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Midwest States Launch Campaign to Pull Back Curtain on 2011 Redistricting

“Draw the Line Midwest” shines spotlight on remapping, seeks greater public involvement in traditionally secretive process of drawing political boundaries

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CHICAGO—Civic engagement and community organizations in six Midwest states today announced they will implement a coordinated campaign to transform redistricting—the way electoral district lines are drawn—by shining an ongoing spotlight on the process, pushing for increased public participation and greater protection of minority voting rights in the creation of new political maps, and proposing alternatives to plans working their way through state legislatures.

Draw the Line Midwest, the nation’s first regional redistricting reform campaign, is a collaboration of the Midwest Democracy Network—an alliance of 25 groups advocating for political reform, civil rights, and other interests in Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, Minnesota, Ohio and Wisconsin, with technical support from the Brennan Center for Justice at New York University Law School.

Redistricting occurs once every ten years, after the decennial Census, and can have a profound impact on whether communities can elect representatives of their choice who are responsive to their concerns, but this building-block of our democracy has traditionally been exploited for political gain.

In most jurisdictions in the United States, incumbent lawmakers have the power to draw the district lines. Districts can be drawn to give one political party a distinct voting advantage over others. In addition, candidates or incumbents can be cut out of or crowded into a district, either to force candidates out of office or to force specific candidates to compete against each other. Racial and ethnic communities can be split across multiple districts, so as to dilute their voting strength, or they may be packed into one district, thereby limiting the number of elected officials they can select. The federal Voting Rights Act prohibits practices that deny minority voters an equal opportunity to participate in the political process and to elect candidates of their choice. Nonetheless, voters have frequently experienced discrimination and unfairness as a result of partisan- or incumbent-oriented redistricting processes or a lack of awareness about the needs of specific communities.

“It’s time to change the focus of redistricting from preserving partisan majorities, protecting incumbents, and diluting votes of minority communities to ensuring that voters get the fairest and best possible representation in state legislatures and the U.S. House of Representatives,” said Leah Rush, the Network’s executive director. “This is a once-in-a-decade opportunity to transform a system that lets lawmakers choose their constituents, when it should be the other way around.”

As part of the campaign, Network partners in each state will team up with the Public Mapping Project and Metro Chicago Information Center to launch District Builder, a unique web-based, open-source software. This tool will allow citizens and advocacy groups to draw their own district maps or map individual communities on the web and is a new and important component for getting people involved. It is expected to be available and free to use in each of the six states by April.

The Public Mapping Project is led by Dr. Michael McDonald, associate professor at George Mason University, and Dr. Micah Altman, senior research scientist at Harvard University. Both are nonresident senior fellows at the Brookings Institution.

Each state participating in the *Draw the Line Midwest* campaign features its own redistricting coalition and its own plan for how best to achieve the goal of greater public scrutiny of the process and increased public participation. Activities include establishing citizen redistricting commissions, public meetings, panel discussions and map-drawing competitions. (*Information on each state’s activities, along with who to contact, is on page 3.*)

“This campaign is unique because, together, we are prying open doors that, in the past, have appeared to be locked. When lines are manipulated, voters are manipulated. Now is the time to for voters to draw the line – both figuratively and literally,” said Catherine Turcer, director of the Ohio Citizen Action’s Money in Politics Project.

While the state campaigns will serve as a public interest counterweight to legislative redistricting processes, organizations involved in the *Draw the Line* campaign are open to working collaboratively with legislatures on meaningful public participation in redistricting.

“By gathering input in a genuine way—perhaps even through our individual state campaigns—legislative mapmakers have an opportunity to demonstrate they’re serious when they talk about being more open and transparent about 2011 redistricting,” said Cindi Canary, executive director of the Illinois Campaign for Political Reform. “But legislative invitations for public participation must be real, not illusory. Regardless, our state coalitions will be there every step of the way on behalf of voters to pursue a government that fairly and honestly represents them.”

The Brennan Center for Justice created resources for the state coalitions and publishes tools for nationwide use, including a redistricting guide specifically designed for the news media. The media guide can be accessed at www.brennancenter.org/content/resource/a_media_guide_to_redistricting.

Initial funding for the campaign and for the Midwest Democracy Network has been provided by the Joyce Foundation. The redistricting campaign concept was developed by the late Larry Hansen, former vice president at Joyce and director of its Money and Politics Program.

For more information on coalition events in each state and/or to find a complete list of partner organizations, go to www.drawthelinemidwest.org. For more information on the Midwest Democracy Network, please visit www.midwestdemocracynetwork.org.

State-Specific Activities and Contacts for *Draw the Line* Campaign

Each state is engaging in its own activities for the *Draw the Line* campaign. Here are some examples of what states will be doing in the coming months:

- The **Illinois** coalition drafted a model transparency bill and concept maps to highlight state legislative districts. The maps will be presented at public forums throughout the state to inform, educate and engage citizens, making it more difficult for legislators to hide their redistricting plans.
CONTACT: Jocelyn Woodards, Illinois Campaign for Accountable Redistricting – 312-335-1767 or jocelyn@ilcampaign.org
- In **Indiana**, coalition members recently established a Citizen’s Redistricting Commission made up of Democrats, Republicans, Independents and Libertarians. This commission will hold public hearings around the state on the redistricting process and monitor the drawing of new maps by the Indiana General Assembly.
CONTACT: Julia Vaughn, Common Cause/Indiana – 317-925-5780 or jvaughn@commoncause.org
- The **Michigan** Redistricting Collaborative, composed of business, labor and public interest groups across the state, will urge lawmakers and county redistricting commissions around the state to make their decisions more accountable, transparent and open to public involvement.
CONTACT: Dave Waymire, Martin Waymire Advocacy Communications – ofc 517-485-6600, cell 517-290-3610 or dwaymire@mwadvocacy.com
- The **Minnesota** coalition is engaging and educating communities around the state about redistricting, working with lawmakers to make the current legislative process more transparent and open to citizen input, and evaluating opportunities for long-term legislative reform.
CONTACT: Taina Maki, Minnesota Democracy Network – 651-224-5445 or tmaki@lwmn.org
- In **Ohio**, coalition members are replicating a successful 2009 online mapping competition that invited the public to demonstrate how congressional districts could be drawn to meet specific criteria. In the three winning plans, the majority of districts were competitive for either party—a stark departure from the districts typically drawn by legislators.
CONTACT: Catherine Turcer, Ohio Citizen Action’s Money in Politics Project – 614-221-6077 or cturcer@ohiocitizen.org
- The **Wisconsin** coalition is working to build greater public awareness of the importance of redistricting at all levels of government and to encourage citizen engagement in the redistricting process. A locally focused effort will provide community members with software and training to draw and present maps to legislators, ensuring underrepresented communities are actively involved in the process at the aldermanic and local levels. A statewide Citizens Panel will educate the general public, monitor state and congressional redistricting, and review and submit mapping alternatives to the Legislature.
CONTACTS: Beverly Speer, Wisconsin Democracy Campaign (state): 608-255-4260; speer@wisdc.org or Sabrina L. Johnson, Wisconsin Voices (local): 414-226-4289; sabrina@wisconsinvoices.org

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