

September 12, 2021

Oregon House and Senate Interim Redistricting Committees

My testimony will not address the “best” way to draw lines on a map for redistricting using the census data, nor do I have an algorithm that would conveniently serve that purpose. Although ORS 188.010 specifies that district boundaries are not to be drawn in a way to favor a political party, the actual redistricting process is one in which the two major parties divvy up that state between them. What is—on paper—designed to be a non-partisan process is not that at all.

It’s therefore interesting that the largest group of voters who could best be described as nonpartisan do not appear to be addressed in the redistricting process. I’m specifically referring to non-affiliated voters or NAVs. As of December 2020, NAVs represented 32% of registered voters in Oregon, numbering almost one million voters. Since December, the number of registered Democrats has declined by 22,000 and the number of registered Republicans by 29,000. The number of NAVs has increased by 42,000 and now constitute 33% of Oregon voters, a 1% increase in just eight months.

A few more metrics to consider. When the last redistricting effort was undertaken after the 2010 census, NAVs constituted 21% of registered voters. Over the past decade, registered Democrats grew by 122%, registered Republications by 115%, and NAVs by 220%. NAVs now outnumber the number registered to either major party in the 2nd, 4th, and 5th Congressional Districts. In my own House and Senate Districts, with substantial majorities of Democratic voters, 26-28% are NAVs.

These are a lot of statistics. To some extent, they are not particularly relevant to your current challenges. They are very important, however, to consider for the future of redistricting in Oregon. Party registration is probably the determinative variable in the redistricting process, regardless of the directive to be nonpartisan. This focus on major party numbers and geographic distribution ignores or discounts a third of the voting population. They are represented in other demographic data but not their identity as voters who have chosen to remain outside the two-party system.

The Oregon Legislature has an opportunity in the current redistricting process to seriously consider how it will work a decade from now, and especially the role of NAVs —as well as minor parties—in defining both congressional and legislative districts. NAVs are much younger than voters registered as Democrats and Republicans, and many are from the Black, Latinx, and Asian communities. Many of them are already disillusioned with and disheartened by our present political system. Continuing their marginalization in the political process not only undermines the integrity and equity of Oregon democracy but will encourage growing numbers of disaffected voters.

In its current redistricting effort, the Legislature has an opportunity to begin better defining a future redistricting process that will represent all Oregonians. For more than a century, Oregon has been known for creating a more transparent and equitable political system. Let’s live up to that reputation.

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