

Connecticut demands an end to prison-based gerrymandering

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EDITORIALS

Count Inmates At Home

Though it fell in a rather busy week and didn't grab much attention, another U.S. Supreme Court decision last week should have ramifications for Connecticut. The ruling affirmed the constitutionality of a Maryland law that counts incarcerated persons as residents of their last legal home addresses, not the prisons, for redistricting purposes.

This is the fairer way to do it. The decision should be an impetus for Connecticut to follow suit.

Prisoners are counted in the locality of the prison here and in most states, which is an accident of history. When the census began more than two centuries ago, it didn't much matter where inmates were counted because relatively few people were in prison and the prisons and jails were often in the same town where the prisoner lived. But the burst of prison building and mass incarceration in the latter part of the 20th century changed the landscape. Now there are many more people in prisons that are most often in other municipalities.

The U.S. Census Bureau recognized this in 2010 when it allowed states to choose where to count inmates for redistricting purposes. And handful of states including New York and Maryland passed laws requiring that inmates be counted in their home communities. Bills that would have changed the law in Connecticut failed in the last two sessions of the General Assembly.

Next year it should pass. The current system tends to dilute the political power of urban areas, where the majority of inmates come from, in favor of suburban towns that happen to have prisons. Remember that most prisoners cannot vote. So if, say, 15 percent of a district is made up of inmates, then the remaining 85 percent of the district's population has the same political muscle as 100 percent of the people in a district with no prison. That would appear to violate the "one person, one vote" rule.

[...]

Data compiled by the Prison Policy Initiative using the 2000 census found that less than 20 percent of the state's population lives in Bridgeport, Hartford, New Haven, New Britain, Stamford or Waterbury, but more than half of the state's prisoners come from those cities. By the same token, less than 1 percent of state prisoners hail from the five towns — Cheshire, East Lyme, Enfield, Somers and Suffield — that contain 60 percent of the state's prisons.

The vast majority of inmates leave prison, and most go home. That's where they should be counted.

For more on the Connecticut campaign to abolish prison-based gerrymandering, see: <http://www.prisonersofthecensus.org/connecticut.html>

And for a weekly newsletter about the national movement to end prison-based gerrymandering, see: <http://www.prisonersofthecensus.org>

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The Bulletin

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OUR VIEW Population figures should accurately reflect the community.

Prisons skew census numbers

[...]

Legislative boundaries

Those skewed population figures also impact legislative boundaries that are re-apportioned every 10 years based on the U.S. Census. These individuals are ineligible to vote because they are convicted felons serving prison sentences, yet they are counted as residents in calculating and redrawing political boundaries.

Maryland adopted a law that counts prisoners as residents of communities of their last legal address, not the community where they are incarcerated — a law the U.S. Supreme Court upheld as constitutional earlier this month.

Connecticut has twice tried to adopt a similar measure, but with no success. We hope that lawmakers will try again next year.

Hartford Courant

July 9, 2012, page A9

Stop Counting Inmates as Residents

The Courant editorial “Count Inmates At Home” [July 2] addresses an important issue that the legislature should fix in its next session.

Incarcerated people are considered residents of their pre-prison addresses for virtually all legal purposes. Only when drawing electoral districts do we credit them as residents of the prison. This gives extra influence to communities with large prisons, and dilutes the votes of all other residents in the state who don’t happen to live near a prison.

In 2000, the U.S. Census found 19,331 inmates in Connecticut -- a population almost large enough to constitute an entire district. Using this population to fill out legislative districts clearly distorts the goal of “one person, one vote.”

It’s also of particular concern for African American and Latino communities that disproportionately lose population because of this practice.

New York, Maryland, Delaware and California already acted to end prison-based gerrymandering. Their example, along with the Supreme Court’s ruling last week upholding Maryland’s reform law, should encourage the Connecticut legislature to do the same.

Miles Rapoport, West Hartford

► The writer, president of Demos, a progressive advocacy group, was a four-term state representative and served as secretary of the state from 1995-1998.

Hartford Courant

July 5, 2012, online edition

End Prison-Based Gerrymandering

Monday’s editorial was right that Connecticut should count incarcerated people at home for redistricting purposes, not in prison [July 2, “Count Inmates At Home”].

The sheer number of people in Connecticut prisons makes the issue of how they are counted impossible to ignore. In 2010, the U.S. Census Bureau counted close to 20,000 people in state and federal prison cells in Connecticut, despite the fact that they cannot vote and remain legal residents of their home communities.

All together, that’s almost enough people to make up a whole legislative district. In a state where African-Americans are almost 13 times as likely to be incarcerated as whites, and Latinos are incarcerated 7.5 times as often as whites, crediting people in prison to the districts that contain the prisons has negative effects on minority representation. Counting the concentrated, incarcerated population in the few districts that contain prisons dilutes the votes of every Connecticut resident who lives anywhere else.

Now is the time for the Connecticut legislature to start planning ahead for the next redistricting cycle by passing legislation to count incarcerated people at home after the 2020 census.

Cheri Quickmire, Hartford

► The writer is executive director of Common Cause.

Norwich Bulletin

July 21, 2012, online edition

I’m thrilled The Bulletin has called for passing legislation that counts incarcerated people’s hometowns for redistricting purposes. For the last decade, I’ve studied how the Census Bureau’s method of counting inmates as if they were willing residents of the prison distorts the democratic process. And as you note, the national trend is for states to develop procedures to count them at their home addresses for redistricting purposes.

I did want to clarify one important detail, however. It turns out that where prison populations are counted has almost no impact on federal or state funds. It is true that many federal and state funding formulas are distributed in part on population, but our research has shown that almost all of these programs are either blocks grants to the states, or programs that are far too sophisticated to be fooled by where incarcerated people are counted.

That data point aside, The Bulletin is to be commended for raising the prison count issue in its July 17 editorial. The only way the legislature is going to end the practice of diluting the votes of everyone who does not live next to the large prisons in Enfield is if the public demands that they do.

Peter Wagner, Easthampton, Mass.

Peter Wagner is executive director of the Prison Policy Initiative and co-author of the report “Importing Constituents: Prisoners and Political Clout in Connecticut.”