

RECENT EVENTS PROMPT NEW ATTENTION TO GERRYMANDERING

Concern about the impact of gerrymandering on public life is alive and well. In Ohio, activists were discouraged when voters rejected a proposed constitutional amendment last year designed to reform the state's redistricting process. However, actions by the Ohio General Assembly remain a constant reminder that legislative districts carved out in a highly partisan fashion fail to provide fair and balanced representation.



Then the sixteen day federal government shutdown and the near default of the national debt dominated the news. Many people began to ask why Republicans in the House of Representatives stuck with a strategy that was so overwhelmingly unpopular with the general public. The news media began to point out that most of these GOP House members (especially Representatives who were identified with the Tea Party) came from Districts that were gerrymandered to make their seats quite secure. In fact, many of these districts were drawn in such a partisan manner that their present Congressmen truly represent the views of their constituents.

One of the more astute commentaries about gerrymandering and the recent federal shutdown appeared in The Economist, a British weekly news magazine. In a piece entitled "Why Do Politicians Gerrymander?" this publication provided a brief history of gerrymandering in the U.S. and how the Constitution leaves the power to draw legislative districts in the hands of the states. The article points out that several states including California and Iowa created non-partisan redistricting processes in order to end the abuses of gerrymandering.

The article also points to a reason why both political parties may begin to question the extreme gerrymandering that currently prevails in so many states. When a situation exists where no competition will occur in the general election, then the primary becomes the real contest. An extreme minority such as the Tea Party can often organize effectively to defeat a moderate candidate in a primary.

Meanwhile in Ohio, redistricting reform has re-emerged in a different venue. The Constitutional Modernization Commission heard testimony in Columbus last week on potential changes in the state's redistricting process. This body is charged with advising the General Assembly about useful and appropriate amendments to Ohio's Constitution, and the fact that it is looking at redistricting is significant.

At last week's hearing, Secretary of State Jon Husted promoted changing the current system, and he proposed a "bipartisan" process that would produce "compact and competitive" legislative districts. Husted, who actively opposed the 2012 constitutional reform, urged the Commission to prepare language that could be taken to the voters as early as November 2014. He concluded his testimony with the statement: "This is an issue we want to deal with sooner rather than later."

Catherine Turcer, Common Cause/Ohio's legislative consultant, attended the hearing, and remarked that Husted's testimony was "a hopeful sign!" More public testimony will be heard by the Commission in a post-Thanksgiving session.