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State ballot proposition on legislative redistricting panel focus of debate in New Paltz

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NEW PALTZ >> A ballot proposition to establish a state commission on legislative redistricting was debated here Wednesday evening, with observers saying approval of the measure could either make the political business of drawing election districts messier or be a step toward ending a way that incumbent office-holders have kept themselves in office.

Arguments on both sides of Proposition 1 were laid out during a 90-minute session at Deyo Hall in the Huguenot Street Historic District, with Gerald Benjamin, director of SUNY New Paltz's Center for Research, Regional Education and Outreach, speaking in opposition to the proposition and Dick Dadey, executive director of Citizens Union, speaking in favor.

"There are ... no legislators allowed on this commission," Dadey said. "There are also no lobbyists and there are no other political officials allowed to serve."

The proposition would establish a 10-member panel, with two members appointed by each of the four state legislative leaders and two members by those appointees. The commission would begin meeting in 2020 and use specific guidelines to draw districts that would require approval by the state Legislature. State courts would make a decision on redistricting if two recommendations are rejected by lawmakers.

Dadey argued that state legislative districts are currently drawn not by Democrats or Republicans but by an "incumbent party" that has broken promises to reform the process.

"The most appealing part of this (proposition) is it bans partisan gerrymandering," he said. "We only need to look at any number of these districts in New York state to see how twisted and contorted they are. They are drawn essentially to advantage the party in power, to protect incumbents."

Benjamin acknowledged that changes to the way districts are drawn is sorely needed but contends having an even-number of commissioners could result in a "nightmarish" deadlock that may not be resolved in courts.

"You could perceive that there could be a deadlock encouraged so that the Legislature could take back control of the process," he said.

Benjamin said it would be "an ideal circumstance" to have final decisions made by the commission. He argued that approval of the proposition will help state lawmakers avoid dealing with redistricting inequities until 2020.

“If we pass this, we will be told that New York’s redistricting process has been reformed and we can move away from this issue for the foreseeable future,” he said. “In other words, this is not a building block. It is a result that we would have to live with for a long time.”

Benjamin said the way appointments are made to the commission is suspect because it involves only Republicans and Democrats without considering other political parties in the state.

“This is the best that the Legislature can do and ... it is proof that the Legislature does not want change,” he said. “It’s proof that what the Legislature wants is to control this process, and they’ve written something in the guise of reform that does not produce reform. It produces the perception of reform and it produces the argument that we’ve already made reform and consequently we don’t have to go further, and I don’t think I want to arm the Legislature with that argument.”

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