

The Misrepresentative Nature Behind Gerrymandering: How Fair Districts PA Combats REDMAP

By Danielle Corcione

June 2, 2017

Over the past few years, the Pennsylvania legislature and U.S. Congress have tilted dramatically to the right. Is this just a reflection of our polarized times? A look at Republican gerrymandering suggests not.

Since 2010, conservative strategists behind REDMAP, or the Redistricting Majority Project, brought in consultants to flip blue (Democrat) legislative branches to red (Republican) all over the country. Although the organization's website claims they're a "grassroots movement," they are the exact opposite. REDMAP brings in outside funds to help Republicans advertise their campaigns and persuades these candidates to engage in gerrymandering on behalf of GOP interests.

Redistricting happens every ten years, when the updated U.S. Census comes out. To better represent their constituents, state legislatures redraw the borders to their district maps. Most recently, legislative districts were redrawn following the release of the 2010 Census data.

Theoretically, redistricting should be politically neutral, but within the current system, it is far from that. Instead, it's an oppressive tool to disenfranchise voters, especially voters of color and/or those from low-income neighborhoods. The term **gerrymandering** refers to manipulating legislative district lines to favor a specific party's interests through the process of redistricting. Gerrymandering is the reason the *New York Times* describes the 7th U.S. Congressional district, near Philadelphia, as "a Rorschach-test inkblot of a district snaking through five counties."

In Pennsylvania, redistricting is currently done by a five-person committee. There are two Democrats and two Republicans. Since both parties rarely agree, the fifth person is chosen by the Pennsylvania Supreme Court, which is currently controlled by Democrats.

However, in 2010, Republicans redrew district lines in important swing states, according to *Mother Jones*, to gain control of the U.S. House of Representatives. Although Democratic candidates received half of Pennsylvania's votes for the House midterm election that year, Republicans claimed three-quarters of the state's representation in the House. Thus, the GOP currently holds 13 of 18 seats to represent our state in the House, despite half of us voting otherwise. (This binary also fails to mention third-party votes in the House midterm elections.) This is

how gerrymandering works: re-creating boundaries to work within a political party's interest.

REDMAP's framework gave certain Republican voters more power over those more likely to be Democratic. While Pennsylvania potentially has more left-wing voters than right collectively, legislative borders are strategically aligned to favor Republicans.

Now enter Fair Districts Pennsylvania. The campaign encourages voters to self-educate, find their influence within local government, advocate on behalf of redistricting reform, and (if economically possible) donate to the campaign directly.

"Pennsylvania is one of the most gerrymandered states in the country," explains Christina Moretti, Northeast Philadelphia coordinator for Fair Districts PA. "This isn't what democracy is. This is people buying votes, coming in with millions of dollars of outside money, taking seats, and then ignoring the needs of their constituents."

To make reform a reality, the new model requires a state constitutional amendment to be passed in the assembly and the senate, followed by a statewide citizen issue ballot referendum. There are current proposals in both state legislative branches, including SB 22, to reform the commission that redraws the state and federal legislative districts every decade.

Redistricting will occur again in 2021, after

the 2020 Census data is collected. The campaign's goal is to expand the existing committee to 11 people, including four Democrats, four Republicans and three independent voters. Perhaps, these independent voter positions could be a chance to have socialist representation in redistricting.

Unlike REDMAP, this campaign is strictly bipartisan, advocating for both parties and those in-between to have a voice in redistricting. "We see that gerrymandering affects both sides of the aisle," stresses Moretti. "It makes politicians pull into outside money rather than the interests of local residents and businesses. It creates a gridlock in Congress, because when you group all these voters into a district, your representatives don't have to reach across the aisle and compromise to gain support from their base; it creates a one-sided base."

The campaign's goal is to unite 150,000 voters across the state, which Fair Districts PA hopes will be just enough to put pressure on Pennsylvania representatives to enact redistricting reform. While the campaign doesn't challenge the injustices of capitalism and racism that make our electoral system inherently undemocratic, it may open up space for greater representation within the system that socialists can use to build grassroots power. 

