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Edward Fitzpatrick

## N.Y. prisoners switch districts; will R.I. follow?

A City Council member in Anamosa, Iowa, won election with just two votes: one from his wife and one from his neighbor.

"The problem in this election wasn't voter apathy. It was a lack of voters," explained "Gerrymandering," the documentary film shown Friday at the Rhode Island International Film Festival. "The district includes Anamosa State Penitentiary. Prisoners can't vote, but the U.S. census counts them where they are locked up."

In the film, Prison Policy Initiative executive director Peter Wagner says, "The perfect district from the perspective of an elected official would be your house and a large prison, because as long as your spouse is willing to vote for you, you are guaranteed reelection."

That line made me laugh. But I don't know Anamosa from Omarosa (from Donald Trump's "The Apprentice") so I wrote it off as an Iowa issue. But then I started thinking about the Adult Correctional Institutions. While prisons are sprinkled throughout other states, most of our prison cells are in one place: Cranston.

And as it turns out, Wagner's analysis was inspired by state Rep. Peter G. Palumbo, D-Cranston, who in 2001 told *The Providence Journal*: "All these years the prison has caused me grief with my constituents. Now, maybe it will help with redistricting."

Last week, New York's governor signed a law requiring that inmates be counted at their home address (rather than where they're doing time) when state and local legislative districts are redrawn with 2010 census data. And Rhode Island lawmakers have proposed a similar bill.

Certainly, we don't have examples as extreme as Anamosa. But the Prison Policy Initiative, a think tank in Easthampton, Mass., says 25 percent of Cranston's 6th Ward is incarcerated, giving "every three actual residents in that ward as much influence over city affairs as four residents in other parts of the city." And after the 2010 census, 29 percent of Palumbo's House district could be behind bars, Wagner said. "So Rhode Island is poised to be the most dramatic example of prison-based gerrymandering in a state legislature."

Palumbo contends that inmates should be counted at the ACI. "The fact of the matter is, that's where they're living," he said, and he's concerned Cranston could somehow lose money. So would inmates vote for Palumbo if they could? "Hell, no," he said.

Inmates also make up part of the districts of House Majority Leader Nicholas A. Mattiello, D-Cranston, and Sen. Hanna M. Gallo, D-Cranston. Mattiello said he'd prefer constituents who can vote for him, but, "I'm not advocating for doing anything because I haven't been able to conclude Cranston would be revenue neutral" under the bill.

Despite such fears, Wagner said the fact is "Cranston would not lose a dime" because federal and state money is not distributed based on state redistricting data. He said the current system of "representation without population" undercuts the constitutional principle of "one person, one vote."

Common Cause Rhode Island executive director John M. Marion said legislators should change the system for one simple reason: "The 110 legislative districts in Rhode Island that don't have the ACI in them are having their votes diminished."