

How do we achieve fair political maps?

By Sen. Jeff Smith and
Rep. Deb Andraca

Allowing politicians to draw their own districts is like allowing a fox to watch over the chickens. So why do we keep doing it? Those in charge of changing districts are the foxes, and they like it just the way it is.

It's hard to blame politicians entirely. It's just too tempting for foxes to draw lines that keep themselves in power.

It's often said the goal of the minority party in the Legislature is to get in the majority. The goal of the majority is to govern. But what if the majority fails to govern? The voters will make a change, right? Not if the majority are the ones determining district lines.

Being in the majority is a powerful thing. The majority determines rules of conduct, creates committees and assigns legislators to chair committees. Like air traffic controllers, committee chairs decide which bills advance out of committee and which bills die before the public ever has an opportunity to advocate for or against them.

It's no surprise majority party committee chairs give preference to their own party. It's extremely rare these days for a bill authored by a member of the minority to even receive a public hearing, much less a vote. In the Assembly last session, less than 2% of the minority party's bills got a hearing.

The majority's most powerful ability is drawing their own districts to stay in power. Elections are supposed to be how the public changes the status quo, but by using sophisticated computer modeling, a party can draw maps that almost guarantee their position in the majority for the

foreseeable future. That's called gerrymandering.

With such an incentive for majority legislators to pursue their own best interests, often the courts must intervene to prevent them from cynically doing just that. Starting Aug. 1, for the first time in 15 years the Wisconsin Supreme Court (SCOWIS) will no longer be controlled by conservatives. We expect a legal challenge filed to end gerrymandering. If it's found to be unconstitutional, SCOWIS may opt for more competitive maps.

With all we know about how damaging gerrymandering is to our democracy there's no excuse for doing this again in 2030 when new maps are drawn. We have an opportunity to follow in the path of states like Michigan, take the power away from the foxes, and return it to the people of this state where it belongs. A properly trained independent commission could be the answer.

Since 1980, Iowa has used an independent commission to draw maps. It's been the model for other states to adopt similar, more contemporary versions of independent redistricting.

More recently, Michigan residents passed a binding referendum to create an independent system which works for the public rather than politicians. There's a lot to learn from Michigan as well as Iowa when it comes to what works and what doesn't. The Michigan commission even compiled a "Lessons Learned" report which describes their process and how to avoid any pitfalls.

It's time to create a Wisconsin Model of independent redistricting that works for our particular dynamics and diversity. We can learn much from other states and cities with independent redistricting models,

but we aren't Iowa, nor are we Michigan. We do have the same need to modernize how we draw district lines so voters can choose their elected officials instead of political parties choosing their voters.

Computer programs draw maps in minutes, utilizing oceans of data to form perfectly gerrymandered maps. Information is collected about your purchasing habits, groups you belong to, if and where you attend church, your interests and your profession. This data collection isn't going away, but we can harness it to form competitive districts that motivate candidates to win your vote based on their values, rather than their political affiliation.

It's time we learn the lessons from Iowa, Michigan, California, Maryland and other states who removed the foxes from the henhouse and drew maps free of interference from politicians. Such an important part of our democracy should be protected from the self-interest of legislators. A Wisconsin model of independent redistricting, protected under our Constitution, is our goal. It's time we get these foxes out of the henhouse once and for all.

(Sen. Smith, D-Brunswick, represents District 31 in the Wisconsin State Senate. The 31st Senate District includes all of Buffalo, Pepin and Trempealeau counties and portions of Pierce, Dunn, Eau Claire, Jackson and St. Croix counties.)

(Rep. Andraca, D-Whitefish Bay, was elected in 2020 to serve the 23rd District in the State Assembly, which includes the Northern suburban Milwaukee communities of Bayside, Brown Deer, Fox Point, Mequon, Thiensville, River Hills, and Whitefish Bay.)