



HOME

Headlines Index

Last 6 Days

Search/Archives

Shopping

Career



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Drawing the Line On Fair Elections

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The newly released census numbers on New York are, as always, a gold mine of information about the marvelously diverse people of this city and state.

Journalists, academics and intrigued citizens will be poring over the stats for a long time to come.

The census results also act like a starter's gun. Based on the new population figures, the Legislature soon will begin drawing new lines for state Senate and Assembly districts. It's a once-every-decade legal requirement. And just as sure as the sunrise, you can bet both chambers will try to do it in a way that protects incumbents. In Albany, "redistricting" is a synonym for "guaranteed reelection."

That is a direct denial of democracy and a cynical, destructive manipulation of the political system. The only cure is drawing legislative districts that give New Yorkers a real choice between Democrats and Republicans. Districts in which challengers have at least a fair shot at defeating incumbents.

For decades, there has been an unwritten bargain in Albany that legislative districts will be fixed in a way to ensure Republican control of the state Senate and Democratic control of the Assembly. How do they do it? That's where the census numbers come in.

Matched with voter registration rolls, they show the pols where the concentrations of Democrats and Republicans are. Then lines are drawn to include — or exclude — folks whose affiliation doesn't match the incumbent's. If the resulting district looks like a particularly ugly ink blot, so be it.

It's past time to get rid of gerrymandered districts, and this could be the year, because Gov. Pataki — who must sign off on the new lines — has signaled that he will take an active role. He should veto any plan that does not provide more competitive districts.

Twelve states use nonpartisan commissions to draw their districts, and 12 other states use the courts to do the job. Why can't New York follow one of those examples?

It isn't rocket science. For example, the New York Public Interest Research Group has the software to draft fair lines. There are other competent groups that could do the job too.

Another crucial point: New York City should get more representation in Albany when the new lines are drawn. More than two-thirds of the state's population gains over the past decade were in the city. As a result, its share of the populace rose to 42% from 41%. The city should gain one seat in the 61-member Senate and two seats in the 150-member Assembly.

Power must come from the people, not the parties.

Open Hearts

One cannot say that the story of Bao Zhu Chen has a happy ending. Happiness is a rare commodity when your husband has been murdered. But at least the widow and her two children are now debt-free. And have a decent place to live. All thanks to the kindness of strangers, including not a few Daily News readers.

Chen's husband, Jin-Sheng Liu, was slain in Queens in September. Charged in the killing are five teenagers who police say phoned in an order at Liu's Chinese restaurant, beat him savagely when he delivered the food and left him to die as they consumed their free meal. It was one of those crimes that redefine "bestial."

Chen was left destitute. The News discovered and publicized her plight, and readers responded. More than \$40,000 in donations poured in. Since virtually all that went to pay her husband's creditors — Chen considered meeting the debts a moral obligation — she continued to live in a single squalid room at the rear of the restaurant. As bad as that was, it was better than being homeless. But then the landlord threatened eviction.

Now, thanks to the efforts of Asian Americans for Equality, a nonprofit organization, and city officials who refused to be paralyzed by bureaucracy, the family is moving into an apartment in Manhattan. Chen and her children will finally have a real home. That, and the knowledge that they are surrounded by compassionate people, can at least help ease their continuing grief.

Good Scouts

From the wires: *TACOMA, Wash. (AP) — When a thief stole \$100 from a pack of Girl Scouts who were selling cookies in front of a grocery store, police officers dug into their own pockets to make it right.*

Now, that really earns a merit badge.

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