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League of Women Voters of Ohio Educational Fund

Fateful week ahead for Ohio's House clout By Howard Wilkinson •
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One benefit of winning big in an Ohio election year that ends in a zero, as the Republicans did in November, is that the party in power can literally redraw Ohio's political map.

Every 10 years, congressional districts are redrawn, based on the U.S. Census numbers.

Those numbers will be released by the Census Bureau on Tuesday, and the consensus is that Ohio - even though it has shown modest population growth over the decade - will be losing two of its 18 congressional districts.

In Kentucky, which has six congressional districts, legislative leaders say there is no indication that the state will either lose or gain any seats.

But the loss of two districts in Ohio would be the continuation of a steady decline in the state's congressional delegation, from a high of 24 members in the 1960s.

That lessens Ohio's clout both in the House and in the Electoral College - which means Ohio will be slightly less important in the next presidential elections. It could also change who represents some residents in Washington.

Republicans control both the House and the Senate in the Ohio General Assembly, so they'll decide which seats will go, making them just about the most important people in the world to the 13 Republicans and five Democrats who will hold those U.S. House seats when the 112th Congress convenes in Washington next month.

"They absolutely control the process and I would imagine that there are congressmen cozying up to them already," said Richard Gunther, a professor of political science at Ohio State University who closely monitors the congressional redistricting process.

It will give the GOP power to create a new political map - in effect for the 2012 elections - that would help them to keep control of Ohio government for the next decade.

Who will lose a seat?

Some congressional districts, like the 1st Congressional District in Hamilton and Butler counties, where Republican Steve Chabot won election in November after being out of office for two years, could end up being made more Republican by shifting GOP strongholds in the northeastern suburbs of Cincinnati into the district, possibly by drawing them from Rep. Jean Schmidt's 2nd Congressional District.

It is unlikely, political strategists on both sides say, that the GOP will be able to eliminate two Democratic-held districts. The more likely scenario is that one of each will be gone.

The Republicans could end up combining the districts of two northeast Ohio Democratic representatives, Dennis Kucinich and Betty Sutton. And there is speculation that the west-central Ohio district of Rep. Jim Jordan, R-Urbana, could go if Jordan becomes the GOP Senate candidate in 2012, although other GOP districts are being talked about as well.

Ohio law gives the power to re-draw state legislative district lines to a five-member apportionment board, made up of the governor, secretary of state, auditor and one person from each party in the legislature.

That board will have a 4-1 Republican advantage.

But the job of carving up congressional districts is up to the Republican legislature, led by incoming Senate President Tom Niehaus of New Richmond and incoming speaker Bill Batchelder of Medina. Whatever plan the House and Senate pass must be signed by the new governor, John Kasich, also a Republican. Niehaus won't speculate on what a final map might look like, saying it is far too early in the process for that.

People on both sides of the aisle don't expect the serious business of carving to start until summer.

"Whatever we come up with is going to have to follow the guidelines of the (federal) Voting Rights Act," Niehaus said.

"The map could well end up being challenged in court. What we have to do is come up with a constitutional system that we can defend. And we will do that."

Changes for Democrats

Meanwhile, there is little that Democrats in the Statehouse - and in congressional offices - can do but sit back and watch.

They are getting all too familiar with the role - this will be the second decade in a row where Republicans have controlled the congressional redistricting process.

The result has been a curious phenomenon - over that period of time, Democrats have taken the majority of votes in congressional races, but ended up with less than a majority of Ohio's seats in the U.S. House.

"That is solely a result of how the Republicans have drawn the lines," Gunther said.

"To me, it's an entirely undemocratic outcome."

Four years ago, for example, Democrats won 53 percent of the congressional vote statewide, but ended up with only 39 percent of the House seats.

In 2010, a GOP landslide year, the Republicans had the majority of votes - 56 percent - but ended up with 72 percent of the House seats.

Chris Redfern, the chairman of the Ohio Democratic Party, said he thinks the Republican legislature will be hard-pressed to reproduce those results in the new congressional district map.

"The census doesn't drive the math in redistricting; registered voters drive the math," Redfern said.

"And the fact is there are 1 million more registered Democrats in Ohio than there were 10 years ago."

That is true, in part because of the Barack Obama-Hillary Rodham Clinton presidential primary in 2008, which saw many voters cross over and vote as Democrats.

'Packing' and 'cracking'

Gunther said that over the past two decades, Republicans have maintained control by the use of two devices of map-making - "packing" and "cracking."

"Packing" involves packing Democratic voters, or large Democrat constituencies such as African-Americans, into districts that are safe for Democrats but keeps them out of neighboring districts. The 11th District in Cleveland, Gunther said, held by Democrats for decades, is the prime example.

"Cracking," on the other hand, has diluted Democratic vote by splitting up Democratic urban areas. Franklin County is the prime example.

It is large enough to be a single congressional district, but that district would have a majority of urban, more Democratic voters.

The same is true, to a lesser extent, in Hamilton County, which is split down the middle into two congressional districts.

The GOP divided Franklin County and the city of Columbus into three separate districts, bringing in more Republican rural and suburban voters to each district. All three districts are currently held by Republicans.

"The notion of breaking up counties solely for the purpose of protecting incumbents is just plain undemocratic," Gunther said.

Gunther worked this year with the Ohio League of Women Voters on a proposed constitutional amendment that would have changed the way congressional districts are drawn, creating a board that would choose from citizen-submitted plans that, he said, would be based "on fairness of representation, competitiveness, preservation of communities and geographical compactness."

But the constitutional amendment stalled in the legislature and never made the ballot.

Gunther said the League would be monitoring the process and presenting plans that it believes would meet those criteria.

"In the meantime, though, I fear it may just be business as usual," Gunther said.