

By William Hershey

COLUMBUS – Except among do-gooders, David L. Horn may not be a household name in the back-scratching and occasionally eye-gouging world of Ohio politics.

If Ohio voters do the right thing next November, however, a lifetime's worth of work by Horn on how to make sure Ohioans have fair representation in the state legislature will be available to guide them.

The Bliss Institute of Applied Politics at the University of Akron is lending a hand by hosting Horn's massive research at www.uakron.edu/bliss/research.

Horn, 82, has been working since the 1970s to reform a current system that now lets the majority party give itself a clear political advantage when it comes to drawing state legislative districts.

He wants to do away with such creations as a former Cleveland-area state Senate district that had three prongs sticking out on the west, each including a part of a Cleveland ward. The goal was to include not just Democrats in the district, but Democrats with Italian surnames.

"I think scholars will read it," said Green, the institute's director, said of Horn's massive research. "The politicians who actually draw the lines will find it really interesting."

Green hopes that the politicians will take the lessons Horn's research provides on airy subjects such as compactness, keeping local governments intact and population equality.

Green, no political Pollyanna, added that there's always the danger that these politicians could misuse Horn's research to make even worse the gerrymandering that that dominates how Ohio is divided into 33 state Senate districts and 99 Ohio House of Representative districts.

Let's be optimistic and, for a change, assume the lawmakers will do the right thing and continue what might be called the "miracle of Columbus" by putting Horn's research to good use. The "miracle of Columbus" refers to the bipartisan agreement Ohio legislators reached last year to place a constitutional amendment on the November ballot this year that would change the current very partisan system of drawing legislative districts.

The districts now are drawn after every 10-year census by the Apportionment Board which is made up of the governor, secretary of state, auditor and two legislators, one from each party. The party that holds two of the three constitutional offices draws the districts to suit its political purposes.

Currently it's the Republicans but Democrats have done the same thing when they held a board majority.

The makeup of the General Assembly reflects this GOP gerrymandering. In a state that has voted for Democrat Barack Obama for president twice, Republicans control the Ohio Senate 23-10 and the Ohio House 65-34.

Something's out of balance here, however, however disorganized and dispirited Democrats might be.

The proposed constitutional amendment would create a new seven-member panel to create legislative districts and would require at least two minority party votes for approval. The commission would be composed of the governor, secretary of state, state auditor and two members from each chamber and from each of the majority and minority parties.

If the plan doesn't get two minority votes, the maps would have to be redrawn in four years. This, said Green, would give board members an incentive to work together, for practice purposes, if nothing else. It's much easier to draw districts once every 10 years than draw them for four, scrap them and start again.

Horn, who could be called the "grandfather of redistricting reform", is delighted with the Bliss Institute's decision to host his massive research.

"I am happy there is an institute of applied politics in Ohio appropriate for offering researchers a study like mine about how the process of redistricting might be made fully democratic," Horn, from the Athens area, wrote in an email.

Horn, an agriculture engineer by profession, has been both patient and persevering since starting in politics as Athens district manager for George McGovern, the Democratic candidate for president in 1972.

"I thought it worthwhile enough to try reforming the redistricting process that for 41 years I researched its history, analyzed its favoritism to the party in power, conferred with political activists in other states, contributed an amicus brief to a (U.S.) Supreme Court case and helped craft another, introduced reform legislation 12 times into the Ohio legislature and wrote this detailed manuscript about ways to do away with gerrymandering," he said.

It has been difficult to achieve reform because concepts surrounding redistricting are academic sounding and, at first blush, draw little attention from citizens more worried about paying their bills and educating their children.

At its essence, however, there is nothing academic about it.

"Democracy means all the citizens are represented. Gerrymandering gives some more voice than others ... Democracy widely and equally distributes political power. By giving the dominant party a free hand to redraw the district map of a state every 10 years to reflect population changes, it has the right to redistribute power unequally, skewing results in its favor," said Horn.

The proposed constitutional amendment does not do all that Horn would like to see done. It leaves the system for drawing U.S. congressional district. Ohio, a battleground state, now has 12 districts represented by Republicans and just four by Democrats.

Horn is disappointed, but savors the victory he is on the verge of achieving.

"It is 'half a loaf' but still would be a lot better than it is now," he said