

## Redrawing the line on politics

EDITORIAL

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Republican state legislators want to take politics out of the way in which Colorado redraws its congressional and legislative districts.

It's all in the name of good government, of course, and surely is not driven by the fact that for the first time in decades, Republicans will have almost zero political power in the redistricting process.

Well, of course it is, and even House Minority Leader Mike May, R-Parker, acknowledges as much in his easygoing way. It's impossible, you see, to remove politics even from the process of depoliticizing.

But pushing all double-speak aside, the bill that May filed Monday, with some Democratic support, is an intriguing one that deserves consideration, though we wish it had come up before the frenetic last days of the legislative session.

The measure would make a single commission responsible for redrawing both state legislative and congressional districts.

The reconfigured commission would have nine members selected from a pool of 25 candidates. Four members would be appointed by House and Senate leadership, two members would be appointed by the governor, and three members — who must be unaffiliated voters — would be "elected" by the other six members.

Currently, redistricting (drawing congressional lines) and reapportionment (drawing statehouse boundaries) falls to two separate entities. Congressional redistricting is done by the General Assembly after the federal census. In short, whoever controls the legislature controls that process. Assuming Democrats maintain their majorities, they'll have more power to re-draw lines than they've had in generations.

State reapportionment is now conducted by an 11-member panel. Three members are chosen by the governor, four by the Colorado Supreme Court chief justice and four come from the legislature: House Speaker, House minority leader and Senate majority and minority leaders.

May's bill, House Concurrent Resolution 1005, would refer to voters a proposed constitutional amendment creating a new nine-member panel.

If the legislature, controlled by Democrats, won't pass the bill, May said he and the others who support such a change are willing to petition to put the question before voters.

May says he has the League of Women Voters and Colorado Common Cause on board, and leaders in those groups confirm general support. However, they have concerns, including that the bill doesn't require geographic diversity among the panel's members, and that it doesn't speak to the guidelines by which districts ought to be drawn.

As it stands, the party with the most muscle controls the redistricting and reapportionment processes. It's not fair, and for many years Democrats suffered the injustices of being in the minority. We're guessing they won't be willing to give it up.

But carefully crafted changes could give Colorado a process that best serves voters, instead of one political party or another. This bill proposes a good start down that road to reform.

# Legislature should support reform of the congressional redistricting process

OPINION  
Bill Grant  
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*Bill Grant*

It is encouraging to see Colorado join other states considering new methods for determining federal congressional districts after the 2010 census. The Legislature has already addressed redistricting at the state level by putting the process into the hands of a special non-partisan commission. It now has the opportunity to address federal elections by adopting House Concurrent Resolution 1005.

Introduced by Rep. Mike Ray, R-Parker, and Sen. Morgan Carroll, D-Aurora, this legislation would ask voters to amend the Constitution to establish an independent redistricting commission to draw up congressional districts based on the 2010 census results. Under present rules, the Legislature has that power.

The dominant party has used its redistricting power to gerrymander blocks of voters into safe districts, making fewer and fewer House seats competitive. The habit has become so ingrained in our political process that some observers believe it has become a threat to democracy.

As the number of competitive congressional districts shrinks, voter participation declines. Once voters feel their votes are unlikely to count, it becomes easy to rationalize not going to the polls. Meantime, incumbents in these safe districts can be relatively sure of holding the seat, even when faced with a rare primary challenger.

Since primaries often are decided by the party core, incumbents cater to ideological extremes to mobilize their base, while counting on a party-line vote in the general election to protect their seat. Without an effective challenger, incumbents have little accountability to the electorate. One result is a Congress polarized along extreme party lines.

Six states have already removed redistricting from partisan bodies, and another three include some role for a non-partisan commission in the process. Several other states, including Colorado, are considering the issue this year. It is apparent that a national movement to make democracy more accountable to the people by reducing partisanship in the redistricting process is growing.

What started out as a way of securing party power has morphed into a system protecting incumbency that is contrary to our democratic values. In a process designed to either preserve or expand the power of the dominant party, redistricting becomes a highly partisan political struggle for power every 10 years.

The results are districts shaped by the location of registered voters, rather than such factors as communities of interest, geographical integrity, or local political boundaries. While it is effective in creating safe seats and returning incumbents to office, it is not an effective way to ensure that

office holders serve the people and not the party. Incumbents of both parties have too much vested interest in the outcome to be trusted with the process.

Colorado does not need another failed redistricting process like 2002 to show us the system is broken. After the 2000 census allocated a new House seat to Colorado, the General Assembly was unable to agree on a plan, requiring a state court to draw the districts that have remained in effect for this decade.

In 2003, Republicans drew up new districts designed to benefit the party, then sued the state to implement their plan. The Colorado Supreme Court ruled against them, and an appeal to the U. S. Supreme Court was rejected.

This year's proposed resolution would replace the politically structured Legislature with a non-partisan commission of nine members selected from a list of 25 candidates named by the Colorado Supreme Court Nominating Committee. Four members would be appointed by the House and Senate leadership, two would be appointed by the governor, and the remaining three members, who are required to be unaffiliated voters, would be selected by the other six.

The foremost reason the Legislature should support this proposal is because redistricting reform is essential to good government. But the politicians might also consider that this is their best chance to ensure their place in the redistricting process.

If the proposed resolution fails in the Legislature, it is almost certain that reform groups will petition the issue on to the ballot. In that case, a commission designed by the reformers might significantly reduce the role of elected officials in redistricting. Some voters would welcome that as real reform.