

Wisconsin Freedom of Information Council: State needs a more open redistricting process

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Wisconsin lawmakers will soon begin redrawing congressional and state voting boundaries, in accordance with the latest Census. It's a good time to reflect on how that process has played out before — and for the public to demand greater transparency this time around.

A good example of how things ought not work comes from the last round of redistricting, in 2011.

In July of that year, Wisconsin's Republican-controlled Legislature [released](#) new legislative district maps on a Friday, held a single public hearing in Madison five days later, and passed the maps a week after that. Republican Gov. Scott Walker [signed](#) the new maps into law a month after they became public.

It was the first time since the 1950s that a single party had complete control of the process, and it allowed Republicans to cement control of the Legislature for a decade — even in 2018, when Democrats won every statewide election.

As later court cases and news reporting [uncovered](#), the mapmaking process was an affront to the state's tradition of open government.

The maps were drawn in a closely guarded “map room” in a law firm across the street from the Capitol. Only Republicans were allowed in to see the new maps, and only if they signed nondisclosure agreements.

When Democrats briefly took the majority in 2012, they demanded to see the redistricting records that had been hidden from them. Looking at the mapmakers'

computers, they found that hundreds of thousands of documents had been deleted and one hard drive had been damaged.

Still, records recovered from the hard drives (it turns out deleting files doesn't always destroy them) showed with each map draft, Republicans were tweaking them to be more and more politically advantageous. The Republicans were deliberately trying to pack Democrats into fewer districts to help Republicans win more seats.

Whether or not you like politicians picking their voters (and the [passage](#) of referendums or resolutions in 56 counties across the state calling for nonpartisan redistricting suggest most voters don't), the public should want a more transparent process than what happened in 2011.

Democratic Gov. Tony Evers' budget proposal [calls for](#) retaining all legislative redistricting records for 10 years and making sure all legislative redistricting meetings comply with the open meetings law. That would be a good start for building more confidence in the redistricting process.

Yet there is every indication that Republicans will try to keep the process as opaque as possible while doing everything they can to draw maps for their own partisan advantage.

The news site Wispolitics.com recently [revealed](#) that Republicans are planning to spend upwards of \$1 million of taxpayer money on outside lawyers on redistricting lawsuits. The 2011 redistricting litigation [cost taxpayers](#) at least \$3.5 million, according to the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel.

With such a high price tag, it's important to reiterate the conclusion the three judges, including two Republican appointees, reached in the 2011 litigation in which they blasted the "peculiarly furtive process adopted by the majority party."

Aptly, they added: "The people of Wisconsin deserve better in the next round of redistricting after the 2020 census."

Your Right to Know is a monthly column distributed by the Wisconsin Freedom of Information Council (wisfoic.org), a group dedicated to open government. Matthew DeFour, a council member, is state politics editor for the Wisconsin State Journal.