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Parties agree political redistricting is in expert hands

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Alan Rosenthal doesn't exactly exude power.



JENNIFER HULSHIZER/THE STAR-LEDGER

Rutgers' Alan Rosenthal is the final member of the panel that will redraw the map of the state's legislative districts.

The 78-year-old professor of public policy at Rutgers University has never held an elected office. Although he's spent more than four decades studying state legislatures and meeting powerful officials, the walls of his modest Princeton town house are free of the trappings associated with the well-connected — no pictures of him hobnobbing with political elites, no political memorabilia.

Instead, there are photos of his children and grandchildren, an autographed picture of the

cast of "Seinfeld" and a photo of Rosenthal in a clown costume from his days as an occasional guest clown with a circus.

But for the next month, Rosenthal is perhaps the most powerful person in New Jersey politics.

On Thursday, he was appointed the 11th, tiebreaking member of the commission that redraws the state's legislative district boundaries based on Census Bureau data. That may not sound like a big deal on its face, but think about it this way: How those

districts are shaped in the new map will go a long way toward deciding which party controls the Legislature for the next decade, and it's really up to Rosenthal to decide what the new map will look like. The commission has to produce a new map by early April.

Ask Rosenthal about the power of his role and he downplays it.

"It's a great responsibility because you're casting a vote for a map that's going to affect members of the Legislature, people who want to run for the Legislature and, indirectly, citizens as well. Citizens will feel it," he said last week, sitting on a couch in his sun-lit living room. "Yet nobody is going to die as a result of me voting for a Democratic map or me voting for a Republican map."

Bipartisan choice

Colleagues call Rosenthal, who leads the Legislature's ethics committee, the foremost expert on state legislatures in the nation. So no one was surprised that Democrats and Republicans both recommended him when state Supreme Court Justice Stuart Rabner asked their input on who he should appoint as tiebreaker.

"There's nobody that can come close to him," said Monmouth University pollster Patrick Murray. "The ramifications of what comes out of this redistricting commission are something the state has to live with for 10 years. It will determine policy direction and all sorts of things: Who's up, who's down, who's in power, who's out."

Rosenthal said he "backed into" academia. Raised in Manhattan by a schoolteacher mother and his grandmother, he graduated from Harvard in the 1950s and was accepted to its prestigious Law School, but volunteered to serve in the Army instead.

Stationed in West Germany in a counterintelligence unit working to infiltrate the local Communist Party, he gathered intelligence from an informant who was a member of the party.

"When I got out of the Army, I decided I was not going to be a spy when I grew up," said Rosenthal, who went on to get a Ph.D. from Princeton and, in 1966, took a job with the Eagleton Institute of Politics, where he studied state legislatures.

Former Gov. Thomas H. Kean credits Rosenthal with helping to strengthen the Legislature in the 1970s by pushing to give them more staff, including a budget office so lawmakers did not have to rely on the Governor's Office for bills' cost estimates. "I don't think there's any question about his integrity. He's first class," said Kean.

Rosenthal is a registered Democrat, but said it doesn't color his dealings with the Legislature. "I call myself sort of a moderate Democrat. But I think what eroded any kind of partisan edge I might have had was being at Eagleton and working with legislators on institutional matters."

Over the past 45 years, Rosenthal said, he developed a respect for lawmakers he wishes the public would share. "I think people are unduly cynical towards politics

and politicians, partly because — well, more than partly because of the media," he said.

The role of tiebreaker is not new for Rosenthal. Twice before, in 1992 and 2001, he was the tiebreaking member of the state's other redistricting commission, which redraws U.S. House district boundaries. In 2001, the House members of both parties agreed among themselves on a map that protected incumbents.

"I think the major role of the independent member ... is to negotiate constantly and try to bring [the parties] closer together," he said. "And then when the time runs out and they're as close as they're going to come, you have to choose which one you think meets your criteria."

The criteria is, above all, constitutional: districts must not be geographically broken up, have roughly equal populations and meet the Voting Rights Act.

It's not an easy role to play. Ten years ago, tiebreaker Larry Bartels sided largely with the Democrats' proposed map. Today, Republicans say his name through clenched teeth.

"It may be at the end of this experience I'll say Larry Bartels was really lucky. I don't want to come out being really hated by everybody, being hated by half this state or one party," said Rosenthal. "But it's a real possibility."

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