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Cartographic Malpractice

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The several profound U.S. Supreme Court decisions delivered over the past two weeks revolutionized marriage and preserved health care reforms for the uninsured. But the broad opening provided for states to prevent rigged elections by overhauling the redistricting process should emerge in time as the most far-reaching judicial edict of 2015.

Redistricting is the most momentous of all? Yes, if you consider that the fundamentally corrupt system of gerrymandering serves as a political protection racket, creating campaign district maps that advance the party in power, squelch competition in elections, and exacerbate the partisan battles in Lansing and Washington.

Key Michigan Democrats reacted immediately to the Supreme Court ruling, jumping on the opportunity to end the squiggly district lines drawn by crass legislators who are poisoning our politics.

The Dems who took the lead called for establishing a nonpartisan process of shaping objective borders for districts that largely determine the outcome of elections for Congress and the Legislature.

But the Democrats are making a colossal mistake.

Cynical voters will reject any plan that carries the taint of one political party perceptibly trying to gain a permanent advantage over the other. If an election reform plan will have any chance of working its way onto the ballot through a petition drive and winning a majority of the Michigan electorate, it must bear the credibility of an earnest, good-government effort at changing our politics for the better.

The Supreme Court declared that independent commissions can replace the slightly sleazy practice of having state legislators from the majority party carve out their preferred territory on the map. Under that long-held, incumbent-fortification scam, the politicians choose their voters, rather than the voters choosing their politicians. This is cartographic malpractice that produces an illegitimate distribution of power.

Any redistricting reform attempt in Michigan should be led by the League of Women Voters, the nonpartisan, civic-minded group with a sterling reputation earned over many decades. The LWV has already called for an end to the politically manipulated process that creates “safe” districts to keep the ruling party in charge.

If the goal is to create an impartial election process that restores truly representative democracy, an unbiased grassroots drive is needed, not a campaign with one member of the politically powerful status quo (the Democrats) fighting with the other half of the monolith (the Republicans). Voters have had their fill of the two parties’ food fights.

In recent weeks, as anticipation rose that the high court would uphold the independent commission that draws districts in Arizona, the LWV, together with Common Cause, a well-established election reform group, jointly expressed interest in leading the charge in Michigan. But even Common Cause is associated with the Democrats to the extent that their authenticity would face a challenge.

If true reform is the mission, the leadership of a forthcoming campaign must be willing to state unequivocally that, over the past several decades, both parties have played the gerrymandering game.

After each decennial U.S. Census, the apportionment process redraws legislative districts to reflect population shifts and the party in charge in Lansing at the time manipulates the process.

Republicans who stitched together the Michigan hodge-podge quilt of districts since 1991 will surely try their best to unravel the entire reform project if it is led by Democrats.

And Michigan Democratic Party Chairman Lon Johnson inadvertently provided the first round of ammunition for reform opponents when he said immediately after the court ruling that the Dems will work for a “fairer” apportionment process. Johnson’s predecessor, Mark Brewer, has quietly conducted numerous workshops on redistricting reform for various Democratic groups over the past several months.

Of course, the Dems have reason to be agitated. Too often in recent years their election successes have been twisted into losses.

The egregious unfairness at the heart of Michigan’s brand of democracy was on full display in the 2014 general election. Though Michigan stands as a closely contested state up and down the ballot, most of the electorate lives in non-competitive districts where votes don’t count for much.

The jagged, zig-zagging district lines that granted Democrats a clear advantage for many years when they were the majority in the State Capitol are now the product of Republicans in charge. Maybe the GOP is better at this game – or more ruthless – but the high-tech, computer-driven precision in drawing maps has produced a monstrous result.

The combined votes cast statewide last November gave an overall majority of support to the Democratic candidates for Congress, State House and State Senate. But, due to the gerrymandered districts, the GOP emerged with a 9-5 edge in congressional seats, a solid 63-47 advantage in state House seats, and a 27-11 super-majority in the state Senate.

Reform advocates say the best opportunity to end this nonsense is to create a bipartisan independent redistricting commission, as seven other states have done.

Though the track record regarding one goal – more competitive elections – remains mixed, the results show that those states which bypass the politicians have square, compact districts drawn with straight lines and without consideration of what areas are dominated by one party, or where the current incumbents live.

In Arizona, more than 100 residents applied for a seat on the state’s five-member redistricting commission. A judicial panel narrowed that field down to 25 finalists – 10 Republicans, 10 Democrats and five independents. From there, the top four legislative leaders from the two parties appointed four members to serve. The fifth member of the commission was selected by the other four. The panel operates independently, without outside influence.

In Michigan, the two major political parties have had their opportunities for many decades to create a playing field that was fair and square. But they’ve demonstrated that they’re incapable of setting partisanship aside to map out a straightforward election process that respects the electorate.

It’s up to the voters to realize that, when these political practitioners slice and dice Michigan’s political landscape, it’s the people of all shapes and sizes who are cut loose.

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