

She said gerrymandering, the drawing of district lines to benefit a political party, is a problem no matter which side is in power because Michigan ends up with representation not reflecting its population. If done well, gerrymandering can protect incumbents and maximize the number of districts in which one party has a majority of voters.

Republicans controlled the redistricting process in both 2001 and 2011. The GOP has a 9-5 edge in Michigan's U.S. House delegation. Republicans enjoy 63-47 and 27-11 majorities in the state House and Senate. State Democratic Party Chairman Lon Johnson said the court decision "paves the way for Michigan to explore the option of a fairer system that better reflects voter sentiment in our state." Organizers of a constitutional amendment would have to collect about 315,000 valid voter signatures by next July to put the measure to a public vote in November 2016.

Some experts doubt that a commission would remove partisanship from the process. Others say geography may be as responsible as gerrymandering for the GOP advantage.

Democratic voters are more clustered into dense urban areas while Republicans are dispersed in rural and suburban areas.

"That accounts a little bit for the disparity in total votes cast versus number of seats achieved," said GOP strategist Bob LaBrant, referencing Democrats' complaints that they win more votes statewide than Republicans only to be outnumbered in Congress and the Legislature. He noted that Democrats controlled the state House from 2007 through 2010 despite a GOP map.

LaBrant, who has been involved in Michigan's redistricting process for decades, said key components of any revamp would include who would create lines instead of legislators and the criteria to be followed. In defending the current system, he said legislative maps have abided by standards such as respecting city and county boundaries to the extent possible.

The Detroit area has some "ugly"- and "adventurous"-looking congressional districts such as the 11th and 14th — held by two newcomers, Republican Dave Trott and Brenda Lawrence — LaBrant said. But he said that is because Detroit lost a quarter of its population over a decade and lawmakers needed to keep intact districts where minorities are a majority of residents under the federal Voting Rights Act.

"Any petition drive to amend the Michigan Constitution would come under a great deal of scrutiny," he said. "Just because you get it on the ballot doesn't mean it's going to pass."

Thirteen states have commissions with varying roles in drawing congressional lines, an approach endorsed by the Supreme Court. Twenty-one states use a commission in their redistricting process, including 13 where the panels have primary responsibility for drawing up plans.

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