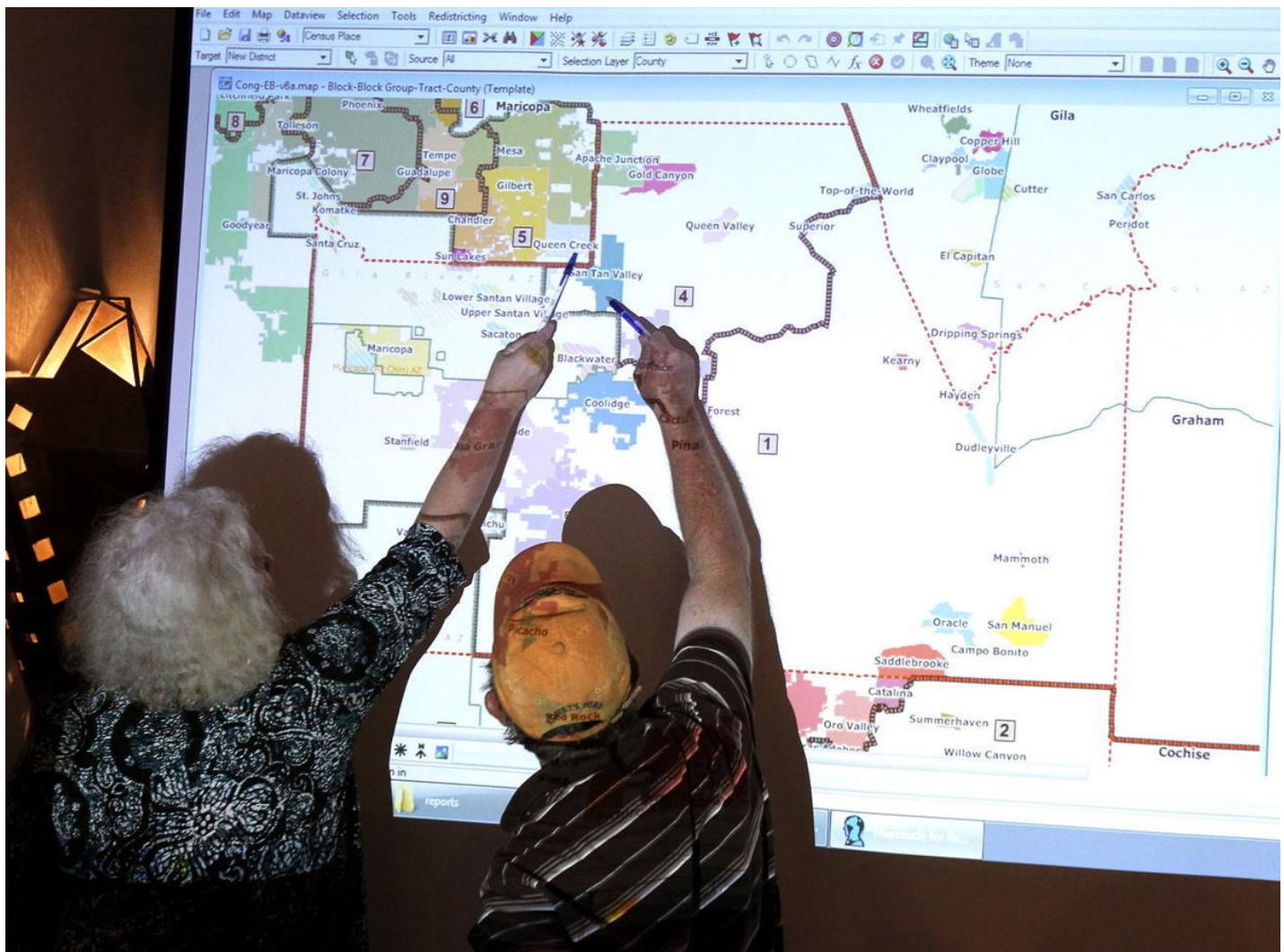


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Arizona does well in test of political gerrymandering

By Joe Ferguson Arizona Daily Star Jun 25, 2017



Gerrymandering, altering voting districts to give one party an advantage, is unlikely the reason Arizona is a red state, the AP found.

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Nationally, 49 percent of Americans went to the polls last year backing Republican candidates in House races throughout the country, yet the GOP controls 55 percent of the U.S. House of Representatives.

An investigation by The Associated Press looked at political redistricting — and what is known as gerrymandering — throughout the country as a legal fight in Wisconsin heads to the Supreme Court. A decision there could shape how political districts are drawn in every state.

The AP used a mathematical formula to determine the effects of gerrymandering, in which the party in power alters voting districts to its advantage, in federal and state legislative races across the country.

So is gerrymandering why Arizona is a red state? Unlikely. The results indicate Arizona has among the lowest measures of unequal representation among the states analyzed by The Associated Press, coming in fourth out of 43 states in the 2016 election. The reason, some say, is how the state draws its political districts every 10 years, relying on a independent redistricting commission.

The AP analysis found that Republicans — the largest political party in the state — won 52 percent of the votes in Arizona statehouse races in 2016 but ended up with 58 percent of the seats. The GOP gained just three seats more under the current district maps than it would have under more neutrally drawn maps.

Also, the Arizona GOP controls five of the nine House seats in Congress — about 56 percent — and at the polls in 2016, Republicans received 52 percent of the vote. The analysis shows the Arizona GOP won less than one seat more in the U.S. House using the current district maps.

For its analysis, The AP scrutinized all 435 U.S. House races in November using an “efficiency gap” statistical method designed to calculate partisan advantage. It found that the GOP may have won as many as 22 additional congressional seats than expected based on the average vote share in congressional districts across the country. The AP also used the method to calculate efficiency gaps for all states that held partisan House or state assembly elections for all of their districts in 2016.

The AP’s analysis was based on a formula developed by University of Chicago law professor Nick Stephanopoulos and Eric McGhee, a researcher at the nonpartisan Public Policy Institute of California. They computed efficiency gaps for four decades of congressional and state House races starting in 1972, concluding the pro-Republican maps enacted after the 2010 Census resulted in “the most extreme gerrymanders in modern history.”

IN ARIZONA

Local political observers disagree with the analysis, but all three agree the state’s Independent Redistricting Commission — backed by voters in 2000 after complaints of gerrymandering — plays a major role in wresting control of the process of creating legislative and congressional districts from the state’s political parties.

When the voter-backed commission draws the maps every decade, it gives weight to following the federal Voting Rights Act, but also the district’s shape and geographical features, keeping communities of interest together as well as potential political competitiveness.

Scott Freeman, a Republican who sat on the state’s redistricting commission, said the AP has simply taken a snapshot of Arizona’s political environment without putting into context what the makeup of the Legislature was two to four years ago.

“I don’t think the efficiency gap is a useful tool,” he said, noting the state’s congressional delegation had more Democrats than Republicans after the 2012 election, which used the same legislative districts. “It is very misleading.”

Freeman continued, “The 2012 election was the first election with the current maps and, theoretically at least, more likely to expose the plan of the devious map maker.”

Political analyst Chris Herstam says he would like to see the state focus on building as many competitive districts as possible.

“The number-one criteria should be competition,” he said. “It is good for democracy and good for Arizona.”

However, Herstam said the state also needs to look at the entire system as the state’s second-largest political group — independents — have almost no voice in the current system.

“It almost impossible for an independent to run for office,” he said.

Specifically, the state requires too many signatures, and the two main political parties make it difficult for political outsiders to raise campaign funds.

He worries that over time, these independents will reject the entire system and sit out on election night.

“Something has to be done, or we are losing a significant part of our voters,” he said.

DJ Quinlan, the former executive director of the Arizona Democratic Party, agrees with Herstam that the current maps do not go far enough to make districts politically competitive.

However, he said any changes to the maps would have to consider the federal Voting Rights Act, which is designed to prevent racial discrimination and voter-suppression efforts.

THE STATE'S COMMISSION

Voters pulled redistricting from the Legislature in 2000, with proponents of Proposition 106 arguing political lines were being gerrymandered for political advantage. The redistricting commission is made up of two Republicans and two Democrats appointed by legislative leaders and one independent chosen from a list compiled by the state Commission on Appellate Court Appointments.

When the final maps were adopted by the redistricting committee in early 2012, a series of court challenges ensued over complaints of unequal populations in the districts. In 2016, the U.S. Supreme Court upheld the legality of the Arizona Independent Redistricting Commission's legislative districts, even though the court acknowledged the unequal population sizes of the districts.

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