

Senate Redistricting Committee
Testimony from Whitney Woodward
Illinois Campaign for Political Reform
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The Illinois Campaign for Political Reform is a non-profit, non-partisan public interest group that conducts research and advocates for public participation, government transparency and accountability, and efforts to curb the role of money in politics.

We believe the state's last three redistricting cycles demonstrate the need to substantially alter the process by which district maps are created. Simply put, we do not feel the public is best served by a process that grants one political party the sole authority to draw maps, and with no requirement that the party listen to the public's concerns.

On that note, we are pleased that the Senate has formed this committee and held meetings this summer and fall.

But as this committee deliberates on the process by which Illinois draws new district lines – and, we hope, considers proposals to change that process – I would encourage you to consider some principles that we believe a redistricting process must respect.

ICPR, along with other state and national interest groups, signed onto a list of principles developed at a national conference on redistricting for public interest and civic groups this summer. These principles also have been embraced by many organizations concerned about this issue in Illinois.

First, we believe an accurate and complete count in the 2010 Census is an essential building block for all redistricting efforts. Illinois will only stand to benefit from the participation in the Census by of all of the state's residents. For the purposes of

redistricting, an accurate headcount will empower map-drawers with the data they need to draw fair, equal-sized districts that preserve communities. On this note, the state should give special attention to ensuring the participation of immigrant communities and racial and ethnic groups, as statistics show members were less likely to respond to the survey than their peers in past decades.

Second, the process used for redistricting must be transparent to the public. We believe that a representative democracy functions best when it is open and accessible to the public. The public greets government work done behind closed doors with automatic skepticism. They question secrecy, and their cynicism grows, in this case, when they look at the resulting maps and perceive gerrymandered districts. To this end, under the current redistricting process, the General Assembly or the Redistricting Commission should make maps available to the public before they have been approved. And when considering or creating new redistricting structures, the General Assembly should mandate that the public is given ample information – at a minimum, making those draft maps available. Those documents would invite public participation, which brings us to the next principle.

Third, the redistricting process, at all levels of government, must provide data, tools and opportunities for the public to have direct input into the specific plans under consideration by the redistricting body. Here, we mean that not only should the redistricting process be open, but it should allow for public participation. Illinois can work toward this even under the current process by holding town hall meetings, for example. But even better, the state could consider maps drawn not just by elected officials but by civic organizations and concerned citizens, too.

On a geeky note, and building off the testimony from Reps. Winters and Fortner, this redistricting cycle is exciting because it will be arguably the first opportunity for the public to easily engage in the map-drawing process. Web-based programs, such as Google Maps and, for example, open source programs, allow users to easily create their own maps or draw districts. In earlier decades, the public didn't have this opportunity because there was no easy way for them to access and apply Census data. I would suggest these maps drawn by the public can aid the General Assembly under the existing

redistricting process by providing lawmakers with defined communities of interest, as identified by the residents who live in them.

Fourth, in order to achieve representative democracy, redistricting plans must be drawn in a manner that allows elected bodies to reflect the diversity of the populace, especially racial and ethnic diversity.

Carefully drawn districts can protect communities and maximize their voting strength. Redistricting can encourage a healthy political environment by creating opportunities for communities to elect candidates who understand their needs. And, of course, the Voting Rights Act was designed to ensure that electorates are not systematically disenfranchised through – among other things – gerrymandering.

In addition to this list, Illinois Campaign for Political Reform would also encourage you to consider ways to make our redistricting process more independent.

The state Constitution puts the redistricting process in the hands of either state lawmakers or the legislative leaders' designees. But these stakeholders have a vested interest in district boundaries because they are officials elected to serve these residents, and because their careers and political parties can be affected greatly by them. Redistricting power should be shared by a broader group of stakeholders, so that the appearance and opportunity for map-drawers to inappropriately use or control the process is minimized.

Furthermore, just as we value lawmakers' diversity in the General Assembly, we believe such diversity can prove valuable in the redistricting process. In addition to partisan diversity, the group of map-drawers should mirror Illinoisans in terms of their geographic, racial and ethnic diversity, among other factors.

We believe the General Assembly can make adjustments to the existing redistricting process to better achieve these benchmarks I've listed. But we believe this committee and the General Assembly at large should seek to incorporate these values into new proposed redistricting structures, too.

Lastly, because redistricting is of such great importance to all residents – and particularly to individuals from racial and ethnic communities – I would ask this committee to seek out and consider the opinions of members of these communities. Specifically, I would suggest this committee hold a public meeting focused on the Voting Rights Act. I think we are all concerned with Section 2 compliance and believe a hearing in Chicago, focused on these issues, would be a good way to allow citizens and organizations to present their concerns.

Thank you. I am more than happy to answer questions.

Whitney Woodward
Policy Associate
Illinois Campaign for Political Reform
325 W. Huron, Suite 500
Chicago, Illinois 60654
(312) 335-1767
whitney@ilcampaign.org

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