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Census set to show Illinois losing 1 US House seat

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With the expectation that Illinois will lose one of its congressional seats, the state's politicians are poised to begin their once-a-decade finagling over drawing the state's political boundaries based on new census data.

On Tuesday, Census Bureau officials plan to release initial population estimates for the nation. A continuing population shift from the north to the south and west means Illinois is likely to lose one of its 19 seats in the House, and the clout that goes with it.

While nationally the reapportionment is expected to help Republicans, Democrats in Illinois have an advantage because they control both chambers of the General Assembly and the governor's office, which are tasked with determining how the new political lines are drawn.

Census data so far suggests new Hispanic-dominated districts could emerge, particularly with growth in some Chicago area neighborhoods. States are required under the Voting Rights Act to respect the interests of minority voting blocs.

Other scenarios include a lost seat in downstate Illinois, which has lost population.

"It could be good news for Democrats," said U.S. Rep. Phil Hare, who lost a former Democratic stronghold to tea party-backed GOP challenger Bobby Schilling in November, but could benefit from redrawn lines if he decides to run again in 2012.

Pat Brady, chairman of the Illinois Republican Party, warned that the GOP would push back if the Democrats in Springfield become too "heavy handed" and don't cooperate in creating new congressional and legislative districts that are competitive for both sides.

He appealed to Gov. Pat Quinn to make sure that Democratic House Speaker Michael Madigan and Senate President John Cullerton play fair.

"When it's too much one-party control, there's unintended consequences, and it's going to backfire," Brady said. "I don't think for a second that (Illinois House Speaker) Mike Madigan's not going to shove this right down our throat."

Steve Brown, a spokesman for Madigan, said that the Illinois process will comply with federal election laws. "That makes who's in the majority, who's in the governor's office, not nearly as important as some of the hand-wringers want you to think," he said.

So-called redistricting is a tedious and politically charged process that protects strongholds, affects influence in Washington and makes or breaks political careers. The task over the next few months is analyzing population data while considering geography, race and political interests so legislators can re-divide the state's population into nearly equal pockets.

"Redistricting is the most political activity that occurs in a decade," said Chris Mooney, a political science professor at the University of Illinois in Springfield. "It's almost purely about who gets what and who wins what seat."

Officially, the state legislature comes up with a plan and approves it like a bill. It also requires the governor's signature. In cases of deadlock, Illinois leaves the key decision over which party gets to draw the political map to random chance: One year, the secretary of state picked the winner out of Lincoln's stovepipe hat.

The process, outlined in the 1970s Constitution, can drag for months and undergo court challenges. Efforts to reform the system stalled earlier this year.

Each decade brings a set of unpredictable and unprecedented circumstances. This year is the first time since the current redistricting laws have been in place that Illinois has both a Democratic governor and Democratic-majority in both houses of the legislature.

The last time Illinois redrew its congressional map - in 2001, when Republican George Ryan was governor and the state Senate was Republican majority - the state also lost a seat.

Two Illinois congressmen, then Republican House Speaker Dennis Hastert and Democratic U.S. Rep. Bill Lipinski, came up with a plan that largely protected incumbents. But it left out Democratic Rep. David Phelps, whose district was combined with others.

State Sen. Kwame Raoul, a Chicago Democrat, heads a committee which has been looking at overhauling the state's redistricting laws. He said there has been surprisingly little chatter on new boundaries so far, which he believes means the state legislature will maintain a central role instead of "just punting to the congressional delegation."

The sprawling 17th District, which the GOP's Schilling just won, hugs a long stretch of the state's western border, but juts into central Illinois to include Decatur and portions of Springfield. Hare said lines could be drawn to pick up more Democratic areas from Republican Rep. Don Manzullo's 16th District.

Another scenario includes making two districts from the 17th District and two others represented by Republican Congressmen Aaron Schock in the 18th District in west-central Illinois and Tim Johnson in the 15th District, which covers a chunk of eastern Illinois.

Brady said he doesn't see any district being particularly safe, and that any of them - Democratic or Republican - could be subject to change. And he said he's confident that GOP candidates will be competitive, especially those who won in November.

"No matter how they slice and dice it, we're going to have good candidates," Brady said.
Associated Press Writer David Mercer in Champaign contributed to this report.

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