

Legislative Reference Bureau would draw district lines under bipartisan bill

Posted on Wednesday, Jul 17, 2019

Dem lawmakers and activists Tuesday touted a bill aimed at creating a nonpartisan redistricting process.

The proposal from Sen. Dave Hansen, D-Green Bay, and Rep. Robyn Vining, D-Wauwatosa, places the responsibility for redrawing legislative and congressional maps on career civil servants at the Legislative Reference Bureau. Under the criteria laid out in the bill, the LRB lines are required to be strictly nonpartisan and political affiliations of registered voters, previous election results, or demographic information could not be used to inform the line-drawing process.

Gerrymandering opponents have pushed for nonpartisan redistricting for over a decade and this measure closely mirrors one that Hansen has floated since the 2013-14 biennium.

This year's edition features more Republican support than any of its predecessors — Reps. Travis Tranel of Cuba City and Joel Kitchens of Sturgeon Bay have signed on as cosponsors alongside Rep. Todd Novak of Dodgeville, who co-sponsored the measure in the previous two bienniums as well.

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In a Capitol news conference Tuesday, Hansen praised the bill as “a return to our democracy.”

“It’s past time for both sides to come together, do the right thing, pass a nonpartisan redistricting law that will give the people of this state the type of elections they deserve: fair, transparent, and as importantly, competitive,” he said.

But despite the growth in support from Republicans, Assembly Speaker Robin Vos was quick to scuttle the idea. In a statement released shortly after the news conference, the Rochester Republican made clear the bill stood little chance in the Assembly and labeled the effort by Dems as “sour grapes.”

“Democrats blame their minority status on gerrymandering but the reality is they were beaten fair and square,” he said, highlighting the fact that Dem U.S. Sen. Tammy Baldwin won just 30 percent of the seats held by Assembly Republicans.

“Wisconsin has ticket splitters and Assembly Republicans simply have better candidates with a better message that resonates with the voters.”

Advocates at the news conference acknowledged that the bill faces an uphill battle in the Republican-run Legislature but pledged to continue raising awareness among the public.

Sachin Chheda of the Fair Elections Project pointed to a January Marquette Law School Poll, which found 72 percent of Wisconsin voters supported the idea of a nonpartisan commission drawing electoral maps. Chheda pledged that advocates and lawmakers would leverage that sentiment to “shame” GOP leadership into holding a public hearing on the bill.

“Even if they don’t put the bill on the floor, we’re going to keep the pressure on,” he said. “We’re going to be knocking on doors all across the state for the next year and a half. We’re going to make sure that people understand who is rigging the maps and who wants change.”

Dems praised their GOP cosponsors and played up their willingness to sign on to the bill as evidence of shifting momentum. But when quizzed by reporters as to why none of the three showed up to the event, Hansen said that while “everybody’s invited,” he believed they were back in their districts working.

Novak in an email told WisPolitics.com that neither he nor the other two Republicans were invited to the event, which was also confirmed by a Kitchens spokeswoman.