

Drawing the lines

HOW POLITICIANS SELECT THE VOTERS THEY WANT

By Stephen J. Farnsworth
March 22, 2009

Despite Virginia's status as a key swing state in the 2008 presidential elections, the state's many moderate voters will learn once again this fall how little voice they have in the Virginia House of Delegates.

The drawing of legislative lines by incumbent office-holders, perhaps the most powerful incumbent-protection device in all of politics, ensures that the real electoral action in many legislative districts will occur in June primaries and conventions, when the most far-left and far-right slivers of the electorate determine the Democratic and Republican nominees.

Those nominees, selected on the basis of their appeal to the most conservative Republicans and most liberal Democrats, immediately become almost certain winners or almost certain losers depending on the composition of the district in which they run.

The vast majority of the state's 100 House of Delegate districts are drawn to reduce--if not eliminate--genuine two-party competition. (Virginia's 40 state senators do not face the voters for another two years, but they, too, enjoy gerrymandered districts they drew themselves.) Democrats take care of themselves when they are in the majority, as do Republicans when they run the legislature. Regardless of which party is in control, the line-drawing process undermines the notion that citizens should have a real choice in November.

Sure, the Founding Fathers designed a system where We the People select our government officeholders. But in practice, the elected officials select the voters they want in their own districts, and modern computer technology leaves little room for genuine two-party competition or for the moderate voters who outnumber the activists of the left or the right in the Old Dominion.

'SWING' LOW

In truly competitive districts, political extremists who nominate a fellow extremist could face defeat if a sufficiently large bloc of voters were to favor a more moderate alternative. But today's sophisticated computer modeling nearly eliminates such "swing" districts in Virginia and in most other states.

Partisan line-drawers have pretty much ensured that more than 80 of the 100 seats in the House of Delegates will remain under the control of the same party after Virginia votes this November. (I am tempted to say at least 90 out of 100 won't change their partisan color, but the party nominees have yet to be selected and the fall elections are still some time away.)

The capacity of these sophisticated district-drawing computer programs to block serious out-of-party challenges is particularly amazing if one considers that the legislative boundaries were drawn in 2001, following the 2000 U.S. Census. A lot of people have moved into and out of legislative districts over the past eight years, but the lines still work pretty well to keep the incumbent party in place.

Citizens lose with such one-sided districts, whether they are located in Virginia or in any other state that lets the politicians design their own districts--which is nearly every state. Under gerrymandering, legislative control rests with a partisan majority more extreme than the electorate as a whole. Most citizens like politicians who are moderates and are willing to compromise, but the ideologues who come to power in one-sided districts usually aren't moderate and don't like to compromise.

With these gerrymandered legislative districts, safe-seat incumbents are not obligated to defend their policies or talk about future priorities. They can even skip debates against major-party challengers with little risk to their prospects for re-election. Candidates in one-sided districts need fear only intra-party competition, so they worry mostly about rivals who are more extreme than they are, further pushing these politicians away from the mainstream.

WHY BOTHER TO VOTE?

The lack of viable electoral competition in these ideologically drawn districts depresses turnout in state general elections, already a significant problem in Virginia. The state holds its legislative elections in odd-numbered years, and there is substantial voter drop-off from presidential election years. Gerrymandered districts make a bad turnout situation even worse.

Even though Virginians do not register to vote by party, party officials know more about individual voters and the precincts in which they live than one might suspect. Computer searches reveal who participates in a given party's primaries, how long they have had a mortgage, who gives money to whom, who belongs to the

National Rifle Association, and who contributes to liberal causes. To paraphrase the old Bob Dylan song, "You don't need party registration to know which way the wind blows" in a given legislative district.

Citizens who want more control over the process can push for legislation that takes the construction of legislative districts out of the hands of incumbent elected officials. The handful of states that do employ nonpartisan line-drawing systems, such as Iowa, have a relatively high number of competitive elections and higher voter turnout than the vast majority of states that allow the people who are going to be running in the new districts to say where the lines are going to be.

Prospects are not good for a nonpartisan line-drawing process in time for the redistricting process (in early 2011 following the 2010 U.S. Census). A legislative effort to reduce gerrymandering died in this year's session. Future proposals will be resisted by most state legislators (of both parties), who like facing only token opposition every other November.

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This column is reprinted from the Fredericksburg Free-Lance Star