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LAWMAKERS SHOULD MINIMIZE PARTISANSHIP IN REDRAWING VOTING MAPS

By Andrea Kaminski

MADISON – A federal court has ordered the Wisconsin legislature to redraw voting districts in time for the 2018 elections. This is a victory for voters, who have been voting in gerrymandered districts that were ruled unconstitutional in November.

Although the court did not specify how the legislature should redraw the maps, the League of Women Voters urges lawmakers to choose a method that will minimize undue partisanship. The League filed a [brief](#) in the case offering possible ways to accomplish that.

The Wisconsin constitution gives the legislature the responsibility of redistricting, which takes place every ten years after the census. Unfortunately, when you have one-party rule, as was the case in Wisconsin in 2011, the majority party is able to “choose the voters” by drawing meandering district boundaries designed to include some voters and exclude others.

Of the nonpartisan redistricting methods we proposed, the most practical is the procedure followed successfully in Iowa, which has a similar constitutional provision. There, a nonpartisan legislative agency drafts the district maps for the legislature, which retains final responsibility for enacting (or rejecting) the proposed maps. The Wisconsin legislature could direct its Legislative Reference Bureau, the nonpartisan service agency which drafts all legislation, to create new maps. The agency would have to follow the usual districting criteria mandated by state and federal law, such as compactness, contiguity, respect for existing municipal boundaries, and non-dilution of minority voting power.

The plan should also provide for public input. Iowa’s Legislative Services Agency is advised by a nonpartisan commission and must hold at least three public hearings about the plan in different regions of the state and report on the hearings to the legislature. The legislature then brings the redistricting bill to a vote shortly after receiving the report. Only corrective amendments are allowed. If the initial plan is rejected, the agency must submit a second version within 35 days. Again, the legislature votes, with only corrective amendments allowed. There is plenty of time for such a process to take place in Wisconsin before the court-ordered deadline of November 1.

Since its creation in 1980, the Iowa process has operated smoothly and with the support of both parties. Each decade the legislature has enacted the first or second proposed plan. No plan has been challenged in court, saving Iowa tax payers millions of dollars in litigation fees.

Iowa’s plan has resulted in some of the most competitive districts in the nation, offering voters a choice of two or more viable candidates. In Wisconsin, none of our eight congressional districts is considered competitive, and Common Cause in Wisconsin reported in 2016 that just one in ten of our legislative

districts could be considered competitive. That leads to uncontested elections and less choice for voters.

There are currently proposals before the Wisconsin legislature to adopt the Iowa plan. Lawmakers should do so this session. They also should apply the plan now to redraw the current, unconstitutional districts in a way that will give voters confidence that they are not being manipulated by politicians seeking an unfair partisan advantage.

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Andrea Kaminski is executive director of the League of Women Voters of Wisconsin, a nonpartisan organization that advocates for informed and active participation in government. The League welcomes women and men across the state as members. With 18 local Leagues in Wisconsin and 800 affiliates across the county, the League is one of the nation's most trusted grassroots organizations. Follow @LWV_WI on Twitter.