

Commonwealth Forum: Should Pennsylvania Adopt a Citizens' Redistricting Commission to Draw Congressional Districts?

YES

Gerrymandering is a pernicious problem in politics, fueling the flames of partisanship currently endangering the very essence of our republic. In a representative democracy, citizens should be able to choose their elected officials, not the other way around.

The congressional maps drawn by the Republican legislature and governor's office in 2011 were so blatantly based on party identification that they ended up being thrown out by the Pennsylvania Supreme Court following a lawsuit in 2018. The districts were so carefully constructed to give Republicans an unfair advantage that even though Democrats received a slim majority of the votes for Congress, Republicans still won thirteen of the eighteen available seats. That means over 50 percent of voters preferred Democrats, but they received only 28 percent of the total representation. Such outcomes are outrageous and fly in the face of sound democratic principles.

One solution to stop elected officials from choosing their voters is the implementation of a citizens' commission to draw district maps. A citizens' commission would be composed of average voters using modern and simple software to draw up the next set of congressional maps after the 2020 census. It would also take politics out of the equation, as the commission would be looking to draw fair maps based on communities of interest, various government boundaries, contiguity, and compactness. As the group Fair Districts PA, which advocates for such change, states, the process would be fair, transparent, and accountable. Citizens' commissions already exist in Arkansas, Arizona, California, Idaho, Montana, and Washington.

Extreme gerrymandering leads to unrepresentative democracy or, in reality, no democracy at all.

NO

The United States has witnessed a number of reform eras where good-government groups have attempted to take partisanship out of politics. Political primaries, nonpartisan elections, council-manager forms of local government, and direct democracy were all well-intentioned examples of the reform impulse. These changes have done little to make the system less contentious. The current reform du jour is setting up independent citizens' commissions to stop partisan gerrymandering of legislative districts.

Advocates argue that groups of private citizens will create maps that are electorally competitive and that do not benefit one party at the expense of the other.

Thirteen states give the primary power over map making to variations of these commissions. However, partisanship still seeps into the process. For example, in the 2010 cycle of redistricting, Colorado Republicans argued that one of the independent commissioners was a closet Democrat who swung the state legislative map to their opponents. Idaho found itself mired in lawsuits after problems seating the membership of the commission and the inability of the commission to create a map by established deadlines. Investigative reporting by ProPublica showed that California's independent commission was influenced by a covert Democratic campaign to influence map drawing during local hearings throughout the state.

Beyond not working as advertised, citizens' commissions are inherently undemocratic because there is no way to hold them accountable. At least we can vote members of the state legislature out of office if we disagree with their actions. The best solution for dealing with gerrymandering is to require supermajorities of the state legislature to pass new maps. This would require working across the aisle to create a map that is acceptable to at least some members of the minority party. We can never completely rid politics of partisanship. However, this solution can smooth off the worst inclinations of the majority to use the redistricting process to their advantage.

For More Information

Fair Districts PA (<https://www.fairdistrictspa.com>) is a statewide organization committed to reforming the existing redistricting process in Pennsylvania. Their goal is to set up a Citizens' Redistricting Commission. The **National Conference of State Legislatures** (<http://www.ncsl.org/research/redistricting.aspx>) provides overviews of how states redistrict, news about redistricting activities in the states, and webinars on the process of redistricting.

Pennsylvania Redistricting: The Legislative Guide to Redistricting in Pennsylvania (<http://www.redistricting.state.pa.us>) is the official state governmental website providing information about redistricting in the Commonwealth as well as data and maps.

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