

# Chicago's next ward map can change a neighborhood's fate

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## FULL TEXT

In the upcoming months, the figures from the 2020 U.S. Census will be released. Besides giving us a clear view of population trends in the neighborhoods of our city, this new census data will be used in the redistricting of Chicago into 50 wards of nearly equal population. This redistricting process is the most important political event of the decade, as it shapes the political fates of every alderman and also every community. Usually, the maps are made in the backrooms of the City Council and the state legislature with no public input. This year will be different.

In decades past, maps proposed by the City Council have been adopted nearly unanimously. However, for anyone who has seen the current ward map of Chicago, it is hard to believe that it was drawn to benefit the residents of Chicago. While it was technically legal, it kept power bases of clouted incumbents within their wards, thus maximizing their chances of reelection. Especially for long-term incumbents, a disadvantageous map is an existential threat that must be eliminated at any cost.

At the state and national levels, the conversation about gerrymandering revolves around the battle between the two major parties. However, in a one-party Chicago, where redistricting is controlled by our City Council, the conflict is not between Democrats and Republicans. It is between the body of 50 incumbents and the 2.7 million Chicagoans who just want fair representation.

The backroom division of the city's neighborhoods doesn't just make for ugly maps tilted toward incumbents. It also makes for a worse city. Take communities such as Englewood and Chinatown, which are split apart, or the gerrymandered 2nd Ward, which represents no single community. Sonya Harper, who represents parts of Englewood in the Illinois House, has said that the dysfunction stemming from the neighborhood being split into six different wards "is one of the biggest reasons why" Englewood gets a bad rap.

City Council maps can have a human toll as well: The western portion of Little Village, represented by a single alderman, sees a far lower crime rate than the eastern half, which is split among three different wards. That split has contributed to difficulties in coordinating efforts to deal with problems such as gang violence.

A transparent and public mapping process is important for the same reason numerous groups are calling for transparency and accountability in our schools, police and economic recovery from the pandemic.

Simply changing who gets elected won't change how our institutions are governed, and it won't change the "winner-take-all" system in a one-party city. But leveling the electoral playing field through redistricting can be a critical first step in showing the residents of Chicago that we can achieve a 21st century government that punishes graft and corruption and elevates innovation and inclusion.

Although the deadline for the City Council to adopt a new map is Dec. 1, the mapping wars already have begun. Ideally, an ordinance to create an independent commission and make the mapping process transparent would be the right way forward. However, since no such ordinance is pending, good government groups have created a Chicago Advisory Redistricting Committee, with 13 members from every section of the city, to draw a community ward map.

Due to the laws of Chicago and Illinois, this Advisory Redistricting Committee's map will be just that, advisory.

However, if any 10 aldermen introduce this alternate map, it could be put before the voters in a public, legally binding referendum, likely in the next citywide elections, in March. Such a map, from the people and communities, would maximize the ability of communities to elect their own representatives over "machine" influence. The remapping process will be difficult. But if a majority of the City Council does not approve a new map, it goes to voters. The reform organizations and 10 aldermen will ask the people by referendum which map we want. We will then have the chance to create a ward map that represents every community that is fair to all. We can't let this once-in-a-decade opportunity slip through our fingers.

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CAPTION: Photo: The Chicago skyline is seen from Ping Tom Park in Chinatown in 2019. BRIAN CASSELLA/CHICAGO TRIBUNE

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