

Best Redistricting Fix Ignored

By Roy Minet (Rev. 01/11/22)

Suppose we could write down a simple procedure to draw electoral districts. The procedure could be followed by anyone (or a computer) and the same impartially-drawn districts would be the result. Redistricting could be done quickly, at very low cost and without all the strife. Anyone could verify that districts have been correctly drawn.

The good news is that exactly such a procedure has already been written down and is available for use any time. The bad news is that it's extremely difficult to get our career politicians to adopt it because it would completely end their control over the redistricting process; bye-bye gerrymandering for good.

The name of the procedure is Precinct-Preserving Splitline or PPS. It has just five steps. The procedure could be enshrined in the Constitution and there would be no need to re-invent the "redistricting wheel" every ten years. PPS never splits voting precincts and so is non-disruptive.

PPS can be used to quickly and impartially draw equal-population districts very accurately for any number of districts and for any state. It can draw Congressional districts as well as state senate and house districts. It always draws districts that are contiguous and maximally compact.

To guarantee impartiality, only population data and geographic boundaries are used. No other data, such as registration or voting history, should ever be considered.

The Pennsylvania House State Government Committee spent many hours conducting hearings around the state this fall soliciting input from anyone regarding the redistricting process. About 90% of the testimony consisted of a parade of officials from everywhere pleading, "Oh, please, please, please don't split up *my* county, split up somebody else's instead!" What a waste of time.

However, at a hearing on October 13, 2021, the PPS solution was presented. Also submitted was a 17-district map for Pennsylvania's Congressional districts as drawn by the PPS procedure. Crickets.

The House State Government Committee also provided a website to allow all manner of input from anyone interested.

What a charade all this has turned out to be. The supreme solution, the result of applying the State Government Committee's wisdom to all of these voluminous inputs, apparently is House Bill 2207.

HB2207 would amend the Pennsylvania Constitution to set up a feel-good "citizens' commission" which would draw maps. Actually, HB2207 is a big load of smoke and mirrors to obscure the fact that all final decisions regarding the maps for state senate and house districts would still remain firmly in the hands of, yep, the House and Senate politicians.

As long as people (politicians or even citizens on a commission) are in control of a very complex and loosely defined process, the door is open to chicanery.

Some may object to using a rigid procedure to define districts because it will divide political entities (except for voting precincts). Face it: many such splits are absolutely unavoidable in order to accurately achieve equal district populations. If splitting some is OK, why would it be such a huge problem to split others? It could be validly argued that, if many must be split, it would be fairer to split all.

The notion that political entities should not be divided stems from a desire to not divide so-called “communities of interest” or “COI” which are presumed to coincide with political entities. There are two fundamental and *fatal* problems with attempting to keep communities of interest together; one is practical and the other is principle-based.

The fatal practical problem is that COI is a very nebulous and hard-to-define concept. Different people will have radically different definitions. COIs could be based on religious beliefs, political philosophies, single “hot-button” issues and countless other criteria. COIs as defined by different people can and will differ and overlap. Whose definition is to be honored? Not dividing COIs is a completely insoluble problem of impossible complexity. It’s an exercise in futility that obviously cannot be solved by mere mortals, whether they are state legislators or citizens on a commission.

The fatal problem of principle is that the only possible valid reason why anyone would want to keep a COI together is so that a representative who “truly represents their interests” can be reliably elected. The only way that can happen is if the members of that COI can outvote a smaller number of those in their district who do not share their same interests. That is the very definition of gerrymandering, which presumably we are trying to prevent!

The correct conclusion must be that redistricting should be *impartially* done in a way that does not *systematically* confer any advantage or disadvantage to any specific faction or COI. The PPS procedure can fix the redistricting process simply, elegantly, permanently and *correctly* in a way that cannot be corrupted by people.