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POLITICS

Redistricting Reform Advocates Say The Real 'Rigged System' Is Gerrymandering

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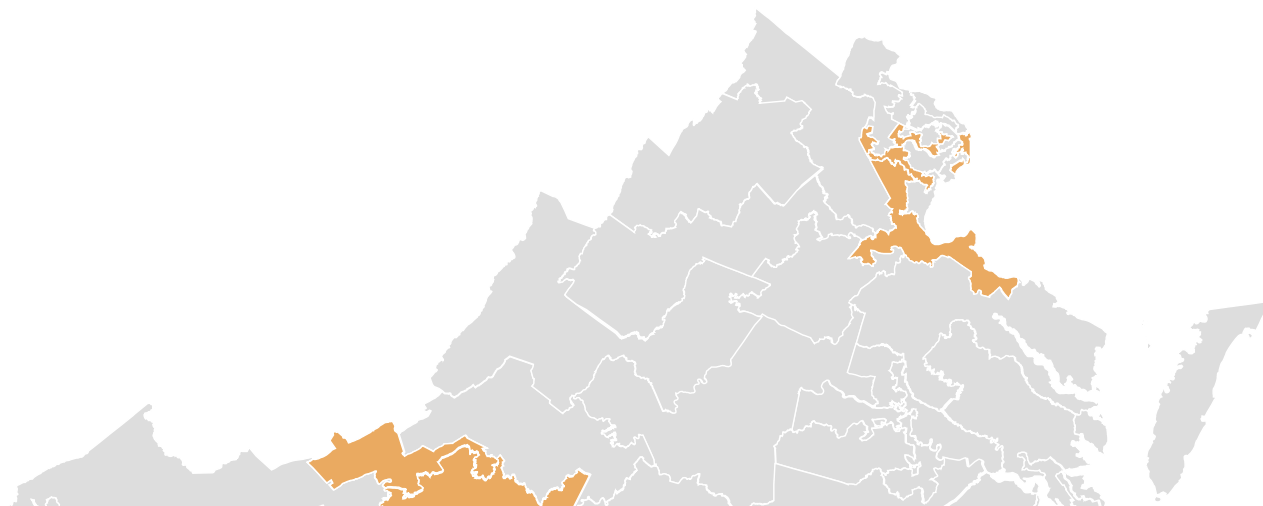


SARAH MCCAMMON

Virginia Legislative Boundaries Facing Legal Challenge

SENATE

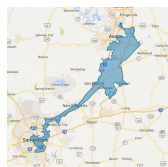
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If the election results of 2016 were really about rejecting the political establishment, then Congress didn't get the memo. After all, 97 percent of incumbents in the U.S. House of Representatives seeking re-election won even as national polls show overwhelming disapproval of Congress.

Advocates for redistricting reform hope voters are ready to pay more attention to the otherwise wonky issue of legislative districts are drawn, a system that's helped send so

many incumbents back to Washington and state capitols, year after year.



THE TWO-WAY

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One group trying to change that system is One Virginia 2021, a nonpartisan organization that's challenging the constitutionality of 11 state legislative district boundaries.

Executive director Brian Cannon says many of the Virginia General Assembly boundaries are so convoluted they no longer serve the people.

"I think when people scratch the surface on the concept of, 'Are these elections rigged?' it might not be rigged in the same way that Bernie Sanders or Donald Trump was saying it, but it doesn't take you too long to get to gerrymandering," Cannon says.

In the Virginia General Assembly, like in Congress, incumbents have a huge advantage; all who ran in the last election, in 2015, kept their seats. Cannon and his allies are waging a multi-front war on that system, which allows state lawmakers to draw the lines for state legislative and Congressional districts. A decision in the Virginia case is expected next month.

Independent commissions

In a separate effort, the group is also calling for the creation of an independent redistricting commission, similar to ones in Arizona and California. Cannon and his colleagues are traveling the state, showing a documentary about gerrymandering several times a month and pushing to elect candidates who support redistricting reform in Virginia's statehouse races this fall.



LAW

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Shane Brown runs a theater in Richmond that hosted a screening this week. He describes himself as a Democratic-leaning independent and who's concerned about the increasingly polarized nature of American politics.

"I think a lot of people are actually delving more and more into the intricacies of how all this works - especially when you see how not knowing it can be crazy when you see it breaking down," Brown says.

Cannon argues that competitively-drawn districts would force lawmakers to be more responsive and work across party lines.

"There's a number of ways to do this," he says. "Anything would be better than our current system."

National campaign

The issue of partisan gerrymandering appears to be energizing voters in several states. Last month in Montgomery County, Pennsylvania, hundreds showed up for a meeting hosted by a group pushing for a nonpartisan redistricting commission.

Others, including Texas and Florida, have seen legal challenges to their congressional district boundary lines. In Wisconsin, a federal judge in November ruled state legislative districts unconstitutional as drawn by Republican lawmakers.

The biggest pushback to redistricting reform tends to come from majority-party incumbents. In Virginia, Republican Chris Jones sponsored the bill that created the current districts for the House of Delegates.

"There's no non-partisan way to do this," Jones says. "Those who claim to be non-partisan if you look at most of their affiliations, they have party affiliations so it's not nonpartisan. So I think you're folly to think that's the case."

Critics have also raised questions about whether some proponents have failed to acknowledge the limitations of redistricting reform, instead of focusing on issues like voter turnout.

Reform advocates say while there are many potential approaches to drawing legislative boundaries, and no system is likely to be perfect, legislators shouldn't be designing their own districts.

Ruth Greenwood, the deputy director of redistricting at the Campaign Legal Center, acknowledges that change can be a tough sell to lawmakers who control state legislatures - but she hopes they will take the long view.

"Maybe it will be 2020; maybe it's 2030, but the Republicans will no doubt fall out of favor again, and the Democrats will be back ready to gerrymander," Greenwood says. "And hopefully at some point, both sides will realize that it's easier if we just have a fair, level playing system."

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