



Monday, January 23, 2012

## A 63rd seat has no leg to stand on

By JOSHUA SPIVAK

As their population base erodes, New York's Senate Republicans face a challenging redistricting — one that could end their almost uninterrupted, nearly century-long hammerlock on the State Senate.

So they have decided to fall back on an old idea: Expand the size of the Senate to squeeze in one more seat in their favor. This plan is a straightforward power grab — one that simply adds more fat and expenses to an already bloated institution.

Compared with other states, New York's Senate is already way too big. New York has the second-largest Senate in the country, after Minnesota; only two other states have more than 50 members in their upper chamber.

On the other side of the aisle, our state Assembly, while large at 150 members, is not even in the top 5 in the country. The reason for the supersized Senate has nothing to do with the state's large population — America's other biggest states, California, Texas and Florida, all have 40 or fewer senators.

Unfortunately for New Yorkers, this bloated Senate does not mean a more effective or active institution.

New York's Senate is not exactly known as the hardest-working legislative body in the country. Albany's "three men in a room" governing philosophy has meant that, except for the majority leader, nearly all the senators — including all the members of the minority party — are superfluous.

But this irrelevance is not free — New York senators are actually very well paid. Surveys show our Senate ranks near the top in pay in the nation, while at the same time being considered a "part-time" job — meaning senators can (and do) hold down other lucrative positions.

As we saw at the trial of former Majority Leader Joseph Bruno, sometimes these positions can be directly related to the Senate job, to the taxpayers' everlasting regret.

Each additional senator is not just a salary, plus per diem and travel expenses. The new senator will also require staff and office space. It's not clear exactly how much the cost will be, but in a 2005 survey, the Empire Center for New York State Policy ranked New York fourth in spending per legislator, at \$973,900 per member.

None of these negative facts will stop the Republicans, who have added one seat in each of the last two redistrictings. The addition of a seat in 2002 ended up coming back to haunt New York, when four rogue Democrats created a 32–32 split in the chamber — and Gov. Eliot Spitzer's resignation elevated his lieutenant, David Paterson, to the governor's office, leaving no one to break the tie.

Republicans have long had their way with the upper chamber — the party has controlled the body for all but a handful of years since World War I. Over the last 70 years, there have been only two terms that the Republicans were not in power, and both of those terms were marred by catastrophic Democratic infighting.

But now, Republicans rightly feel threatened. Democrats are easily going to win the presidential vote in New York, and perhaps pull in additional voters for the rest of the ticket. The

Republicans' majority is very thin, and that extra seat can only help.

However, this problem should be of no consequence to the redistricting process. There is clearly no need for an additional Senate seat, and no reason for the added expense.

Having two competitive parties in a state is great. Adding more players to your team is no way to go about it. Republicans should turn back from this plan, before New Yorkers make them regret it.

*Joshua Spivak is a senior fellow at the Hugh L. Carey Institute for Government Reform at Wagner College and writes the Recall Elections Blog. <<http://recallelections.blogspot.com>>*