Reapportionment: An Insiders Game
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Reapportionment is the constitutionally required process in which the physical maps of legislative districts are redrawn. It happens every 10 years after the new census. It is happening now, and it's happening quietly in the recesses of the state capital in Harrisburg - very quietly.

To most people reapportionment is one of those bureaucratic polysyllabic words that evoke a collective yawn. But to the politically sophisticated, it is also the quintessential insiders' game.

The re-mapping process is not limited to Pennsylvania. Each of the 50 states must reapportion itself in order to bring congressional representation into line with population changes that occurred nationally during the 1990s. In addition, each state must also reconfigure its state legislative representation to reflect changing populations within the state.

For Pennsylvania, reapportionment is not good news. The state’s feeble growth rate during the 1990s means it will lose two congressional seats - almost 10 percent of its federal representation-while most states will keep the representation they have, and a few fast-growing states like Florida and Texas will gain congressional seats. Nor is losing seats a new experience for Pennsylvania. In fact Pennsylvania has been losing seats after every decennial census since the 1930s. We have gone from a high of 36 congressional seats (in the 1930s) to the 19 we will have in 2002.

This makes reapportionment a zero sum game in Pennsylvania: The state as a whole loses influence relative to the rest of the country while within the state some counties and regions that are growing will gain influence at the expense of other portions of the state.

If reapportionment is bad news for Pennsylvania in general, it is simply awful news for Pennsylvania Democrats. State Democrats enter the reapportionment wars at desperate disadvantage to state Republicans. The latter hold all the cards. The state’s new congressional map will be drawn by the state legislature and approved by the governor---and Republicans control both houses of the legislature as well as the governor’s office.

This means the GOP can virtually dictate the new congressional boundaries to go into effect in 2002. For Democrats, this is equivalent to having to compete in a game in which the other side gets to pick the field, decide which fans will get in, and where the goal line will be.

Not surprisingly, reapportionment prospects for state Democrats look bleak, since the state congressional lineup--now eleven Republicans and ten Democrats--will likely drop to eight Democrats after reapportionment. Some observers believe it will be worse, with perhaps six or even fewer Democrats left in the congressional delegation after the 2002 election. Given the already moribund status of the Pennsylvania Democratic Party, a serious decline in its congressional strength looms ominously -- another sign of the death of the competitive two party system that has been a crucial component of modern Pennsylvania politics.
Political types love reapportionment. And why not? The gambits, the intrigues, the endless plots and counter-plots are all fodder for this decennial political drama. The stakes are high, the interest intense, and the outcomes always somewhat in doubt. Even the inevitable court suits, though typically unsuccessful, raise political pulses.

But while the political crowd relishes reapportionment, non-political types mostly ignore it. Largely shrouded from public view, reapportionment is seen by John and Sally Q. Public as a kind of mind-numbing political accounting-- byzantine, legalistic and only marginally important. This is regrettable. Reapportionment, far from being unimportant, is perhaps the single most important recurring event in political life. It determines who gets power, and what gets done with it for at least the next 10 years.

It also determines how much competition there will be in our politics. At present there is precious little. Last cycle for example all congressmen running for re-election won their contests, as did all but four state legislators. Longer term, the incumbent re-election rates for federal and state lawmakers in Pennsylvania hover between 95 percent and 100 percent. Increasingly true competition occurs only when an incumbent retires, producing an open seat election. In fact, play the state lottery for better odds than those for successfully challenging a Pennsylvania incumbent lawmaker.

Much of this lack of competition in elections is traceable to past decennial reapportionments that have produced district maps highly favorable to incumbents -usually by stacking Republican party supporters in one district and Democrat party supporters in another. If a business conspired to limit competition the way political decision-makers have limited political competition, government prosecutors would be screaming anti-trust and invoking racketeering statutes. But in Pennsylvania we just call it politics - the politics of reapportionment. And the courts of this land have made the politics of reapportionment perfectly legal.

So reapportionment may be of interest to only a handful of people, but it is important to all of us. Few have a role in actually drawing the new maps that will chart our political future for the next decade. But those maps and the changes they make will affect us all. Our state legislators who will actually do the job need to know that we care and that we are watching. Then we need to make sure that we do care-- and we do watch.

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