Amendments 5 and 6: Redistricting changes also a party fight

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The Florida Legislature’s once-a-decade task of redrawing political boundaries has always proved a fierce partisan fight.

But this fall, the struggle has intensified – beginning two years early and pivoting around a pair of ballot measures going before voters Nov. 2.

“There may be some people who are involved in this for what you might call good government reasons,” said Aubrey Jewett, a political scientist at the University of Central Florida. “But it really is a partisan fight.”

Amendments 5 and 6, if approved by at least 60 percent of Florida voters, would guide the 2012 round of redistricting. But the measures have already spawned a battle between Florida Republicans who rule the Legislature and Democrats, supporting the proposals as a means to help them regain power.

The measures – one covering legislative districts and the other congressional – would require voting districts be compact, contiguous and respect city and county boundaries when possible.

But the main change would be line-drawing, which must be done to reflect population shifts revealed in the Census and would be prohibited from favoring incumbent politicians or political parties, under the proposals.

Fair Districts Florida, which spent $3.2 million on a petition-gathering campaign that collected the necessary 678,811 voter signatures for each proposed constitutional amendment, has been backed heavily by Democratic-allied groups, including the Florida Education Association and the Service Employees International Union.

Heading toward Election Day, Fair Districts raised another $1.5 million from more Democratic-leaning individuals, organizations and political committees, while Republican-backed opponents recently formed Protect Your Vote, a spending committee whose contributions through late September were confined to a $25,000 donation from TECO Energy, the Tampa-area utility.

Fair Districts supporters include AARP, the Florida League of Women Voters and the state NAACP.

Both sides in the fight insist they are not doing the bidding of either political party.

“This is not a partisan issue,” said Ellen Freidin, Fair Districts’ campaign chair. “We don’t want to draw district lines that favor any party or incumbent. We just want to let voters choose their representatives in the Legislature and Congress, not have them choose their voters.
“We want things to be fair. But the other side may want to inject partisan politics into this,” she added.

Kurt Browning, a former Florida secretary of state chairing the Protect Your Vote committee, said he and other opponents say the proposed standards are “unworkable,” and could potentially reduce minority representation in the Legislature and Florida congressional delegation.

“I know people are frustrated with the way districts are drawn in Florida,” Browning said. “But this is not the way to fix it.”

Redistricting is pivotal to both parties.

While registered Democrats exceed Republicans by almost 600,000 voters in Florida, boundaries drawn by the Legislature over the past 20 years have helped the GOP dominate the Legislature and Florida’s seats in Congress.

Deepening the partisan subplot, the Republican-controlled Legislature fought the two Fair Districts amendments and offered an alternative proposal that has been since struck from the ballot by a state court.

Still, the Fair Districts approach may include some risk for minority lawmakers – all of whom are Democrats in Florida.

By demanding that districts be compact, the amendments could threaten the multi-county, serpentine districts now served by some minority incumbents, critics say.

Such boundaries were created during redistricting in 1992 and 2002 to create voting districts with as many black Democrats as possible. That helped clear the way for Florida to elect its first minority representatives in Congress since shortly after the Civil War, while also increasing the small number then serving in the Legislature.

But such minority-packed districts also reduced the Democratic population in surrounding areas. And that has allowed Florida Republicans to flourish and win control of the Legislature in 1996 for the first time in 122 years.

Redistricting in 2002 only solidified the GOP’s grip on legislative power.

The Florida NAACP and most black Democratic lawmakers have rejected Republican claims that Fair Districts will hurt minorities, saying that Voting Rights Act protections are unaffected and that the warnings being sent up are designed to muddy support for the measures.

Despite that claim, two minority members of Congress, State Rep. Corrine Brown, and State Rep. Mario Diaz-Balart, an Hispanic Miami Republican, earlier filed a lawsuit seeking to strike Amendments 5 and 6, a move rejected by the Florida Supreme Court. Brown and Diaz-Balart are now supporting the Protect Your Vote campaign.

District lines in place since 2002 have created some inconsistencies across Florida.

Fort Lauderdale, for example, is fragmented into four congressional districts. Brown represents a district stretching 140 miles and spanning nine counties. Republican U.S. Rep. John Mica represents parts of six counties, including a sliver of Orange County that also contains his Winter Park home.
In Orange County, where more registered voters are Democrats, Republicans hold nine of 12 state House seats that include a portion of the county, along with three-out-of-four Senate seats.

Freidin, of Fair Districts, said the ballot measures would end such political imbalances.

While the amendments have not drawn much voter focus or the major television ad campaigns accompanying other political races, most say the measures will have a profound effect if approved.

“I think it’s safe to say that the most important thing Floridians will vote on in November is Amendments 5 and 6,” said Kevin Wagner, a Florida Atlantic University political scientist. “It’s going to shape Florida politics for the next 10 years.”