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Point of View

Unhealthy, gridlock-producing gerrymandering in NC needs to end

By Charles Meeker and Richard Vinroot

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Read about the initiative to end gerrymandering at nando.com/gerrymander.

As state lawmakers return to Raleigh to balance the budget and tackle a variety of other important issues, we commend our legislators for approaching their responsibilities with the best of intentions.

Everyone wants the same thing: a North Carolina that's on course for a bright and prosperous future. How we get there is where sharp differences can emerge

Different ideas, different policies, different agendas are not such a bad thing. That's to be expected in our state's robust two-party system. When those differences can be resolved through thoughtful debate and a willingness to find common ground, our democracy works the way the Founding Fathers wanted it to.

Yet these days in both Raleigh and Washington, it is becoming increasingly difficult for both sides to work with each other, much less find common ground.

A big reason has to do with gerrymandering. When legislative and congressional districts are drawn to protect a political party and eliminate competition, lawmakers are less likely to work together and reach consensus. Compromise becomes a bad word. Civil discussions go out the window. The result is legislative gridlock in a toxic polarizing environment.

But we believe it doesn't have to be that way.

The public yearns for legislative bodies to work with each other in a spirit of civility and respect. We believe most of our hard-working elected officials would in fact prefer such an environment as well.

So how do we get there? Ending gerrymandering is an important first step.

North Carolina needs to find a new way to draw our legislative and congressional districts that takes petty partisan politics out of the process.

Of course, both sides have done it over the years – to the victor goes the spoils. And if your side has the power of the pen, why not draw districts to benefit your party?

The reality is that most legislative and congressional races in North Carolina are overwhelmingly noncompetitive thanks to gerrymandering. Lawmakers arrive in Raleigh and Washington with little incentive to work with their counterparts on the other side. Without competition, the public has no reason to pay attention to political campaigns, the media have no reason to cover the issues and candidates have no reason to campaign or to fear being held accountable.

And that's not healthy for democracy.

As former elected officials from different political parties, we recognize that ending gerrymandering is a much-needed reform to improve our democracy. That's why we are leading a new coalition called North Carolinians to End Gerrymandering Now. We want to encourage the General Assembly to pass a redistricting reform bill next year that can be put on the ballot for public approval in 2016.

We applaud Wake County Rep. Paul "Skip" Stam, the Republican House speaker pro tem, and Cumberland County's Rep. Rick Glazier, a Democrat, for their co-sponsorship of redistricting reform. House Bill 606 had 61 overall co-sponsors last year, so clearly there is bipartisan buy-in to end gerrymandering from leaders in each party. We the people just need to encourage the legislature as a whole to act next year.

For both political parties, ending gerrymandering is an insurance policy. Clearly in North Carolina, no political party will hold power forever. And when the next power-shift comes, the party out of power should not be marginalized to the sidelines without a voice. A nonpartisan redistricting process will provide fair, compact and more competitive districts.

Yes, some of us may be coming late to the party on ending gerrymandering. But gerrymandering was wrong in the past, and it's wrong now.

We believe a 21st century process – free of politics – would produce districts that elect folks more willing to work with one another and would boost both civility and productivity in Raleigh and Washington.

And that's what our democracy needs.

Richard Vinroot served as Charlotte mayor from 1991 to 1995. Charles Meeker served as Raleigh mayor from 2001 to 2011.

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