



Wednesday, January 15, 2020

GOP Could Hold Thin Edge After Redistricting Commission Redraws Maps

Republican candidates running to retain or fill open seats could still have a slight advantage in future elections even after a citizen-led commission redraws the state's legislative district maps next year, a panel of experts said Wednesday at a forum on redistricting.

The reason, panelists said, could lie in the state's geographical distribution of voters, which sees large pockets of Democratic voters concentrated in cities and Republican voters spread apart in rural areas.

Still, each panelist at the event hosted by the Michigan State University Institute of Public Policy and Social Research said a citizen-drawn map would be inherently fairer to voters and the two leading political parties than Michigan's current district maps.

The discussion also delved into the complications the process might experience along the way, like applicants lying about their political affiliations or a lack of clear population data if participation is remarkably low in the 2020 census.

Panelists included [Secretary of State Jocelyn Benson](#), IPPSR Director Matt Grossmann, MSU Associate Professor Jon Eguia and Nancy Wang, executive director of Voters Not Politicians.

Ms. Wang's group led the 2018 ballot initiative that successfully changed the state's Constitution so a commission of 13 citizens could redraw Michigan's legislative maps.

Each panelist gave a brief presentation and later answered questions from the audience. It was Mr. Eguia who touched on voter distribution and the natural advantage Republicans hold over Michigan politics.

In his presentation, Mr. Eguia said the signs of gerrymandering over decades of Republican rule in Lansing were hard to identify by a quick glance at its legislative

maps, and that's likely because of the way Republican and Democratic voters are distributed throughout the state.

Using data from the 2016 presidential election, Mr. Eguia illustrated what it would look like if the maps were drawn proportionately and legislative seats were tallied by which party won each county. In this model, Mr. Eguia said that Republicans hold a slight natural advantage.

Even with influence over the process of drawing legislative districts, which helped lend Republicans a clear artificial advantage, the state legislative map appears to somewhat align with the way Democratic voters in major cities and Republican voters in rural areas are spread throughout the state.

"If you just look at the U.S. Congressional map of Michigan, it's truly bizarre, a preschooler could tell you this is wrong," he said. "Michigan Senate and House maps visually do not look as bad for whatever reason. But when you do the eyeball test and numerical (computations), indeed the congressional map is indefensible."

Furthermore, Mr. Eguia said that the state's Constitution calls for maps that "...shall not provide a disproportionate advantage" to any political party, and if that's the law, he argued the forthcoming commission should continue to preserve any and all natural advantages.

In practice, Mr. Eguia said, fairer maps based on natural pre-existing advantages could enable a GOP win in an election with a tied vote share. In turn, Democrats looking for a seat tie would need a smaller share of votes than what the party needs now to balance the outcome of an election.

As an overview, Mr. Grossmann dove into an historical look at gerrymandering practices in the state and its proportional spread, while Ms. Benson explained the three-phase process of redrawing legislative districts and the process by which the commission would be selected.

The Department of State is in the process of collecting applications and holding community workshops to garner a pool of diverse applicants.

At least 1,000 applications have been returned out of the 250,000 applications Ms. Benson said were sent to registered voters randomly selected from the state's qualified voter file. The department will collect applications until June 1.

The second phase will consist of eliminating incomplete applications or unqualified applicants from the pool after July 1, selecting 60 applications from people who self-identified their party affiliations and 80 from a pool of politically unaffiliated applicants.

The commission, when convened, will be made up of four Democrats, four Republicans and five politically unaffiliated citizens, such as independent voters or those who identify as members of minority parties, Ms. Benson said at the forum.

Those selected to sit on the commission will not only "help lead Michigan drawing our natural future," but also will receive monetary compensation of about \$40,000, Ms. Benson added.

Ms. Wang's presentation was cut short for time, but stressed the importance of transparency in elections, and how her group's initiative sought to restore constitutional fairness.

When asked if they were concerned about lackluster census participation, each panelist said they were confident in the commission's ability to find additional population surveys that might assist them in creating accurate, proportional maps.

Ms. Benson was asked what the state was doing to verify if applicants were being forthright on their applications when disclosing political affiliations.

"The transparency of the process I think is important in that regard so people know that at the semi-finalist stage who has applied and how they have affiliated themselves," Ms. Benson said. "And there's an opportunity at that point for individuals to communicate with partisan legislative leaders on both sides of the aisle if they feel there's been some sort of misrepresentation, or to give the opportunity for the applicant to give more information about that.

"I think that's a check on the process, and the power that the legislative leaders have is critical for that reason."

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