



Partisan redistricting at 'heart' of voter frustration, says Michigan group exploring alternatives



Michigan Districts for the 113th Congress (*USGS nationalatlas.gov*)

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LANSING, MI — Partisan redistricting is at "the heart of so much frustration the public is feeling toward their elected leaders," according to the Michigan League of Women Voters, which is hosting a series of town halls across the state to discuss alternatives.

"Think about this for a minute. In Michigan, every 10 years, we allow politicians of whichever party is in power to draw their own districts to the advantage of their political party and their own re-election,"

said League vice president Sue Smith.

"This means we're allowing politicians to pick their voters, rather than allowing voters to pick their representatives."

Michigan is among a majority of states that relies on its Legislature to **redraw legislative and Congressional district boundaries** every 10 years following the decennial U.S. Census.

More than 20 other states have some sort of redistricting commission that plays a role in the process, according to the National Conference of State Legislatures.

In some of those states, such as Maine and Vermont, the commission advises the state Legislature. In others, such as Arizona and California, the commission has the **primary responsibility** for drawing political boundaries.

The League of Women Voters, in announcing more than two dozen town hall meetings, wants to seek input on those alternatives and others that might make sense in Michigan. It is among a handful of groups considering a possible ballot proposal in 2016 or beyond.

Michigan's current system increases the power of political parties and creates uncompetitive districts, according to League President Judy Karandjeff.

"Voters are left wondering how decisions are being made, and they wonder why there's so much extremism and so little ability to compromise and get things done," she said.

While the League wants public input, it supports the creation of an independent redistricting commission, a position it took in 2012.

The concept won a legal stamp of approval earlier this year when **the U.S. Supreme Court** ruled that Arizona's independent redistricting commission, created via ballot proposal in 2000, is constitutional.

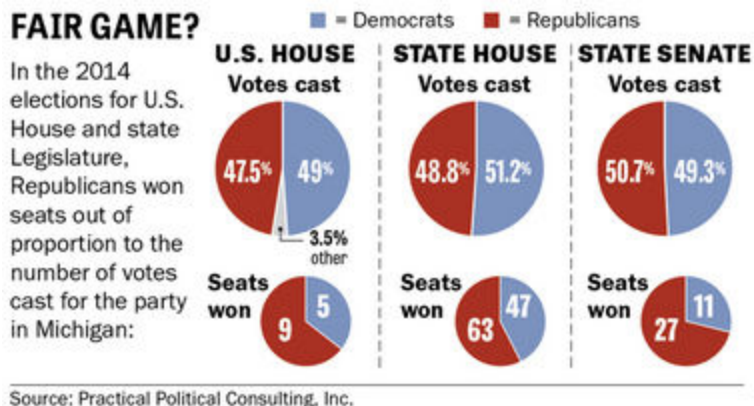
"The people of Arizona turned to the initiative to curb the practice of gerrymandering and, thereby, to ensure that Members of Congress would have a habitual recollection of their dependence on the people," Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg wrote in the 5-4 majority opinion.

But an independent redistricting commission won't necessarily remove all politics from the process. California's 14-member commission is supposed to include 5 Democrats, 5 Republicans and four members from neither party. The commission is supposed to consider citizen input on "communities of interest" that should stay together.

But as **ProPublica reported** in 2011 and 2012, Democrats used "front groups, disingenuous testimony and other aggressive tactics" in an attempt to manipulate California's redistricting commission. Democrats ended up retaining and picking up a few Congressional seats, although at least one member has maintained the commission was **not influenced** by the partisan efforts.

Bob LaBrant, a long-time Lansing insider and GOP strategist, said independent redistricting commissions like those in California and Colorado are "an invitation to a partisan gerrymander by another means."

LaBrant defended the **so-called Apol Standards**, which have governed Michigan's redistricting process since 1982. The standards, ordered by the

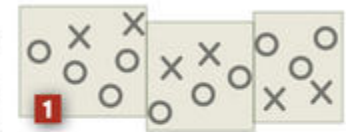


Michigan Supreme Court, generally hold that districts must be compact and contiguous, among other things.

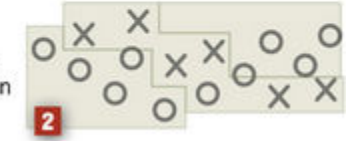
While he's wary of independent redistricting commissions, LaBrant said reform advocates might look to Iowa, where non-partisan legislative staff develop district maps without access to political or election data, such as the addresses of incumbents. Lawmakers then vote on the maps.

WHY DISTRICT LINES MATTER

Imagine a region with supporters of parties O and X spread out as shown in map 1, with political districts based roughly on geography and population. If voters are true to their leanings, the O's will consistently win all three districts.



Now suppose you redraw the district lines like map 2. There are now just two O districts and one where Party X will win consistently.



(Jeff Johnston/MLive.com)

"There's consensus that the process is fair," LaBrant said of **the Iowa model**. "The ultimate decision makers remain the Legislature and the governor could veto that legislation, but if there's a deadlock, it goes to the courts. In four decades, they've somehow managed to never go to the courts."

The Michigan Constitution of 1963 called for a bipartisan redistricting commission, but the rules it was supposed to use were invalidated by a U.S. Supreme Court decision the following year. Minority Democrats in the Michigan House have proposed an independent redistricting commission, but the Republican majority is unlikely to take up the legislation.

Republicans oversaw Michigan's last redistricting process. The new lines they approved in 2011 won pre-clearance from the U.S. Department of Justice but were sharply criticized by Democrats.

As the only state to lose population in the 2000s, Michigan lost one Congressional seat in 2010. The new map eliminated one district previously held by a Democrat, forcing two incumbents to duke it out in the 2012 primary.

Critics of the current districts point to statewide totals in the 2014 election cycle: Republican Congressional candidates received 47.5 percent of all votes but won nine of 14 seats. Democrats got 49 percent of all votes and won five seats.

Democratic candidates for the Michigan House reportedly combined to receive slightly more votes than Republicans, who nonetheless won 63 out of 110 seats. Despite a near even split in statewide votes, Republicans won 27 of 38 seats in the Senate, a supermajority.

The Michigan League of Women Voters has scheduled a redistricting town hall for Wednesday night in Traverse City. Others are currently planned for Detroit (Sept 29), Lansing (Oct. 28), Ann Arbor (Oct. 29 and Nov. 5), Flint (Nov. 10) and East Lansing (Nov. 10).

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