



Will Hawaii care enough about deciding its political districts?

 Beth-Ann Kozlovich  June 20, 2011 11:09 AM

BakTalk with Beth-Ann Kozlovich

Sometimes, California really does get it right. In this case “right” is an historical first: a citizen-driven redistricting process that may become the model for many states around the country.

The genesis of the new process goes back to 2001 according to Kathay Feng, Executive Director of Common Cause California, when “the heartfelt testimony from people around the state was ignored.” Feng says like-minded citizens had a group epiphany and understood that regardless of how they attempted to influence the California Legislature with public input, the real decisions would be made behind closed doors.

“I got phone calls from legislators,” Feng says. “At the time I represented an Asian-

American civil rights organization and they would call me up and literally tell me, ‘Kathay, you’re not putting another f-ing Asian in my district.’”

“They were really cherry picking voters and assets rather than have voters choose them.”

Feng says the gerrymandering manifested in redrawn lines that could excise whole communities. Other efforts, she says, would draw in an incumbent’s house, a favorite donor, and potential assets—and draw out challengers and naysayers.

“They were really cherry picking voters and assets rather than have voters choose them,” Feng says.

The story gets worse. If some disgusted legislators wanted to come forward and say what had happened, their legislature clamped down on any discussion, saying all deliberations are protected by legislative privilege.

“All that sausage making, all of the dirty work, all of the minority community discrimination and cutting up of communities got done behind closed doors and the public never knew,” Feng says.

It was the realization that the closed door cut-and-paste would continue unless citizens acted that sparked conversations about what a participatory redistricting process would look like and how Californians could make democracy meaningful. In 2005, advocates negotiated at the Legislature, though Feng says it became clear that lawmakers could not effect enough change on their own.

Fortunately in 2008, citizens were able to put an initiative on the ballot asking voters if they would approve the creation of a citizen redistricting commission. They did

if they would approve the creation of a citizen redistricting commission. They did. And then went further: In 2010 voters asked the commission to include the drawing of Congressional as well as state lines.

Feng says they looked at other states with commissions but wanted to make sure that all 14 of the California commissioners were chosen through a rigorous, participatory, and democratic process that represented the state's diversity ... meaning not appointed by lawmakers or anyone who might be advantaged by the appointment. And yes, she says, they looked at Hawaii's commission, but still found the one thing they didn't want: eight of the nine bipartisan commissioners are chosen by the Legislature's leaders. The ninth is appointed by the eight.

In the current incarnation, Hawaii's eight commissioners ran out of time, and the Hawaii Supreme Court made the final choice.

To see the whole list of Hawaii's commissioners and more, [click here](#)

California's commission is now hearing testimony from citizens commenting on the proposed maps. Feng says some believe the new lines are fine; others are making sure the commission hears their requests to redraw certain lines to make a community whole or connect communities with affinities. The amazing part from Feng's perspective is that multicultural alliances are presenting themselves as a unified voice and "real, everyday Californians" are coming out to talk about their concerns for their communities.

"If you can get people energized about redistricting," Feng says, "and I acknowledge that is an arcane and usually yawn-inducing subject matter, if you can get people to line up three hours beforehand like a rock concert to testify about their communities, I think we've struck gold."

She's not the only one. Feng happily admits many states are looking at what California has accomplished. Although California's first could be replicated in other states, the requirement that a state already have an initiative process in place may thwart those states without one. The cold fact: legislatures have a strong disincentive to ever adopt a method of redistricting that would leave them less

powerful.

“It’s really interesting to see a place like California be able to do this on such a big scale and to do it completely citizen driven,” says Nikki Love, Feng’s Common Cause Hawaii counterpart. “Maybe someday we’ll get there, but right now, Hawaii’s process is much better than a lot of other states where legislatures do redistricting themselves.”

Love hopes that as soon as the draft maps are available, people will pay attention, though she says the real time for ground level input is now. The final version of Hawaii redistricting plan must be finalized by September 26.

Political science professor, and board member of Common Cause Hawaii, Larry Meacham believes it may take a little upset to get people motivated toward involvement.

“People do get excited when they get another representative or another senator,” Meacham says. “That’s when people get energized.”

The perception that until there is something to get upset about, Hawaii’s reapportionment process is okay doesn’t say a whole lot for a lot of us. For all our talk of wanting to pursue excellence, for all our vociferous complaints during and between election cycles cursing the low level of political engagement and voter turnout, it appears the status quo is just fine.

Maybe the real fact is we’re just a little lazy ... or afraid there actually might be others who could better grapple with questions: Should Hawaii’s military and nonresident students be counted in their districts’ permanent resident base? And more fundamentally: What constitutes a permanent resident base?

The lion in the room is now a huge and ethnically diverse state that has thus far successfully created and implemented what no other (or smaller) state has yet to do: a mechanism for deciding its political districts while engaging its citizens in participatory democracy. Thorny as some of the Hawaii issues may be, having the same looped conversations decade to decade just seems to prove the point that

insanity is doing the same thing and expecting a different result.

The full interview with Kathay Feng, Nikki Love, and Larry Meacham is on the Town Square archive at www.hawaiipublicradio.org. Beth-Ann Kozlovich is co-host of *The Conversation*, HPR's morning show, which airs 8:00 a.m. to 9:00 a.m.

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