

Source: Peoria Journal Star www.pjstar.com

Editorial: From Arizona to Illinois, a lesson delivered by a Peorian

Posted Oct. 28, 2015 at 5:31 PM

Updated Oct 28, 2015 at 5:33 PM

Colleen Coyle Mathis, Peoria High School class of 1984, found herself at the center of a political whirlwind in 2011 just months after being selected to chair Arizona's Independent Redistricting Commission, the group responsible for drawing the state's legislative and congressional maps.

Arizona's then-Gov. Jan Brewer wanted her out — despite having never met Mathis — and the state Senate there complied with those wishes, because the registered Independent was insufficiently Republican for their tastes, declining to gerrymander a map in what they considered the GOP's favor. Mathis fought for her job, and less than three weeks later, the Arizona Supreme Court unanimously reinstated her after less than two hours of deliberation.

Alas, it wasn't over. Amid a flurry of lawsuits challenging the Commission (comprised of two Republicans, two Democrats and one usually tie-breaking Independent), its map and its very right to exist, one made its way to the U.S. Supreme Court, which earlier this year ruled 5-4 that Arizona's efforts to de-politicize the mapmaking, to take it out of the self-serving politicians' hands, is in fact constitutional.

Score one — make that score two — for the nation's judiciary, which got this right.

Mathis' experience in Arizona may be instructive for her native state as petition signatures are being gathered to get a constitutional amendment measure on the 2016 ballot that would do something similar to what Arizona voters did in 2000 with their Proposition 106. That would be to express their justifiable distrust in their state politicians to produce maps that are fair to all and faithful to this nation's brand of democracy.

Indeed, in a way one of the encouraging things about Arizona's experience is that majority Republicans were and are the problem there, the party fighting reform, as opposed to the situation in Illinois where Democrats are largely the stumbling block. It puts the lie to the contention we so often hear in blue state Illinois that redistricting is some sort of desperate conservative plot. To the contrary, it seems endemic to the political species in general, as opposed to any particular flavor of it, that when push comes to shove on drawing legislative boundaries, their self-preservation instincts kick in, the will of the people and good government be damned.

It is in fact a bipartisan affliction that goes a long way toward explaining the dysfunction of a GOP-led Congress that arguably does not reflect the American populace in its makeup, as well as the governing incompetence and cowardice of an Illinois Legislature where Democrats enjoy supermajorities arguably incompatible with this state's political demographics. Safe seats produce unaccountable, often extreme representation that need not consult with the other side or even acknowledge it exists because those politicians are never punished by the purposely skewed electorate that puts them in power.