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Another View: US can learn from Canada about ending gerrymandering



Activists gather outside the U.S. Supreme Court for oral arguments in the Alexander v. South Carolina Conference of the NAACP gerrymandering case in Washington on Oct. 11, 2023. (Bill Clark/CQ-Roll Call Inc.)

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Over the past few years, the legitimacy of American elections has been called into question by Democrats and Republicans alike. Both sides can point fingers and claim the opposing party may try to cheat, scheme or tamper with the election results in some way. At all levels, American elections have been subject to criticism, and it seems to be a general consensus that everyone wants American elections to be more fair.

What is one easy way the U.S. could ensure our future elections are more fair? Getting rid of gerrymandering is a strong start. To do that, we should look to our northern neighbor since Canada has set a great example.

There is no doubt that the U.S. suffers from extremely high levels of gerrymandering. Look at the Illinois congressional districts in Chicago. Some call Chicago the most gerrymandered city in the country. Nicknamed “the earmuffs” because of its bizarre shape, Illinois’ 4th District, consisting of various bits of western Chicago, is a prime example. The district was handcrafted to include even specific blocks and houses. The bias is evident, and it’s everywhere across the nation — cities and rural areas alike.

Gerrymandering has a long history. It was named after former Massachusetts Gov. Elbridge Gerry who, in 1811, specifically remapped a district to help his party win electoral seats. Since then, it has become common practice in the U.S. for states to redistrict to ensure their party has the best shot at winning. While Democrats first realized how to gerrymander, in recent years, Republicans have used it the most to their benefit.

Canada, like the U.S., suffered from gerrymandering. However, today the country is entirely free of gerrymandering. Here’s how Canada did it and what we can learn from our neighbor.

In Canada, districts known as “ridings” are drawn at the provincial level by a commission consisting of a superior court judge chosen by the chief justice and two others chosen by the speaker of the House.

Notably, members of the Senate, House or provincial legislature cannot be on these commissions. This helps avoid the potential of political officials manipulating ridings for their personal gain. Typically, the additional two members are professors, urban geographers, mapmakers or professionals in related jobs. Their expertise in mapmaking, sociology and more help ensure ridings are as fair and practical as possible.

With this simple change, Canada got rid of gerrymandering. If we followed our neighbor's lead, we could too.

There have also been many attempts across the U.S. to end gerrymandering. For example, then-Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger tackled gerrymandering in California by creating a commission of impartial Californians to draw districts. Members of this commission apply of their own will, are split equally along party lines and vow to be impartial.

While Schwarzenegger's plan is strong and has helped California, it's not perfect, considering how deeply polarized the public is right now and how intensely party divisions affect everyday Americans.

Canada's combination of a local-level judge, someone who has already sworn impartiality to the country, removes this issue. Additionally, the knowledge experts help fine-tune the boundaries. As Canada does this process at the provincial level, the U.S. could implement this at a state level and potentially adjust the number of commission members to fit state size. The system works for our northern neighbor and, with a few contextual tweaks, could work for us too.

If we learn something from Canada about ending gerrymandering, we could make elections in America more free and fair and, in turn, strengthen American democracy. And a stronger democracy is something everyone can get behind, eh?

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