

IN MY OPINION

Caroline Porter

The drive to revive

Anyone tired of uncompetitive Illinois State Representative elections? Gerrymandered districts? Lack of minority political representation? Rancor, partisanship and regionalism in the State House? In my column of September, 1999, I said that only 60 out of 118 State Representatives were contested in the 1998 general election. Those who did have competition won by an average of 66 percent of the vote. Since the end of proportional representation, or cumulative voting, in 1982, the House and House candidates have been tightly controlled by two political party leaders and their campaign war chests.

Gerrymandering at its worst is illustrated in Henry County, where there are four State Representative districts, with Republicans carefully carving out Democrat strongholds in the Northeast corner and dividing the town of Kewanee in half. Democrats would no doubt do the same if given the opportunity.

This wasn't always the case. When Illinois used cumulative voting to elect its House of Representatives, elections were significantly more competitive and citizens had a reason to be politically active. From 1972 to 1980, voters faced a non-contested ballot less than 5 percent of the time. The 1980 cutback amendment put an end to cumulative voting, taking with it fair and competitive elections, high voter turnout and the opportunity to elect political minorities like Chicago Republicans, Knox County Democrats and independent candidates. Cumulative voting was first proposed in 1870 by Joseph Medill, Republican editor of the Chicago Tribune, as a way to bring the heavily divided state back together after the Civil War by ensuring that both parties were represented everywhere in the State.

Cumulative voting was used from 1870 to 1980, and House districts each had three representatives. Each voter had three votes which they could distribute among up to

three candidates or give to one candidate. To win one of the three seats, a candidate only needed a third of the vote to get elected. The low threshold for victory makes it possible for independent candidates from both parties to get elected.

Under this system, Illinois became known for producing independent minded leaders like Paul Simon and Abner Mikva. In Knox County, we usually elected two Republicans and one Democrat, but at least those of us in the minority party were represented.

Okay, folks, it's time to stop complaining and take action. Legislators from both parties are sponsoring a Constitutional Amendment (HJRCA-4) which will allow voters to decide if Illinois should go back to cumulative voting, with three member districts. The amendment will not increase the size of the Illinois House, but will create 39 three member districts. This would result in 117 members, an odd number in case of a close vote.

What can you do? Write your State Representative and State Senator and let them know how you feel. Only a barrage of support will make them take notice. In this area write to State Representative Donald Moffitt, 5 Weinberg Arcade, Galesburg, IL 61401 or State Senator Carl Hawkinson, 4 Weinberg Arcade, Galesburg, IL 61401. If you want e-mail addresses or fax numbers, call their offices or check the internet.

The organization behind this movement is the Midwest Democracy Center, mdc@prairienet.org. Their phone number is (312) 587-7060. The co-chairs of the board are John Anderson, former Republican Congressman and Independent candidate for President and Abner Mikva, former Democratic Congressman and retired Federal Judge.

If you want to be heard, you have to say something. Now is the time.

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