

Editorial: Too many voters lost between the lines

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"Disenfranchised" is a word ordinarily used to describe the citizens of countries like Egypt, where large numbers of people are denied any meaningful role in choosing their representatives.

But a detailed study released Thursday by the nonpartisan Center for Michigan suggests that many Michigan voters are being similarly excluded from the political process, especially in state legislative elections.

Nationally, Michigan is known as a swing state where either party can prevail in a presidential or statewide contest. But the vast majority of the state's 110 House districts and 38 Senate seats almost never change party control.

According to the Center for Michigan study, Republicans have had a hammerlock on 43 House seats and 19 Senate seats for at least the last decade; Democrats have monopolized 42 House seats and 11 Senate seats during the same interval. As a result, only one in seven Michigan voters lives in a district where either party's candidates could prevail in any given election cycle.

In places like Detroit and suburban Ottawa County, this sclerosis is a result of demographic facts beyond either party's control. But in most of the state, only the parties' cynical manipulation of the decennial reapportionment process can sustain the status quo.

When Democrats control the Legislature, they contrive to squeeze Republican voters into as few districts as possible; when Republicans control the redistricting process, as they did in 2001, they do exactly the opposite.

The upshot is that Republicans living in safe Democratic districts and Democrats living in safe Republican districts -- about 1.5 million voters statewide -- are effectively disenfranchised.

Now, as results of the 2010 census roll in, Republicans are once again in control of the redistricting process that will yield new legislative boundaries. But sustaining the status quo will alienate voters in both parties while exacerbating the zero-sum partisanship that has held Michigan back for decades.

Other states, including Iowa and California, have reacted to similar threats by making their own redistricting processes more transparent and less vulnerable to partisan manipulation. If Rick Snyder and his party are serious about their desire to harness the energy of all Michigan's citizens, they'll follow suit.

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