

Idaho's Redistricting Process is Broken and Needs to be Fixed

Submitted by Jonathan Parker, Idaho Republican Party Executive Director

Every ten years, each state across the country is tasked with drawing new Congressional and state legislative boundaries to accurately reflect population changes and to accommodate the Constitutional principle of "one-person, one vote." In most states, democratically elected legislators who reflect the political will of the people draw the boundaries; in fact, this took place in Idaho up until the mid-1990s when the process of redistricting was assigned to a six-member commission made up of equal parts Republicans and Democrats. Due in part to an even-numbered commission, Idaho's redistricting process is systematically designed for failure and has proven to be an unnecessarily expensive process that doesn't accurately reflect the political makeup of our state where Idaho Democrats don't hold a single Congressional or Statewide office, and control less than 20% of seats in the Idaho legislature.

Case in point: During a time that witnessed severe budget cuts in state government, the redistricting commission was allocated a whopping \$424,700 by the Idaho Legislature and given 90 days to draw and agree upon new Congressional and legislative boundaries. Unfortunately, in spite of the Republican commissioners' willingness to reach across the aisle and work with their Democrat counterparts, the commission ended in gridlock and now heads to the Idaho Supreme Court where additional taxpayer money and valuable state resources will be spent.

Furthermore, despite the outcome of the 2010 elections, where the political will of the people was clearly made known, the makeup of the commission artificially gives the minority party equal representation and therefore the opportunity to abuse the system. If legislative committees followed this model, not only would the political will of the people be thwarted, but the systematic gridlock would prevent any decisions from being made. Clearly, the current system is broken and needs to be fixed.

In spite of the inherent problems with the makeup of the commission, the Idaho Republican Party tried to make this process work. Chairman Norm Semanko appointed a Redistricting Task Force, chaired by Steve Cory, which was given the mission to assist the redistricting commissioners in drawing maps that were fair to all Idahoans, while at the same time honoring both the Constitutional and statutory requirements. Our Republican Commissioners were successful in seeking additional public input and were very sincere about taking the public comment into account, from all parties. Unfortunately, as the process played out, it became painfully obvious that the Democrat commissioners came in with a predetermined plan to leverage their spot at the table and engage in classic hard-ball, teamster union tactics that doomed the 90-day process.

If the redistricting commission was structured to consider the will of the people, and to actually take public testimony into consideration, the system might be acceptable as is. However, the current process sets up an artificial balance that allows the minority party to overplay its hand

and demand adoption of unrealistic proposals that seek only to maximize their electoral gains in parts of the state that they otherwise wouldn't be competitive. This is gerrymandering at its worst; Idahoans deserve better.

This failure of the redistricting commission to reach agreement and the amount of taxpayer money spent on the process signals the need for an exhaustive review of the system, including input from the public. It is simply unacceptable to believe that the process cannot be improved. It needs to be. If the legislature decides to make any changes after public hearings are held, the issue will then go to a full vote of the people -- and our collective political desires will be made known -- something the current redistricting process should consider replicating.