

Oct. 13, 2009

Remarks by David Yepsen, director Paul Simon Public Policy Institute to the Illinois Senate Redistricting Committee hearing at Southern Illinois University

Good morning. My name is David Yepsen and I am the director of the Paul Simon Public Policy Institute. On behalf of the institute and the university community I would like to welcome you to Southern Illinois University.

We are pleased you have made the trip to Carbondale to discuss your options for legislative redistricting and hope your morning is a productive one. Please let us know if we can do anything to make your visit here a pleasant one.

Redistricting is a subject that has been an important one to Institute. It is also one that has vexed Illinois politics for decades. It sits at the core of so many other issues facing the state.

Soon you will hear from Dr. John Jackson, a long-time political scientist and administrator on this campus who is also a respected expert on redistricting issues. You will also hear from Mike Lawrence, a veteran Illinois journalist, former assistant to Gov. Jim Edgar and the former director of this Institute. Both have grappled with Illinois redistricting questions for years. Mike can speak with you about a proposal the Simon Institute developed to deal with state redistricting challenges.

Also, beginning next week, the Institute will unveil the results of a statewide public opinion poll we are completing that examines options

for ethics reforms in this state. We hope to provide you and academic researchers with some guidance about which ethics reforms the people of Illinois would like to see and whether voters support using citizen initiatives to enact them if you can't.

I want to thank you and your leaders for taking on this task and at least examining what might be done. Just as medical doctors don't do surgery on themselves, it is very difficult for political leaders to do it to themselves on questions like redistricting and campaign finance. Your willingness to even discuss these issues and spend your valuable time on them is evidence that you and your leaders recognize something needs to change in Illinois.

One redistricting option you have is one I'm familiar with and that's Iowa's plan. Before coming to Illinois earlier this year I spent 34 years as a political journalist in the state and covered three redistricting debates. Some believe such a plan might work in Illinois. Others aren't so certain, given the size and racial differences in the two states.

For those truly interested in getting into the weeds of Iowa's plan, I've downloaded a description prepared by legislative staff. For others, let me summarize.

In Iowa, a computer does the work of redistricting. It is operated by the non-partisan legislative services agency. In every year ending in a 1, new census results are entered into the computer and these staffers use it to draw new lines. It's not based on the old plan. They start with fresh census tracts.

Two house districts are put into each senate district. All legislative districts must fit into one congressional district. A citizens advisory commission holds public hearings on it and the Legislature casts an up or down vote on the proposal. If approved, it goes to the governor for signature or veto.

If rejected, the computer generates a second plan. It, too faces a non-amendable up or down vote of the General Assembly.

If the second plan is rejected, the computer generates a third plan but the Legislature can amend this one.

If, after all that, the General Assembly and governor fail to agree on a plan by September, the state Supreme Court draws a plan. It must be in place by Dec. 31.

Would such a plan work in Illinois, a state that is over four times larger? Would such a plan work in Illinois, a state that has a far more diverse population than Iowa, which is 96 percent white? We can have an academic argument about that for years.

The only way to know for sure is to try it. I believe the Legislature, at relatively little expense, could do a study. Why not put the 2000 census data for Illinois into the computer and see what an Iowa like program would produce? Like all states, Iowa's plan must balance the rights of minorities to be represented against the equal protection rights of all.

What would such an Iowa plan do to or for minority representation? How would it shift the balance among Chicago, the suburbs and downstate areas? Only more study could answer those questions definitively.

Those arguments should not be used out of hand just to defend a system of incumbency protection.

There is always fear of uncertainty in politics. The devil we know is often better than the one we don't but I believe it might be worth the effort for you to see how your computers and staffers could perform using the Iowa rules.

Some may find they like it. My recollection is that most redistricting plans gave two-thirds of the incumbents in the Iowa Legislature a single – member district. The other third was tossed in with another incumbent. So, at least two thirds of the members had initially favorable reactions.

One problem with Iowa's system is the requirement that each Senate district contain two house districts and they all fit inside a congressional district. That was done to strengthen the parties but in practice it has made little political sense and it has resulted in some convoluted looking legislative districts. A better system would be to draw a congressional plan and a separate legislative plan

The difference in the size of the two states contributes to different political realities. In Iowa, political leaders believe 90 percent of the legislative districts in the state could be won by either party with the right kind of candidate. So, legislative leaders there are interested in recruiting the best known and respected local candidates they can find. To do that requires they get their district lines drawn as soon as possible after the census is complete.

In a state like Illinois, where legislative districts are four times larger, party affiliation may be more determinative. As well known as you all

are in your districts, you simply can't be as well known to your constituents as your counterparts in Iowa. As a result, when leaders are looking to win seats, party registrations of voters seems to be more important to them in forecasting outcomes.

I'm happy to answer your questions.