

WISCONSIN CATHOLIC CONFERENCE

EYE ON THE CAPITOL

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NEW INTEREST IN AN OLD TOPIC: DRAWING LEGISLATIVE DISTRICTS

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We have all read about growing public frustration with deadlock in Washington, bitter partisanship in both Washington and state capitals, and the lack of civility in politics. Increasingly, the conversation on these topics has triggered renewed interest in an old subject – the process by which states redraw Congressional and legislative districts after each census.

The power to draw Congressional and legislative districts is one of the most important in our political system. This process gets to the very essence of how we determine who will hold our legislators accountable for their decisions. The power to draw districts does much more than define which individuals may win office. That power can also decide which party controls a legislature or Congress for much of the next ten years. And, the power to draw maps can expand or diminish the influence of communities or interest groups within a district.

Since the U.S. began, this process of redrawing districts has rested with state legislatures. It has always been a political process. Partisan interest in control has long trumped the public interest in competitive districts. But in the last 50 years two developments have made the system even less accountable.

First, for much of our history state legislatures were largely part time jobs. While many good people were career politicians in the best sense, public service was not the principal source of their livelihood. Today, most states have full-time legislators and legislative salaries are often the primary source of their income. This is a good thing, for it opens public service to more people of modest financial means. But it also sharpens the incentive for lawmakers to draw districts to suit their personal needs.

The second major change occurred in the 1960s when the US Supreme Court ruled that Congressional districts and state legislative districts must be equal in population. This was a positive change. For it ended the practice by which sparsely populated rural areas enjoyed greater representation than densely populated cities.

But the principle of “one person one vote” came at a price. It allowed legislators to take the practice of “gerrymandering” districts to a new level. At statehood, even as Wisconsin’s founders gave politicians the power to draw legislative districts, they placed strict limits on how they could do it. Legislative districts had to be as compact and contiguous as practicable. No assembly district could cross a county line (although two or more whole counties could be part of the same district). Gerrymandering happened, but there were limits as to how creative the map-drawers could be.

Today, there are no such limits. Districts need not be compact or contiguous. Counties, cities and neighborhoods can be divided. So long as the districts are equal or nearly equal in population, they are acceptable to the courts.

As a result, where voters used to pick the people who represent them, now our leaders, armed with computer technology and census data, can pick their own districts. And we are living with the results.

All of this has ignited interest in reforming the map drawing process. There is growing interest in the “Iowa model.” The Hawkeye State has taken congressional and legislative redistricting out of the hands of legislators and turned it over to a nonpartisan commission. As a result, Iowa’s congressional districts are more competitive at elections and largely free of the contorted shapes and community-dividing boundaries that have become so common in the district maps of most other states.

Several legislators have offered legislation to bring the Iowa model to Wisconsin. Their proposals, Senate Bill 163 and Assembly Bill 185, are proving popular with civic groups and newspaper editorial writers. As one might expect, the idea has received a cool reception in the Capitol to this point.

As long as we imperfect human beings govern ourselves, the methods by which we do so will also be imperfect. But we can improve these methods. When it comes to redistricting, more and more people are insisting that we do so.