

Fair Maps are the Will of the People

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Sen. Jeff Smith and Rep. Deb Andraca write about the Fair Maps Bill they are introducing on May 17th to create a nonpartisan redistricting reform process in Wisconsin.

MADISON - There seems to be only one thing people of both political parties can agree on -- our legislative process is broken. Compromise is rare, most elections have pre-ordained winners, and incumbents feel free to ignore constituents who disagree with them. Fortunately, we have an opportunity to fix the problem once and for all. We can restore Wisconsin's reputation as a state that works by and for the people, and we have introduced legislation that can do just that.

We are two elected officials who unequivocally believe that politicians should not draw political maps, which is why we are introducing the Fair Maps Bill. This legislation would establish an independent, non-partisan commission to create legislative districts based on commonsense principles including compactness, following municipal boundaries, and keeping communities together whenever possible.

To understand why these reforms are needed, just look at what happened last time the maps

were created. Ten years ago legislative districts were drawn in secret, by private attorneys working for Republican politicians, with zero input from the public and one partisan objective: to take decision-making away from the voters and give it to a political party. With the help of secrecy oaths and computer algorithms unavailable to past mapmakers, Republicans drew crazy political boundaries that locked in their party's advantage for a decade.

And it worked! Wisconsin is known as a "purple" state because every statewide election is decided by extremely thin margins, yet in the Wisconsin legislature one party has an overwhelming majority in both the Senate and the Assembly. This majority is far beyond anything that can be explained by political geography.

Unfortunately, gerrymandering has been a bipartisan issue nationally. For instance, Maryland has a Democratic gerrymander that is just as skewed as Wisconsin's because, let's be honest, who wouldn't be tempted to lock in job security for a decade?



But one politician's gain is a collective loss to our state and our democracy. When Democrats and Republicans run in "safe" seats we get candidates loyal to the party, not the people in their district. Moderate Republican or Democratic candidates cannot win in highly partisan districts. This leaves a gap where bipartisanship is usually able to grow and thrive. Gerrymandered maps produce candidates who are comfortable, serving year after year with no incentive to innovate or do better. Competition is good for business, and competition is good for candidates too.



For those who say we can never remove partisanship from the process, we need look no

further than our own Legislative Reference Bureau (LRB). Wisconsin was the first state in the nation to pioneer a state-level, non-partisan, professional legislative support staff. LRB works with both Republicans and Democrats to ensure our laws are crafted to the best of our abilities without unintended legal consequences. These men and women aren't political appointees and are trained to help each member based solely on the substance of the issue at hand.

The Fair Maps Bill would utilize the expertise of the existing LRB staff, with input from a citizen-led Redistricting Advisory Commission, to create maps that are fair, compact, and as free from political favoritism as possible.

We need the Fair Maps Bill to prevent Wisconsin maps from ever being gerrymandered again, by any political party, for partisan gain. We don't want our kids facing this crisis ten years from now. We want to join Iowa, Michigan, and the eleven other states that have a nonpartisan redistricting commission instead of waging expensive, taxpayer-funded legal battles.

We want politicians, like us, to stay out of the map making process. But most of all we want to fix this problem once and for all to restore Wisconsin's tradition of open government. Contact your elected representatives at 1-800-362-9472 and tell them to support the Fair Maps Bill because if there is one more thing we should all agree on, it is that the will of the people -- not political parties -- should be the law of the land.

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Senator Jeff Smith (D – Brunswick) represents the 31st Senate District including Buffalo and Pepin counties and portions of Trempealeau, Pierce, Dunn, Eau Claire and Jackson counties and very small portions of Chippewa and St. Croix counties.

Representative Deb Andraca (D – Whitefish Bay) represents the 23rd Assembly District including communities of Bayside, Fox Point, Grafton, Mequon, Thiensville and Whitefish Bay.

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