

Drawing New Lines in Sand for Votes; 2 Democrats Suggest Realigning Districts

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Two Democratic U.S. House members from Chicago have begun talking up the idea of trying to flex their party's might in Illinois to redraw congressional districts years ahead of schedule.

U.S. Reps. Rahm Emanuel and Jan **Schakowsky** are floating the idea of creating more Democratic-leaning districts in retaliation for similar Republican efforts elsewhere.

Any plan would have to be approved by the Illinois General Assembly, which is controlled by Democrats. However, key party leaders in Springfield have shown little enthusiasm for an idea that would inflame Republicans and complicate efforts to reach accords on the state budget and other legislation.

Still, the attempts by Emanuel and **Schakowsky** to promote a remap before the 2010 census illustrates a growing partisan split among the once-collegial Illinois congressional delegation.

Amplifying an increasingly personal battle between himself and House Speaker Dennis Hastert of Plano, Emanuel said last week that Illinois Democrats who favor a new map are simply playing by the rules Republican leaders set in redistricting Texas and attempting to redistrict Colorado and Georgia.

"For the speaker to say I'm hurting the delegation, I'm not the one hurting the institution [of Congress] under my leadership and stewardship," said Emanuel, who was recently named to lead Democratic efforts to regain control of the House.

Hastert spokesman John McGovern lashed back at Emanuel, saying he is "putting his personal partisan agenda ahead of what's best for the people of Illinois."

The bitterness between Emanuel and Hastert shows that the national fight over redistricting has come home to Illinois.

Normally, state legislatures redraw congressional districts every 10 years with the release of census data and the input of the state's congressional members. The process is known for sparking some political fighting but generally results in oddly shaped districts designed to protect incumbents of both parties.

But in 2003, House Majority Leader Tom DeLay engaged in an unusual and bitter off-census fight to redraw Texas' congressional map to unseat Democrats and create new Republican seats. Republican leaders later tried and failed to alter Colorado's congressional map and are pushing a plan in Georgia to increase the number of Republican seats.

In contrast to the legislative and legal battles in those states, Illinois's congressional map was redrawn in 2001 as a bipartisan compromise between Hastert and then-U.S. Rep. William Lipinski of Chicago, who at the time was the senior Democratic member of the delegation.

It erased one Downstate Democratic-leaning district and included 10 Republican-leaning districts and nine Democratic-leaning districts. The inducement for Democrats was that it preserved a strongly Democratic district on Chicago's Northwest Side whose incumbent at the time, Rod Blagojevich, was leaving to run for governor.

Emanuel now holds that seat.

In the 2002 election, the congressional seats under the new map split as expected. Last year, however, Democratic challenger Melissa Bean defeated incumbent Republican U.S. Rep. Phil Crane in the heavily conservative northwest suburban 8th District, giving Democrats a one-seat advantage in Illinois' House delegation.

But Emanuel and **Schakowsky** believe Democrats should hold an even larger number of seats in a state with a Democratic General Assembly and governor, and that heavily favored Democratic presidential candidate John Kerry in the last election.

"A number of people are looking [at the current map] and saying, 'Why do we have a map that doesn't reflect the political aspirations of the state?'" Emanuel said.

However, an analysis of vote totals in 2004 Illinois congressional elections suggests the current 10-9 Democratic advantage reflects the relative strength of the party.

Democrats currently hold just slightly under 53 percent of the delegation seats. In 2004, all Democratic congressional candidates in Illinois combined received just slightly more than 53 percent of the vote in those races.

The change being touted by Emanuel and **Schakowsky** seems unlikely given that Illinois House Speaker Michael Madigan worked closely with Lipinski on the 2001 remap.

Though Lipinski last year gave up his Southwest Side seat, Madigan feels bound to uphold an agreement reached among the congressional caucus, a leading Democratic strategist said.

At the same time, the Democrat noted that parochial circumstances, unique to Illinois, would make early redistricting politically unpopular. Although Democrats control the governor's office and the legislature, Hastert has become a go-to guy for the state in Washington, where Republicans control the White House and Congress, the strategist said.

"Are we going to put Hastert through some personal embarrassment on the national level?" the strategist asked. "Given what the prospects are, what's the point? If Hastert wasn't who he is and it was just a bunch of Republicans and Democrats going at it, it might be worth taking on."

Despite that, members of Illinois's Republican delegation are taking Emanuel and **Schakowsky** seriously.

"The point is it's putting in jeopardy the ability of the delegation to work together as a whole," said McGovern, the Hastert spokesman.