



FAQs

Here are some answers to questions you might have about redistricting reform.

What is redistricting and why should anyone care?

Each state legislative district should have a near equal number of residents. Because of population changes, legislative district boundaries must be redrawn after each 10-year Census. When the redistricting process is finished, each district should have roughly the same number of people within its boundaries.

That sounds simple enough, but there are many different ways to draw those lines for 118 House districts and 59 Senate districts. District lines can keep everyone in a municipality together in the same legislative district and/or keep similar communities together in the same legislative district. Alternatively, district lines can split a municipality apart and divide similar communities into different legislative districts. Sometimes enough minority group members are kept together in the same district to aggregate voting power to influence who wins an election, and sometimes minority voting power is diluted by splitting it apart.

How is redistricting done now in Illinois?

The General Assembly has the power to draw the maps. The legislative leaders of the party in power – no matter which party is in power – have drawn the maps to protect favored incumbents and improve that party's chances of winning as many House and Senate seats as possible. Instead of voters selecting legislators to represent them in Springfield, the legislators choose which voters they will represent.

What if neither party controls the House and Senate? How do they agree on new legislative boundaries?

They could reach a compromise, but this has only happened once.

According to the 1970 Constitution, when legislators and the governor cannot agree on new district boundaries, an 8-member redistricting commission is formed. The members are appointed by leaders of the House and Senate. If they can't reach a compromise, the Illinois Supreme Court provides the names of a Democrat and a Republican, and the one name that is drawn at random becomes the "tiebreaker" – putting the tiebreaker's party in complete control of drawing the map.

What's so bad about letting the political parties draw the map?

As long as the political parties draw the map, the parties' primary objective will be to protect the interests of the party in control and its preferred incumbents. As evidence of just how that works, over half of the 2014 legislative races (82 of 137) were uncontested in November.

When there is little competition, there is little debate about issues that matter to voters. And when voters don't have a choice in an election, many don't become engaged in the process at all. Democracy suffers.

Should we ask our legislators to pass a constitutional amendment?

In theory, the General Assembly could propose an amendment and place it before voters in a referendum. But in reality, that's not going to happen. The powers in control of redistricting are the same ones needed to approve a reform in the General Assembly, and they have no interest in doing that.

So, we have to do it ourselves?

Yes. Most changes to the Illinois Constitution have to be started in the General Assembly. However, the Illinois Constitution does allow voters to propose some changes by a petition signed by at least 8 percent of the total votes cast in the most recent election for Governor. Changes citizens can propose by petitions are limited to the "structural and procedural subjects" in the legislative article of the Illinois Constitution. That includes legislative redistricting.

After we collect 290,216 valid signatures and submit them to the State by May 8, 2016, one of our opponents will go to court and ask that our amendment language be declared unconstitutional. We're confident the amendment language will survive any court challenge.

And then will it be on the ballot in November 2016?

Yes. To enact the reform amendment, it will need to receive the approval of a majority of the people voting in the 2016 election or 60 percent of those voting on just the amendment.

If the amendment is approved by voters, the new independent commission will use 2020 Census data to draw new district maps in 2021, and the new legislative boundaries will be in effect for Illinois House and Senate candidates in the 2022 election.