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Professor Greg Shaw on Gerrymandering and the Effect on Local Races

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WGLT Interview with Greg Shaw May 20, 2021

Charlie Schlenker: Mclean County will create a bipartisan commission to draft three proposed county board maps. Illinois Wesleyan University political science professor Greg Shaw tells Eric Stock he considers that a positive step toward creating more fair and competitive board races for the next decade. Shaw notes county board share John McIntyre and board member Elizabeth Johnston represent the only district that elected one republican and one democrat.

Greg Shaw: It's pretty obvious I think to anyone that look at the county board map that um 9 of the 10 districts are clearly partisan creatures right all but number 5 are represented by either 2 democrats or 2 republicans so let's just acknowledge that the way the map has been drawn has been pretty... pretty partisan as it is and, um, that's not saying that it's necessarily unfair but let's just face that, as a background reality let's keep that in mind. There are some public issues that I think could become statutory conflicts, so state law says that you're not supposed to split precincts. But in fact that happens on our county board. There's a problem about that because that's a sign there's intentionality drawing the lines that potentially disenfranchise communities of interest. The uh, another statutory issue that I think should be taken seriously is that state law says that you should go to great lengths to not split municipalities.

Eric Stock: How common is that practice in local governments we know it happens at the state levels

Shaw: So I'm not sure with regard to breaking municipalities or breaking precincts I don't know how common that is. That's really I don't know but certainly the other there's one more consideration and it has to do with compactness. The state law says that districts are supposed to be compact and this is usually to make sure that people who share a common interest whether that is economic class or race or whatever that may be they don't get intentionally split or cracked as the saying goes. So critics will scoff at this and say well compactness isn't in the eye of the beholder and that there's no sort of test for this. This is where citizens can come in and say look I can see a non-compact district when I can identify one when I see it and so I think we should take that seriously.

Stock: As you had alluded to that... uh, it should be an effort toward creating more in play districts, if you will, following compact of communities...

Shaw: Right.

Stock: ... would naturally create that?

Shaw: Yes, so yeah, the evidence is yes. So um... so... and the opposite is quite on display as we see partisan Jerry Manders you know run amuck across this country, I'm thinking particularly at the congressional level. Um... you know state legislature generally their rule is to protect in cumbrance especially cumbrance of their own party if they're in majority and so, um, we know that less gerrymandered districts will, on the whole, be more competitive. And I think from a democratic a small democratic point of view that's a great thing because it gives folks a viable pair of choices or maybe

more than two choices so I love that principle of creating more competitive districts it should not be a foregone conclusion. Routinely representatives should not run unopposed I mean we should naturally create some competition so that citizens have a choice I mean that's what fundamentally democracy is supposed to involve.

Stock: And local republicans have said that the democrats in Springfield...

Shaw: Yeah.

Stock: ...have been gerrymandering the maps...

Shaw: Sure.

Stock: ...to help themselves, and to hurt republicans and this is a republican leaning county, especially outside of Bloomington-Normal. Is that a fair argument to make?

Shaw: I think it is a fair argument to make you know two can play this game and I want to point back to the growing number of states that have resorted back to sort of non some sort of independent commission to draw maps because when you put folks in a room um and close the door and give them precinct native voting data you know it's not hard to generate exactly the kind of electro outcome you want and I think there's evidence that both parties do this whenever they get the chance. The district I'm sitting in, the 13th congressional district, was drawn to be a democratic district it hasn't worked out that way, you know Rodney Davis keeps winning, but um... I think that's deeply problematic. It disempowers voters.

Schlenker: That was Illinois Wesleyan University's Political Science professor Greg Shaw with Eric Stock. Shaw says the public comment sections held at the start of the process likely weren't useful since there were no proposed maps to consider. The county plans to make three proposed maps available for public viewing before the board approves the new map before the end of July.