

The 2015 election in Virginia: A tribute to gerrymandering

By Stephen J. Farnsworth November 5

This is what democracy looks like, Virginia style.

Come January, all 40 seats of its state Senate will be occupied by the same party that held the seats before the Nov. 3 elections. In the House of Delegates, only three of 100 districts will be represented by a candidate from a different party than the current office-holder, and all three were open-seat (i.e. no incumbent running) contests in northern Virginia.

Incumbents have a sweet ride in the commonwealth. A total of 122 current office-holders ran for reelection to the 140 seats in the Virginia Legislature, and all 122 were reelected. Seventeen of the 40 Senate seats were uncontested, as were 62 of the 100 House districts.

Others were only barely contested. In the Senate, only five of the 40 districts turned out to be close -- defined as having less than 10 percentage points separating the winner from the second-place finisher. In the House, only six of the 100 seats met that (admittedly forgiving) standard for being “close.”

Three words explain these results in the Old Dominion: gerrymandering, gerrymandering and gerrymandering. If politicians have the opportunity to draw their own district boundaries, these politicians have the power to create a system that offers most voters a Soviet-style candidate list in return.

While the process of partisan line-drawing is about as old as the political parties themselves, modern software programs have made a bad situation worse, as demonstrated by the many lopsided contests, and lack of contests, found across Virginia this year. A few decades ago, partisan gerrymandering consisted of lawmakers trading index cards containing precinct data back and forth with delegates from neighboring districts. Now lines can be drawn with sophisticated computer programs that make it nearly impossible for a line-drawing lawmaker to be defeated.

The system is fixed, and it's no wonder so many voters are angry with politicians. Moderate voters, in particular, lose out when the real electoral

decisions are made by the partisans who participate in the nomination stage.

The map that accompanies this column, by University of Mary Washington geography professor Stephen Hanna, illustrates the extent to which nearly all Virginia elections are over as soon as the party nominee is chosen by the sliver of voters who participate in primaries. The three House districts that switched partisan preferences on Nov. 3 are nearly lost in the sea of sameness that marks the 97 other House districts. (A Senate map would show no change at all -- completely gray).

The legislature's authority to draw its own lines is written into the Virginia Constitution, but that does not mean the process is popular with citizens.

Virginians have their doubts about redistricting, to say the least. By a margin of 74 percent to 15 percent, state residents said in a 2013 statewide survey sponsored by UMW that an independent board — not the state legislature — should draw the boundaries of state legislative and congressional districts.

In all parts of the state, at least two-thirds of those surveyed wanted a nonpartisan line-drawing authority. More than two-thirds of all age groups turned thumbs-down on the status quo, as did more than two-thirds of men, women, whites, African Americans and Hispanics.

Even Republicans, who benefited from aggressive partisan line-drawing nationwide and in Virginia more than Democrats did after the 2010 Census, objected to giving district-drawing power to the state legislature. Among those Virginians who said they generally supported the GOP, only 19 percent said they wanted lawmakers to create their own legislative boundaries.

Even so, lawmakers are about as likely to support a change to the Constitution that creates a separate authority to draw district lines as they were to draw lines that maximize competition. In the few but growing number of states where commissions do handle the redistricting process, the change was often made at the mandate of voters. Ohio voters on Tuesday, for instance, overwhelmingly [passed a ballot measure](#) that aims to rein in the gerrymandering of state legislative districts.

As long as incumbents feel little pressure to change their line-drawing ways, we might want to put quotation marks around the word “elections” for legislators in the Old Dominion.

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