



Legislature should back Schultz, Cullen and end gerrymandering

By Aaron Loudenslager

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Voting serves as the foundation of all free and democratic societies, including but not limited to the United States. As Cicero once succinctly said, “Freedom is participation in power.” Yet, there is a political evil, which has existed for more than 200 years, that threatens this foundation of our democracy: gerrymandering.

To prevent gerrymandering from occurring, other countries and some states in the U.S. have made independent redistricting commissions responsible for making new electoral districts.

Recently, Sen. Dale Schultz, R-Richland Center, and Sen. Tim Cullen, D-Janesville, tried to follow a similar course of action by introducing a bill that would require the Legislative Reference Bureau to create new electoral districts. Currently, the Wisconsin Legislature draws the new districts. Hopefully Schultz’s and Cullen’s bill becomes law this legislative session. If their proposal fizzles during the legislative process, one can only speculate how long Wisconsin citizens will be subjected to the injustice of gerrymandering.

Some of you may be asking: What exactly is gerrymandering? In 1812, Gov. Elbridge Gerry (a member of the Democratic-Republican Party) of Massachusetts signed a law which redefined the state’s electoral districts. As a result of this redistricting, voters who tended to vote for the Federalist Party were consolidated into a few electoral districts while the remaining districts favored the Democratic-Republican Party. One of these new electoral districts looked like a salamander — evidence that Gerry’s districts were drawn on the basis of politics, not geography. This is where the modern term of gerrymandering originates from — an amalgamation of “Gerry” and “salamander.” Today, gerrymandering refers to the process by which state politicians draw up politically biased voting districts in an effort to skew election results.

Gerrymandering has and continues to undermine our democratic system and its ideals. It is a fundamental precept that in a democracy with an essentially two-party system, the percentage of votes for a political party in an election should roughly translate to the percentage of seats that party wins in the federal or state legislative body. Due to gerrymandering this is not the case in

the United States. In a column that appeared in *The New York Times*, Princeton neuroscientist Sam Wang pointed out that “Democrats received 1.4 million more votes [in 2012] for the House of Representatives, yet Republicans won control of the House by a 234 to 201 margin.”

How can one political party win by more than 1 million votes on the national level and still not win a majority of seats in the House of Representatives?

First, the Republican Party took control of a majority of state governments in the 2010 midterm election, riding an influx of voters who supported and identified with the Tea Party movement. Second, since state legislatures are responsible for drawing electoral district lines every 10 years, these Republican-controlled state legislatures (including Wisconsin’s) drew new electoral districts that favored the Republican Party at the expense of the Democratic Party. This explains why the Democratic Party received more votes for the House than Republicans, but still couldn’t win a majority of the House’s seats. As a report written by Patrick Basham and Dennis Polhill published by the Cato Institute states, “Partisan gerrymanders are very effective in increasing a party’s share of legislative seats.”

Gerrymandering doesn’t just help a political party win more legislative seats, it also helps make individual electoral districts less competitive. In the 2012 election, 91 percent of people running for re-election to the House won. This may explain why the recent voting rate in presidential elections is barely more than 50 percent. When citizens know that an electoral district is gerrymandered to unfairly favor one political party, they are less likely to believe their individual vote makes a difference. As a result, more citizens will decide to not vote.

Other countries (such as Canada) and individual states (such as Iowa) have independent redistricting commissions that draw the lines of new electoral districts instead of leaving this responsibility in the hands of a legislative body. In fact, the proposal from Schultz and Cullen seeks to implement an independent redistricting commission similar to the one currently in place in Iowa. As Schultz said in a recent interview, “If the Hawkeyes can do it, the Badgers can do it.”

I couldn’t agree more. Other countries and states have figured out a way to end gerrymandering — and save the political process itself — by putting control of the redistricting process in the hands of independent commissions rather than legislatures. Schultz’s and Cullen’s proposal would be a huge step toward ending gerrymandering.

It is true that gerrymandering has existed in the United States for more than two centuries. It is equally true that gerrymandering effectively dilutes people’s votes — as can be seen in the makeup of the current House of Representatives — and undermines our democratic system of government. It is time for Wisconsin, like many other countries and states, to embrace independent redistricting by enacting Schultz’s and Cullen’s proposal into law.