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Gerrymandering is the biggest obstacle to genuine democracy in the United States. So why is no one protesting?

Author: Brian Klaas

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"If there is one silver bullet that could fix American democracy, it's getting rid of gerrymandering - the now commonplace practice of drawing electoral districts in a distorted way for partisan gain."

Brian Klaas is a fellow in comparative politics at the London School of Economics and author of *The Despot's Accomplice: How the West Is Aiding & Abetting the Decline of Democracy*. In the following viewpoint, Klaas argues that the increasingly prevalent practice of gerrymandering in the United States is injuring the democratic process upon which the nation was founded. The author presents election results from 2016, which indicate wide margins of victory by members of the US House of Representatives across the country. He identifies this lack of competition as detrimental to democracy, claiming that it disenfranchises voters, discourages voter turnout, and further polarizes American politics when elected incumbents accustomed to remaining unchallenged on issues fail to collaborate with members of the opposite party while in office. Although Klaas expresses optimism in redistricting reform following several Supreme Court rulings, he urges readers to take further action in protesting this practice within their districts.

As you read, consider the following questions:

1. According to the author, in a typical district election in 2016, what percentage of the vote was won by the victor?
2. How does Illinois' fourth congressional district—nicknamed "the Latin Earmuffs"—serve as an example of gerrymandering?
3. Do you agree with the author that strong competition between political candidates leads to a healthier democracy and is therefore better for voters? Why or why not?

Byline: Brian Klaas

There is an enormous paradox at the heart of American democracy. Congress is deeply and stubbornly unpopular. On average, between 10 and 15 percent of Americans approve of Congress - on a par with public support for traffic jams and cockroaches. And yet, in the 2016 election, only eight incumbents - eight out of a body of 435 representatives - were defeated at the polls.

If there is one silver bullet that could fix American democracy, it's getting rid of gerrymandering - the now commonplace practice of drawing electoral districts in a distorted way for partisan gain. It's also one of a dwindling number of issues that principled citizens - Democrat and Republican - should be able to agree on. Indeed, polls confirm that an overwhelming majority of Americans of all stripes oppose gerrymandering.

In the 2016 elections for the House of Representatives, the average electoral margin of victory was 37.1 percent. That's a figure you'd expect from North Korea, Russia or Zimbabwe - not the United States. But the shocking reality is that the typical race ended with a Democrat or a Republican winning nearly 70 percent of the vote, while their challenger won just 30 percent.

Last year, only 17 seats out of 435 races were decided by a margin of 5 percent or less. Just 33 seats in total were decided by a margin of 10 percent or less. In other words, more than 9 out of 10 House races were landslides where the campaign was a foregone conclusion before ballots were even cast. In 2016, there were no truly competitive Congressional races in 42 of the 50 states. That is not healthy for a system of government that, at its core, is defined by political competition.

Gerrymandering, in a word, is why American democracy is broken.

The word "gerrymander" comes from an 1812 political cartoon drawn to parody Massachusetts Governor Elbridge Gerry's re-drawn senate districts. The cartoon depicts one of the bizarrely shaped districts in the contorted form of a fork-tongued salamander. Since 1812, gerrymandering has been increasingly used as a tool to divide and distort the electorate. More often than not, state legislatures

are tasked with drawing district maps, allowing the electoral foxes to draw and defend their henhouse districts.

While no party is innocent when it comes to gerrymandering, a Washington Post analysis in 2014 found that eight of the 10 most gerrymandered districts in the United States were drawn by Republicans.

As a result, districts from the Illinois 4th to the North Carolina 12th often look like spilled inkblots rather than coherent voting blocs. They are anything but accidental. The Illinois 4th, for example, is nicknamed "the Latin Earmuffs," because it connects two predominantly Latino areas by a thin line that is effectively just one road. In so doing, it packs Democrats into a contorted district, ensuring that those voters cast ballots in a safely Democratic preserve. The net result is a weakening of the power of Latino votes and more Republican districts than the electoral math should reasonably yield. Because Democrats are packed together as tightly as possible in one district, Republicans have a chance to win surrounding districts even though they are vastly outnumbered geographically.

These uncompetitive districts have a seriously corrosive effect on the integrity of democracy. If you're elected to represent a district that is 80 percent Republican or 80 percent Democratic, there is absolutely no incentive to compromise. Ever. In fact, there is a strong disincentive to collaboration, because working across the aisle almost certainly means the risk of a primary challenge from the far right or far left of the party. For the overwhelming majority of Congressional representatives, there is no real risk to losing a general election - but there is a very real threat of losing a fiercely contested primary election. Over time, this causes sane people to pursue insane pandering and extreme positions. It is a key, but often overlooked, source of contemporary gridlock and endless bickering.

Moreover, gerrymandering also disempowers and distorts citizen votes - which leads to decreased turnout and a sense of powerlessness. In 2010, droves of tea party activists eager to have their voices heard quickly realized that their own representative was either a solidly liberal Democrat in an overwhelmingly blue district or a solidly conservative Republican in an overwhelmingly red district. Those representatives would not listen because the electoral map meant that they didn't need to.

Those who now oppose President Trump are quickly learning the same lesson about the electoral calculations made by their representatives as they make calls or write letters to congressional representatives who seem about as likely to be swayed as granite. This helps to explain why 2014 turnout sagged to just 36.4 percent, the lowest turnout rate since World War II. Why bother showing up when the result already seems preordained?

There are two pieces of good news. First, several court rulings in state and federal courts have dealt a blow to gerrymandered districts. Several court rulings objected to districts that clearly were drawn along racial lines. Perhaps the most important is a Wisconsin case (*Whitford v. Gill*) that ruled that districts could not be drawn for deliberate partisan gain. The Supreme Court will rule on partisan gerrymandering in 2017, and it's a case that could transform - and reinvigorate - American democracy at a time when a positive shock is sorely needed. (This may hold true even if Neil Gorsuch is confirmed to the Supreme Court, as Justices Kennedy and Roberts could side with the liberal minority).

Second, fixing gerrymandering is getting easier. Given the right parameters, computer models can fairly apportion citizens into districts that are diverse, competitive and geographically sensible - ensuring that minorities are not used as pawns in a national political game. These efforts can be bolstered by stripping district drawing powers from partisan legislators and putting them into the hands of citizen-led commissions that are comprised by an equal number of Democrat- and Republican-leaning voters. Partisan politics is to be exercised within the districts, not during their formation. But gerrymandering intensifies every decade regardless, because it's not a politically "sexy" issue. When's the last time you saw a march against skewed districting?

Even if the marches do come someday, the last stubborn barrier to getting reform right is human nature. Many people prefer to be surrounded by like-minded citizens, rather than feeling like a lonely red oasis in a sea of blue or vice versa. Rooting out gerrymandering won't make San Francisco or rural Texas districts more competitive no matter the computer model used. And, as the urban/rural divide in American politics intensifies, competitive districts will be harder and harder to draw. The more we cluster, the less we find common ground and compromise.

Ultimately, though, we must remember that what truly differentiates democracy from despotism is political competition. The longer we allow our districts to be hijacked by partisans, blue or red, the further we gravitate away from the founding ideals of our republic and the closer we inch toward the death of American democracy.

Klaas is a Fellow in Comparative Politics at the London School of Economics and author of *The Despot's Accomplice: How the West is Aiding & Abetting the Decline of Democracy*.

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