

## Our Opinion: Let's try fair districts

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One more redistricting case was argued in federal court this week, this time in Greensboro.

“Here we are again,” Jane Pinsky, director of the N.C. Coalition for Lobbying and Government Reform, said in front of the L. Richardson Preyer Federal Building on West Market Street Wednesday afternoon.

Yes, again. Pinsky estimates there have been 30 “judicial interventions” related to redistricting in North Carolina since 1980.

They include a ruling by federal judges earlier this year that forced the state legislature to draw new congressional districts and schedule a new primary for June 7 — at a cost of about \$10 million.

The present case involves legislative districts, and another “intervention” could scramble those elections.

For the most part, court actions are warranted. First Democrats and now Republicans have abused their power by designing districts to give their party the greatest possible electoral advantage, at the expense of good government.

Legislators don't worry about passing controversial bills like House Bill 2 because most are tucked into friendly districts that they created for themselves. This year, more than 40 percent of them have no challenger in November, and most of the rest face token opposition.

Not only does this make legislators less accountable to the people, it adds to polarization. Legislators from Republican districts veer to the right to avoid primary challenges, while those from Democratic districts veer to the left. There are few moderates in the legislature and even fewer lawmakers who feel any need to compromise.

Pinsky's group staged a small event in front of the courthouse to repeat its long-standing call for independent, nonpartisan redistricting. It has support on the left and right sides of the political spectrum.

“This is an idea that should not be partisan,” said Mitch Kokai, a senior political analyst for the conservative John Locke Foundation. “Voters must retain the ultimate sovereignty in any representative democracy.”

Gerrymandered districts are meant to limit voters' choices — and they accomplish that purpose at all levels of government. Guilford County residents can see that in local legislative, county commissioner and school board districts, all drawn by the current legislature.

There are better ways than letting partisan legislators craft their own districts. In Iowa, a nonpartisan commission, following strict guidelines that prohibit partisan considerations, recommends districts to the state legislature, which must approve or reject the plans as proposed.

It works splendidly, producing more balanced districts and avoiding legal challenges.

Similar proposals have won bipartisan support in North Carolina's state House of Representatives but can't even get a hearing in the Senate. It's time for voters to insist on action. They should be tired of being used as pawns by career politicians and denied meaningful choices at the polls.

What's more, they should be fed up with paying millions of dollars over the years in legal costs to defend legislative schemes that benefit only politicians while cheating the public.

If legislators had to pay for the lawyers themselves, if "here we are again" cost them money, they'd find a better way.

So they owe it to the people to implement fair redistricting.

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