



[News: State of Wisconsin](#)

Dems push back against secrecy pact in redistricting legislation

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Democratic lawmakers and independent consumer advocacy groups began calls for redistricting reform after viewing recently-released public documents that reveal Republican legislators signed secrecy pacts when redrawing legislative districts.

Voces de La Frontera filed a complaint Monday containing documents showing 58 Republican Assembly members and 17 Republican senators had signed secrecy pacts regarding the development of redistricting plans. The complaint also contains a talking points memo in which legislators were instructed to “ignore public comments” on redistricting plans.

“I have never seen anything like this. In all my years in office, never has the redistricting process been faced with the secrecy and scandals that seems to consume state government under the Republican leadership,” Sen. [Fred Risser](#), D-Madison, said in a joint statement with Rep. Mark Pocan, D-Madison; and Rep. Brett Hulsey, D-Madison.

Hulsey said the redistricting plans were full of secrecy and ignored public comment. He said Democrats already have drafted a bill that would make redistricting the power of a non-partisan agent, and the bill is waiting on a hearing.

“This is just a scandal that shows we need redistricting reform in Wisconsin,” Hulsey said in an interview with [The Badger Herald](#).

On Tuesday, Sen. Jon Erpenbach, D-Madison, sent a letter to Eric McLeod, an attorney for the Michael Best and Friedrich law firm who worked with the Republican Party to develop the redistricting map, asking to see the redistricting file he developed.

He said in the letter that Senate Majority Leader Scott Fitzgerald, R-Juneau had insisted the redistricting process was not political, and that Fitzgerald denied Senate Democrats legal representation in this process by saying the Senate already had a law firm.

“Therefore, it is my understanding, as the elected State Senator of the 27th Senate District, I am your client,” Erpenbach said in the letter. “As your client I would like to review the file regarding your firm’s work on redistricting.”

Mike McCabe, executive director of Wisconsin Democracy Campaign, said in his 30 years of working with the Legislature he has never heard of anybody signing secrecy pacts.

He said Senate President Mike Ellis, R-Neenah, who has been in office for 40 years, said this was the first he has ever heard of or signed a secrecy agreement.

McCabe said it would be up to the judge involved with redistricting cases to decide whether the secrecy pledge was illegal. He said Voces de La Frontera has challenged the case on the process of violating open meeting rules.

He added he believes the case amounts to a violation of the spirit and the letter of open records laws.

“It just stinks to high heaven,” McCabe said. “This is a new low.”

McCabe said the allegations should inspire review of the law, but he cannot imagine the current Legislature would change the law. He said Democratic lawmakers introduced redistricting legislation last July, but it still has not received a public hearing.

He said the legislation faces a difficult route in the Legislature, but it would be a major improvement on the current system.

“This is what you get when you let politicians do redistricting,” McCabe said. “Wisconsin deserves better.”

The office of Assembly Speaker Jeff Fitzgerald, R-Horicon, declined to comment on the redistricting secrecy pacts. The office of Scott Fitzgerald could not be reached for comment.

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