

Voters can rule redistricting — let's do it

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Photo: Associated Press)

The most powerful component of our democracy is ensuring that informed, eligible and engaged voters can freely elect their representatives.

Yet in Michigan, partisanship drives the process of grouping voters into districts that elect representatives — or, redistricting. Every 10 years, Lansing legislators have the authority to choose which voters make up a district, which lets them protect incumbents and predetermine the partisan outcome of any district election.

Democracy suffers. Voters are less engaged. Turnout decreases. Winners of primary elections safely sail to victory in general elections. Political rhetoric rises, moderates lose out and progress stalls. This process is flawed and needs to change.

[And the U.S. Supreme Court agrees.](#)

On Monday, the court emphatically endorsed the ability of voters to create an independent commission to draw a state's legislative and congressional districts. The case, *Arizona State Legislature v. Arizona Independent Redistricting Commission*, was more than a win for advocates of citizen-led redistricting commissions. It was a call to action.

Noting the “manipulation of electoral rules by politicians” who then “entrench themselves or place their interests over those of the electorate,” Justice Ruth Bader Ginsberg declared the ballot initiative process is often the only way for voters to fix a broken system.

The court was clear: The best way to give voters a meaningful voice in selecting their representatives is to take redistricting authority away from the Legislature and give it to an independent, nonpartisan commission. And voters should use the initiative process to enact that change.

Voters in states like Arizona and California have led the way. Their models, while not perfect, demonstrate it's possible to create independent commissions that prioritize the people's best interests.

Both states allow the public to apply for a position on the commission. In California, more than 25,000 applied. The Bureau of State Audits selected 120 of the most-qualified applicants — 40 Republicans, 40 Democrats and 40 independents — for interviews. Sixty names were forwarded to legislative leaders in both political parties, who could veto applicants viewed as excessively partisan or otherwise unsuitable. The state auditor then selected eight individuals at random from the remaining pool, and they then selected the final six commissioners. The commission invites the public to submit maps for consideration and, after a series of open hearings throughout the state, enacts a plan.

In Arizona, the commission that appoints the state's judges oversees a similar process. Both states' processes combine transparency, accountability, multiple levels of selection and several checks and balances to insulate the process as much as possible from partisan politics.

There's no reason we can't follow suit in Michigan, amend our state constitution and become a national model for fair and impartial redistricting. Given the opportunity, Michigan voters will eagerly embrace the chance to replace our notoriously odd-shaped districts with competitive and fair ones.

In 2011, amid the redistricting battle in Lansing, a nonpartisan Michigan Citizens' Redistricting Competition invited residents to draw maps for Michigan's congressional seats. The winning map, drawn by the then-president of the Central Michigan University College Republicans, created competitive, compact districts that complied with state and federal law.

We know politicians elected in gerrymandered districts have no incentive to fix the system that elected them. But voters do.

The Supreme Court has spoken. An independent redistricting commission can protect our representative democracy from being choked into extinction by partisanship and self-interest.

It's up to us to use the initiative process, amend our state constitution and fix this broken system.

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