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OPINION: Redistricting essential to economic policy

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In a few weeks the federal government will release the first data from the 2010 Census. These numbers will tell us the official population of each state, county, city, and town in the nation. It might be the last time Indiana gets township population numbers. These data will be used to draw the maps for Indiana's congressional seats plus for the 50 state senators and 100 state representatives.

The key factor determining the change in a county's representation in the legislature is the change in its share of the state's population. Based on the latest estimates released by the Census Bureau, the big winner will be Hamilton County whose share of the state's population grew from 3.0 percent in 2000 to 4.3 percent in 2009.

Change in share of population depends on two things: the relative percent change in population and the initial size of the population. A high growth rate in a county with a small population will have little effect on that county's share of the state. Thus, Warrick County with 52,400 in 2000 had only a 0.5 percent increase in its share of Indiana's population, despite an 11.7 percent growth rate, twice as fast as the state's 5.6 percent.

Hamilton County had nearly 183,000 in 2000 and grew by an incredible 52.8 percent. That was almost ten times the rate of growth for the entire state. By contrast, neighboring Marion County had an increase of 30,000 with a 3.5 percent growth rate (29th in the state), sufficiently below the state average to leave Marion with the largest loss of share at 0.28 percent.

What do these numbers mean for the new legislative maps to be drawn in early 2011? Hamilton County, from 2002, was entitled to three seats in the House and one and a half seats in the Senate. Now Hamilton will be entitled to four and a third seats in the House plus two full seats and part of another in the Senate elected in 2012.

Currently five different senators represent Hamilton County as well as parts of Grant, Hancock, Howard, Madison, Marion, and Tipton counties. It is difficult to draw the maps using just the population criterion. Other factors must be considered. But, historically, the Indiana General Assembly has incumbency as its prime consideration.

"Preserve the incumbents and let the lines fall where they may." That banner might as well hang over the rotunda in the Statehouse. Of course, from time to time, a party will sacrifice an incumbent as part of a trade. "I'll give you an environmentalist and a feminist in exchange for two bull-dog conservatives and a Sunday sales advocate."

Carving and slicing the electoral map to protect incumbents leads to safe districts carefully composed to favor the dominant party. The non-dominant party will avoid these districts leaving voters without a meaningful choice. In 2010, the Republicans were sure they had a good chance to carry the Indiana House; they nominated 95 candidates for the 100 available seats. The dispirited Democrats held back; they nominated only 79 persons for those 100 seats. That's counted as political wisdom. No point in wasting effort and money on giving voice to important issues if you aren't likely to win with a deck stacked against you. No reason to lose when there is no penalty for avoiding the processes of democratic choice.

With more and more economic decision making resting in the hands of state politicians, the ways in which redistricting is manipulated becomes a dollar issue when the maps make no sense.



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