

Re-enfranchisement of New Mexico Voters via an Independent Redistricting Commission

Our United States' democracy is imperiled...something spoken of frequently in the media today. There has been corrosion of our democracy from the beginning, far longer than the current presidential commotion. Gerrymandering, for example, is old-school voter disenfranchisement, as old as the country itself.

Major institutions which evaluate the status of democracy across the world cite gerrymandering as a contributing factor to the erosion of U.S. democracy. *The Economist Magazine* publishes an [annual report](#) on the status of world democracies, which rates the U.S. merely 29th in the world and calls us, by name, a “flawed democracy”. Historically, the report cites our Electoral College and gerrymandering as primary structural reasons for the low ranking. Incidentally, Canada is the sole “full democracy” in North America, as the US continues to languish as a “flawed democracy”, the classification to which it was relegated in 2016, according to the report.

As reining in gerrymandering is left to the states, we must rely on ourselves to root out this blot on democracy. Creating an independent redistricting commission is one way to do that.

Ours is the only democratic nation that allows legislators to draw their own districts. This is the crux of the matter, as doing so allows said legislators to map out districts to block out opponents, and to assure their re-election and perhaps the re-election of their incumbent mates, some of whom represent the opposing party. If the legislature can hand-pick their voters, they can determine the outcome of their races. This specific infamous method of gerrymandering is known as incumbency protection. The New Mexico Senate district maps, drawn by the Senate and adopted by the legislature in 2021, prioritized incumbency protection over fairness. This is the situation as it stands today in New Mexico.

Experts and others around the globe, even our legislators, recognize the inherent conflict of interest in allowing legislators to draw their own districts. It's not a simple matter of "well if my team is drawing the districts, it must be good for me." Sometimes, maybe. But certainly not always. Consider that allowing for incumbency protection leads to entrenchment. Consider that it divides up communities of interest; perhaps *your* community of interest and leads to economic and racial disparities. Consider that we expect fair elections in the U.S., elections for which we pay, and time and again expect to be fair.

Let's look at entrenchment and incumbency protection. We know that incumbency protection leads to uncontested legislative races. In New Mexico, potential candidates of an opposing party know that they cannot win a particular race if the legislature has colluded to make a district overwhelmingly favorable for a particular incumbent, even possibly as a concession to the other party. In 2022 nearly 50% of New Mexico Legislative seats were uncontested, according to [Ballotpedia](#). In other words, 50% of incumbents breezed through to victory without a single opponent. Why? Because usually no potential challenger will enter a race they know is impossible to win. New Mexico's extremely high number of uncontested elections ties us with a few other states as the fourth highest in the nation.

Compare this nearly 50% of uncontested legislative seats in New Mexico to the percentage of uncontested legislative seats in three states who have vanquished incumbency protection with an independent redistricting commission: Colorado, **7.3%**; California, **2.0%**; and Michigan, **0.7%**. What an improvement!

Your legislators can make New Mexico a leader in rebuilding our democracy. Ask your legislators to pass a joint resolution allowing the voters of New Mexico to decide if they want an independent redistricting commission. Please join us in this effort.

Kathleen Burke is Project Coordinator at [Fair Districts for New Mexico](#). Fair Districts NM is a coalition of [nearly fifty organizations](#) in New Mexico and nationwide which is advocating for an Independent Redistricting Commission for New Mexico. It is a project of the League of Women Voters of New Mexico. Fair Districts can be reached at fairdistricts@lwvnm.org.