

Kara O'Connor: A step forward for fair elections

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A pair of recent Federal Appeals Court rulings have opened the door toward greater fairness in Wisconsin's election process. Now our legislative leaders face a choice: will they boldly walk through that door and join the national movement toward nonpartisan redistricting? Or will they slam the door shut and defend their politically-motivated districts drawn behind closed doors?

On Jan. 27, the Seventh U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals ruled that the Wisconsin state legislature must redraw the state's gerrymandered legislative districts prior to the 2018 elections. That decision followed the court's November 2016 ruling that Wisconsin's most recent district map "constitutes an unconstitutional political gerrymander" that unfairly dilutes the votes of over half of the state's citizens, in violation of both the First Amendment and the Equal Protection Clause of the 14th Amendment. The three-judge panel was made up of two Republican appointees and one Democratic appointee.

The current partisan map was designed to create "safe" districts, purposely drawn to be heavily Democratic or heavily Republican. This sets the stage for extreme partisanship, rather than districts that are conducive to competitive races and moderate candidates. Elected officials don't hear from constituents with other points of view, because they have all been drawn into other legislative districts.

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Moreover, when districts are drawn to heavily favor the incumbent, as the current districts do, new candidates don't even bother to run for office, and voters are

denied a meaningful choice at the polls. In the 2016 elections, 38 of 99 state Assembly candidates ran unopposed in the general election. On the state Senate side, most of the races were blowouts – only 3 of the 16 elections were decided by less than 10 percentage points.

Without a legitimate electoral challenge, legislators have less incentive to be responsive to their constituents. For democracy to thrive, we need competitive legislative districts and real elections.

So how do we draw better district maps? Luckily other states have created the laws, and the computer software, to draw legislative districts based on nonpartisan factors such as population, county and town borders, and contiguity of land area.

In addition to creating better outcomes for democracy, such a system is also inexpensive to administer: taxpayers don't have to foot the bill for a multi-million dollar redistricting legal battle every 10 years.

Unfortunately, Senate Majority Leader Scott Fitzgerald and Assembly Speaker Robin Vos have signaled that instead of drawing new nonpartisan districts, they will cling to the current politically gerrymandered ones – and spend outrageous sums of taxpayer money to do so. This week they signed a \$175,000 contract with Washington attorney Paul Clement, who regularly charges \$1,300 per hour for his services, to write a legal brief in support of the current districts. That's on top of more than \$2 Million that the state has already spent to defend the current districts.

Let's tell our legislators: stop using taxpayer money to defend the indefensible. Legislative leadership seems to have missed a key message of the 2016 election results, which is that voters want to see fundamental reform of politics as usual – starting with not spending taxpayer money on political nonsense. The door to better democracy is standing open right now. Democrats, Republicans, Wisconsinites: let's walk forward through that door together.

— *Kara O'Connor lives in Madison and is Government Relations Director for Wisconsin Farmers Union.*