



Reform Md. redistricting or the courts will

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By an overwhelming majority, Marylanders support the idea of having an independent commission rather than incumbent lawmakers draw district lines for Maryland elections. The margin was 73 to 19 percent in a February Goucher Poll, with support running roughly the same among registered Democrats, Republicans and independents.

Yet a bill passed by the legislature this session would instead have kicked the issue of redistricting reform down the road unless five other nearby states all agree to pass similar bills — something no one expects to happen.

As co-chairs of the Maryland Redistricting Reform Commission, which Gov. Larry Hogan established in 2015 to devise a better system for drawing district lines, we support Governor Hogan's May 8 veto of that bill. The proposal for a "Mid-Atlantic Regional Compact" is a frivolous distraction in place of a willingness to tackle reform seriously.

Leading newspapers in the state agree with us and with the governor, including The Baltimore Sun, where editorial writers said the "cutesy" six-state compact represents "an effort to make the issue go away without actually doing anything."

There is no indication that anyone involved in the bill even talked to legislative leaders in these other five states — New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Virginia and North Carolina — let alone tested their level of interest in such a compact. Nor is there any reasonable expectation that even one, let alone all five, of these states will embrace reform by 2020, when the bill expires. That would leave Maryland unreformed when the next census cycle requires a redrawing of district lines. Expect insiders to try another gerrymander just as bad as, or worse than, the current one — already by some measures the nation's worst or tied for worst.

Some say they want to wait for the U.S. Congress to act. But as the Capital Gazette of Annapolis writes: "Fixing a broken Congress isn't Hogan's job; it isn't the job of [Senate President Thomas V. Mike] Miller and [House Speaker Michael E.] Busch either. Getting rid of blatant abuses in how the state carries out its responsibilities is their job."

Even were it somehow to pass, the compact would not assure Marylanders a system that is fair, balanced, independent and nonpartisan.

Senate Bill 1023 removed that portion of our plan that provided for selection of the members of a commission through an independent screening process not controlled by the legislature. Instead, legislative leaders would directly choose who gets to sit on the line-drawing panel. So much for "independence."

And while SB 1023 addresses the drawing of congressional districts, it does not even pretend to reform the same process with respect to state legislative districts — even though the conflict of interest from letting insiders exercise power there is even worse.

Last year, the legislature did not hold so much as a committee or floor vote on the governor's redistricting reform proposal or any alternatives. This year, it seems they wanted to be able to say that they did something, even if that something made no sense.

But time may be catching up with them. For one thing, the courts are getting involved. Everyone who follows this issue has heard about the Shapiro lawsuit, filed against the current map, in which a court has ordered the deposition of Messrs. Miller and Mike Busch and former Gov. Martin O'Malley on how the last gerrymander was planned out.

If Maryland lawmakers will not clean up our system, at some point the courts will step in to do it for them. That is sure to be a mess, with side effects and disruptions that no one will welcome.

Maryland is a state with a proud record of leading the way on many issues of government reform. We have often been among the first states to adopt better ways of doing things. Why should we lag so far behind on an issue as important to our democracy as this?

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