

A voting rights issue affecting all of us

Written by By Michael Daly Guest Columnist
Friday, 05 March 2021 06:05



Redistricting

The American system of representative democracy rests primarily on the concept of equal representation in legislative bodies. The Constitution requires a census of the population every ten years and then states reapportion representation and draw new district lines based on this census. Unfortunately, the devil is in the details. Our New Mexico Constitution, passed in 1912, leaves the drawing of district maps to the legislature.

N.M. has very few standards guiding the drawing of these maps. Only Texas and Nevada have looser standards. The process of redistricting ends up being totally partisan because the legislature is a political body, manipulation during the map making leads to some odd shapes, usually with the purpose of favoring party incumbents or to disenfranchise a particular constituency.

The majority party takes control and works without public oversight or input and draws the lines to favor itself. Often, this allows the incumbent to choose his or her constituents rather than having the voting public select their representative. Our current system is so divisive and dysfunctional that at our last redistricting effort, the results were challenged resulting in \$6 million in legal fees for the state.

In our area, the current system is particularly vexing for Navajos because districts are by precinct, not by Chapter boundaries, splitting communities and weakening their voice.

New Mexico First, a non-partisan New Mexico think tank and the New Mexico League of

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Women Voters, along with a number of other sponsoring organizations, created a task force that included members of the public, New Mexico legislators including Sen. Shannon Pinto and retired N.M. Supreme Court and Court of Appeals justices. After a number of online workshops, they came up with a redistricting bill that turns things around. Their proposal, embodied in New Mexico Senate Bill 199, accomplishes the following:

Bill language specifies redistricting standards

Requires no fewer than 12 public hearings during the process; requires plans to be based in part on information received during these meetings

Endorsed by Tribal Governments, State Ethics Commission, legislators from both caucuses, Common Cause and the League of Women Voters

Explicitly requires compliance with the Voting Rights Act

Preserves cores of existing districts if all other criteria are satisfied

Prohibits plans that favor a political party or an incumbent

Preserves legislature's power to select district maps

A politically neutral committee with a neutral chairperson

Takes into account tribal governances

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Takes into account communities of interest defined as a contiguous population that shares common economic, social or cultural interests

So far only Pinto and Rep. Wonda Johnson have come out explicitly in favor of this legislation, with Johnson supporting a slightly different version of House Bill 211 which in material effects is the same piece of legislation.

If you feel strongly about this it's time to tell your representative.

Sen. George Munoz email: George.Munoz@nmlegis.gov

Rep. Patty Lundstrom email: Patricia.Lundstrom@nmlegis.gov

There is real opportunity here, but also danger. A competing bill, Senate Bill 15 accomplishes no reform but has been put up as an alternative. Will your representative represent you or their own interests? Don't wait. Email them now to support this major piece of reform legislation.

The legislators have a lot of incentive to push this issue under the rug. Both Muñoz and Rep. Lundstrom are popular and pretty solidly in place to remain in office with some moderate district boundary revisions. About one-third of New Mexico's legislators have already signed onto this bipartisan proposal.

Both Muñoz and Lundstrom are Democrats. For those of you who are Democrats, the Democratic Platform for New Mexico strongly supports an independent bi-partisan redistricting commission. The Party Platform states that party members should judge their leaders by how well they adhere to the platform. For those of you who are Republicans in a Democratic majority state, this is an opportunity to get more voice for your views.

Do you want an introduction to the evils of warped redistricting? Then watch the documentary *Slay the Dragon*

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on Netflix.

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