

Editorial: In redistricting process, show your work

Detroit Free Press

12:38 AM, Mar. 31, 2011

With the release of census tract-level population data from the 2010 census last week, Michigan lawmakers can officially begin their decennial task of carving up the state into congressional and state legislative districts.

They ought to make the process for doing that public. They ought to allow for people around the state to give them feedback about the districts they propose. And they ought to explain, for voters who are often mystified by the choices that lead to the line-drawing, how and why they make the decisions that lead to the redistricting choices. This is, after all, the people's business. It should at least be transparent.

Unfortunately, Michigan (like a lot of other states) has a pretty bad track record for this kind of openness. In 2001, the final maps proposed by the Republican majorities in both houses of the Legislature were unveiled at the last minute, after "shell" bills had been circulated publicly with Democratic maps that had no chance of being adopted.

No doubt, legislators had reason to want to hide what they were doing. The favoritism shown to incumbents, combined with the efforts to maximize the creation of "safe" districts for the majority party, have made re-districting more a process of politicians choosing their voters, instead of the other way around.

Indeed, a Center for Michigan study recently found that only 16 of 110 seats in the Michigan House are truly competitive. In the Michigan Senate, only 6 of 38 seats ever changed party hands in the last decade.

That's partially a reflection of housing patterns -- think of the over whelmingly Democratic nature of Detroit, or the overwhelmingly Republican nature of some jurisdictions in western Michigan. But lawmakers accentuate the partisanship when they gerrymander. Right now, the process favors Republicans. But when Democrats had power in the state, they did the same thing.

The first step toward making the process more reflective of voter interests is dragging it out into the light. Leaders of both houses should make sure that their redistricting plans (the ones they're likely to actually pass) get posted on the Legislature's Web site for 30 days before any votes get cast. They should commit to holding committee hearings during which they can receive feed-back on the posted plans, and should hold town hall meetings around the state. And they need to provide explanations with the maps they draw.

A collaborative of nonprofits (including the League of Women Voters, Common Cause and others) has asked leaders in Lansing to embrace that openness. We'd

hope state Sen. Joe Hune and Rep. Pete Lund, the chairs of the legislative redistricting committees, would oblige. It would help if Senate Majority Leader Randy Richardville and House Speaker Jase Bolger added their voices. Speaker Pro Tempore John Walsh has long been an advocate of redistricting reform; he, too, could help move things along.

It's time to make redistricting more the people's process than something politicians do to voters.

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