

MAINE STATE LEGISLATURE

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BANGOR DAILY NEWS

A Tale of Two Districts

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Lawmakers soon will be faced with radically different plans for redrawing the boundary between the state's two congressional districts. One features straighter lines and a difference of only one person between the two districts — top priorities for the state's Republicans. It does, however, move about 360,000 people from one district to another. The Democratic plan moves Vassalboro from the 1st District to the 2nd.

The choice for lawmakers should be easy — they should go with the simplest change that meets the requirements of the law and affects the fewest voters.

Recent history has shown this is unlikely to happen. Redistricting lines were imposed by the state supreme court in 2003 because lawmakers couldn't agree on a plan. Maine doesn't have to go down this road again.

Because of a lawsuit by two southern Maine residents, a federal court earlier this year ordered the Legislature to redraw the congressional boundaries now, rather than in 2013, when lawmakers were scheduled to do it. The change is needed because the population gap between them had grown too large, according to figures from the 2010 census. Under current configurations, the 1st district has 8,667 more people than the 2nd, in violation of the "one person, one vote" standard of the Constitution.

A commission of seven Republicans, seven Democrats and an independent chairman was set up by the Legislature. It must complete its work in time for the Legislature to vote on a redistricting plan during a special session on Sept. 27.

In its simplest form, 4,333 people have to be moved from one district to another to even them out.

There are few requirements for the work: The district boundaries must be contiguous and no town can be split.

Republicans made it clear Monday, when the two plans were unveiled, that their standard is a difference of only one resident between the districts. Keeping the districts as even as possible is crucial, but moving 360,000 people isn't necessary to do that.

The Republican plan changes the districts from a north-south orientation to one that is more east-west. Knox, Lincoln and Sagadahoc County would be moved from the 1st to the 2nd District. Oxford and part of Franklin County would move from the 2nd to the 1st, as would Lewiston and Auburn.

Current 1st District Rep. Chellie Pingree's home island of North Haven would move from the 1st District to the 2nd, which is represented by Mike Michaud. Both are Democrats.

The fact that the GOP changes are so sweeping points to a desire to remake the districts so they are more favorable to Republican candidates for Congress and the presidency. This is especially true of the 2nd District, which would become more conservative without Lewiston and Auburn and the addition of portions of Lincoln and Sagadahoc counties.

Because Maine allows two of its four electoral votes to be split by district, a Republican presidential candidate could potentially pick up an additional electoral vote under the proposed GOP map.

The plan presented by Democrats Monday would move the Kennebec County town of Vassalboro from the 1st District to the 2nd.

Sadly, gerrymandering has become a routine part of redistricting work, with some districts across the country resembling puzzle pieces or ink blots.

Maine should not go down this road. A redistricting committee meets again next week. There is a lot of room for compromise between the two proposals.

PPH/KJ/MS

August 17

OUR OPINION: Redistricting map doesn't have to be radically different

We have seen the Republican plan to redraw Maine's two congressional districts, and we have seen the Democratic plan. We would like to see one more.



Before next week's public hearing about the issue, we hope that both sides can come together and compromise on a plan that could get the endorsement of the redistricting commission and have a realistic chance of getting two-thirds support from both houses of the Legislature when it convenes for a special session next month.

That is not the only way this process could end, but it is the best way.

It would be much more desirable than lawmakers failing to agree and sending the issue to the courts for resolution.

And it would be far better than the Republicans using their majorities in the state House and Senate to change the law that requires a two-thirds vote on redistricting questions so they could force their map through on a partisan vote.

The point of this exercise is to draw a line with half the state's population on either side. It shouldn't be as hard as the parties are making it.

The Republican plan achieves equity (with only one more person in the 2nd District than the 1st, according to the 2010 census) but it also radically redistricts the state in a way that would give the GOP a political advantage.

The Republicans would put Androscoggin County into the 1st District, adding its solid Democratic votes into the already Democratic district. They would be replaced in the 2nd District with Republican votes from Kennebec, Lincoln and Knox counties.

At first glance, this map looks like a slap at 1st District Rep. ChelliePingree, because her North Haven home would be in the 2nd District. Pingree, however, has nothing to worry about. There is no constitutional

or state law barrier to her running for re-election and, if anything, her district looks even safer than it did before.

The real target appears to be 2nd District Rep. Mike Michaud, who would lose a Democratic stronghold in Lewiston and Auburn and would be forced to campaign in coastal areas in which he is not well known.

The Democratic plan, which would put Vassalboro into the 2nd District but otherwise leave both districts intact, has a few disadvantages of its own.

The lines are not as straight as those on the Republicans' map, and the Democrats appear to be as politically motivated as the GOP.

Maine Democrats have won every House race since 1996, and that may explain their spirited defense of the status quo.

But at least their plan has history on its side.

The shape of the district has been roughly the same for 50 years, since Maine lost its third congressional district after the 1960 census, and both districts have been represented by Republicans, although not recently.

The point of redistricting is not to send a Republican to Congress, or snatch a stray electoral vote for a Republican nominee for president.

There has been no upheaval similar to the loss of a congressional district at this time that would justify radically changing the alignment that two generations of Mainers have grown up with.

There are 1st District towns and 2nd District towns, and they shouldn't be switched back and forth every time a new party comes to power.

Fortunately, many choices are available to the parties that would even out the districts without throwing away half a century of history.

Republicans don't need to stack the deck.

They control both U.S. Senate seats, the governor's office and both houses of the Legislature, proving that they can win elections in Maine when they have the right candidates and issues.

The first Tuesday in November in even-numbered years is the time for politics. Mid-August in 2011 should be a time for the parties to compromise.

There is room for a third redistricting plan that both sides can support. And the time to present it is coming soon.

LSJ

Republican plan for redistricting is far too radical

By Editorial Board

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They've barely just begun, but some members of the state Legislature's commission to redraw Maine's two U.S. congressional districts are already playing partisan games.

That's discouraging but not unexpected.

Rather than following the clear guidance of U.S. and state courts, Republicans came out of the gate with a controversial proposal that drastically reorganizes how residents of Franklin, Oxford and Androscoggin counties would be represented in Congress.

Their proposal splits communities with similar industries, demographics and interests and lumps them in with communities of diverging interests while switching the congressional districts for nearly 360,000 Maine voters.

The Democratic plan pushes only 4,000 voters into a new district in one community in a county, Kennebec, that is already divided between congressional districts.

It is the least disruptive of the two plans and models closely the congressional redistricting plan enacted by the Maine supreme court in 2003.

It sets up two districts with nearly equal populations — with a difference of 11 voters between the two and keeps communities with similar interests together under the representation of a single lawmaker.

The Republican plan would create mathematically equal districts, but it would go through geographic and cultural gyrations to do so.

Under the GOP plan, geographically based industries, such as shipbuilding and papermaking, would lose the singular focus of one representative devoted to their cause. Instead of developing expertise in a particular field of business or industry, our congressional representatives would be torn between the competing interests of different industries in divergent geographical regions.

Since statehood, the tri-county region of Franklin, Oxford and Androscoggin have shared cultural and economic bonds. Little has changed. We are also far more connected culturally to the Franco-centric communities of northern Maine than we are to our cosmopolitan cousins in Cumberland and York counties.

Democrats on the panel are rightly charging Republicans with attempting to gerrymander the new districts and Republican justifications for pushing incumbent U.S. Rep. Chellie Pingree, a Democrat from her current district, ring hollow.

Panel member and state Sen. Debra Plowman, a Hampden Republican, said her GOP colleagues were blind to the political implications of their plan, which would place the homes of both incumbents into the 2nd District.

Really? We find that hard to believe and doubt that in this highly charged partisan atmosphere that starting with such an extreme proposal will allow this panel to have any better of a chance at finding an acceptable compromise than its predecessor had eight years ago.

That doesn't mean this new commission shouldn't try, but no one should be surprised if whatever plan emerges does not garner the two-thirds margin it needs to pass the full Legislature.

In 2003, a similar bipartisan panel was unable to reach agreement on new lines for both U.S. congressional districts and Maine State Senate districts.

While that panel did agree on a plan to rearrange Maine's House districts, it was, ultimately, the state's supreme court that redrew the lines for the state Senate and U.S. House districts in the current fashion.

The court did so in a way that seemed to satisfy partisans at the time, even though they really had no choice in the matter.

We appreciate the sentiments of the current commission's independent and non-partisan chairman, Mike Friedman, a Bangor attorney.

Friedman said he's optimistic an acceptable bi-partisan plan can be crafted by the Aug. 31 deadline.

"This is not an impossible task," he said.

We hope he's right but realize it's harder to get back to the middle when your starting point is the partisan fringe.