

# By Republicans, for Republicans

## Why we should change the way we draw districts

BY JEFFREY C. BILLMAN

In 2002, Tom Feeney gave himself two things every politician wants: a promotion and job security. As Florida's House Speaker, he oversaw not only the day-to-day machinations of the legislature, but also the once-a-decade chore of recarving the state's congressional and legislative boundaries. Since the U.S. Census had given Florida two extra seats in Congress, Feeney used his power to create District 24, a heavily Republican enclave on the east side of Central Florida. That November, he ran for the seat and won easily. And had he not subsequently become embroiled in the Jack Abramoff mess, he might have kept it into perpetuity instead of losing it last November.

That's because his district, like all congressional and legislative districts in Florida, was drawn for Republicans, by Republicans. Even though this state splits its presidential vote pretty evenly every four years, its state and federal lawmakers are overwhelmingly conservative Republicans. Because of the way the districts are drawn, many state and congressional races aren't even competitive.

Next year, FairDistrictsFlorida.org hopes to put a stop to that, before the Republicans get another bite at the apple after the 2010 census. On Feb. 2, the group's effort to place two constitutional amendments (dealing with state and federal districts, respectively) on next November's ballot to ban partisan gerrymandering won a 4-3 stamp of approval from the Florida Supreme Court. Now its backers — largely a hodgepodge of liberal interest groups (though the group's board is chaired by local Republican heavy Thom Rumberger) — must collect the nearly 1.6 million signatures required by state law for each to make the ballot, and they need to get 60 percent of the vote.

It's a steep climb, but a necessary one. As Rumberger wrote in a *Tallahassee Democrat* op-ed, "Quite simply, redistricting in its current form operates to keep those in power in power, be they Republican or Democrat."

"I think in Florida, there's an entirely unfair legislative system where legislators are picking their voters," instead of the other way around, says FairDistrictsFlorida.org campaign chair Ellen Freidin, who took over the group after the Florida Supreme Court rejected a similar proposal in 2006.

The numbers bear Freidin and Rumberger out. In November, Democrat Barack Obama bested John McCain by 237,000 votes in the Sunshine State. In the aggregate, Democratic and Republican congressional candidates

received vote totals in similar proportion. Yet our state's congressional delegation had 15 Republicans and 10 Democrats.

The state Legislature is even more lopsided: Republicans own 76 of the state House's 120 seats and 26 of the state Senate's 40 seats, rendering Democrats impotent. In 61 of the 120 state House contests last November, the winner faced token opposition or none at all. That's not because our legislators are held in such high regard — in most cases, the opposition never has a chance. In the 2008 elections, a "change" year by any other measure, only one seat in the state legislature, House or Senate, changed parties.

Congressional races aren't much better. Last year, only two of the 25 Florida contests were nail-biters; the rest were blowouts. In three races, the Republicans didn't put up an opponent. Democrats who won in November did so with an average victory margin of 26 percentage points; the Republicans' margin was 22 points.

If you've ever wondered how Congressional approval ratings could be so terrible — 39 percent

in a recent Gallup poll, up from 19 percent in January — when 95 percent of

its members are repeatedly re-elected, look no further than the way the district

lines are drawn. In Florida, look specifically at District 3, which stretches from Jacksonville to Orlando and captures nearly every black neighborhood along the way. Last year, Democrat Corrine Brown was re-elected without opposition, and she will probably hold that seat until she retires or dies.

And that's just fine with the Republicans who created it. Every Democrat they pack into that gerrymandered zone is a Democrat who doesn't vote in neighboring contests, which in turn helps the Republicans pad their numbers. Of course, there's an argument to be made for minority-majority districts, which ensure black and Latino representation for Congress. But you see similarly odd districts drawn all over the state. For instance, state Sen. Dave Aronberg's barbell-shaped District 27 starts in Palm Beach County, stretches in a thin line over the uninhabited Everglades, and settles on the other side of the state in Ft. Myers. The Democrat easily won re-election last year.

The end result is state Legislature driven by right-wing ideologues and a congressional delegation nearly devoid of moderates, with incumbents who have little to fear from voters.

*jbillman@orlandoweekly.com*

