

## MIKE TIPPING: Changes in political structure could benefit Maine Republicans

With Republican gains in Congress and state legislatures across the country, much has been made about the permanent electoral advantages the GOP may create for itself by controlling redistricting.

Redistricting is the process of redrawing congressional and state legislative districts.

Maine isn't gaining or losing a U.S. House seat, and our redistricting process lags behind the rest of the country, meaning lines won't be redrawn until after the 2012 election.

Redistricting, therefore, won't be much of an issue during this session of the state Legislature, but that doesn't mean that Maine Republicans won't seek to use their new legislative majorities to change the state to their own electoral benefit in other ways.

Here are some things to watch for:

- The GOP might attempt to pass laws that chip away at Maine's labor unions, which usually oppose Republican candidates.

We recently witnessed the push by Republican leaders in the Legislature to rename and remake the Labor Committee, which could have weakened the role of unions in policy decisions. That won't likely be the last anti-labor measure introduced this session.

It's probable that some Republicans will attempt to pass legislation that would prohibit employers from entering into agreements with unions requiring their employees to join a union or pay union dues as a condition of employment, a cornerstone of the process of collective bargaining for workplace rights.

Twenty-two states, mostly in the South, have similar laws that serve to weaken unions and decrease the political clout of organized labor.

- Republicans could attack Maine's system of clean elections.

The Maine Clean Elections Act was passed by referendum by Maine voters more than a decade ago. The program is used by large majorities of both Democratic and Republican legislators and by many candidates for governor. It provides public financing for candidates and serves to reduce the role money plays in Maine's elections and government.

De-funding the program or making it more difficult to use likely would be a boon to large corporations and the wealthy, traditional Republican constituencies, and would allow them to give more money and have more influence in state politics and policy.

- Republicans might seek to make it more difficult for certain groups of people to vote by altering identification or residency requirements for voter registration. In particular, they might attempt to disenfranchise Maine college students.

In 2007, Republican Rep. L. Gary Knight introduced a bill that would have prohibited students who live on campus from voting in the town where their school is located, forcing them to vote by absentee ballot in their last place of residence or not vote at all.

Knight has been returned to the Legislature and made chairman of the Taxation Committee, and it's likely similar legislation will return as well. Gov.-elect [Paul LePage](#) also offered support for the

idea at a forum at Colby College in 2005 while mayor of Waterville.

Demographically, young people are more likely to vote for progressive candidates and issues, so this kind of change most likely would benefit Republicans, particularly those running for office in districts and towns containing colleges and universities.

This kind of attempt would be unfortunate not just on moral grounds, because of the systematic disenfranchisement of an entire group of people, but it would also be a blow to Maine's attempts to attract and retain an educated work force.

The solution to many of Maine's economic problems lies in convincing young people to come to or stay in the state, become involved in their communities, practice entrepreneurship and contribute to Maine's knowledge economy. Putting up barriers to civic participation would do exactly the opposite.

Republican leaders have pledged that they will focus on people and the economy this session instead of political games, so perhaps none of these issues I've mentioned will even be broached.

If they are submitted and enacted, however, they could represent the first steps in changing the political structure and culture of Maine and making Republican control of state government a more frequent occurrence.

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