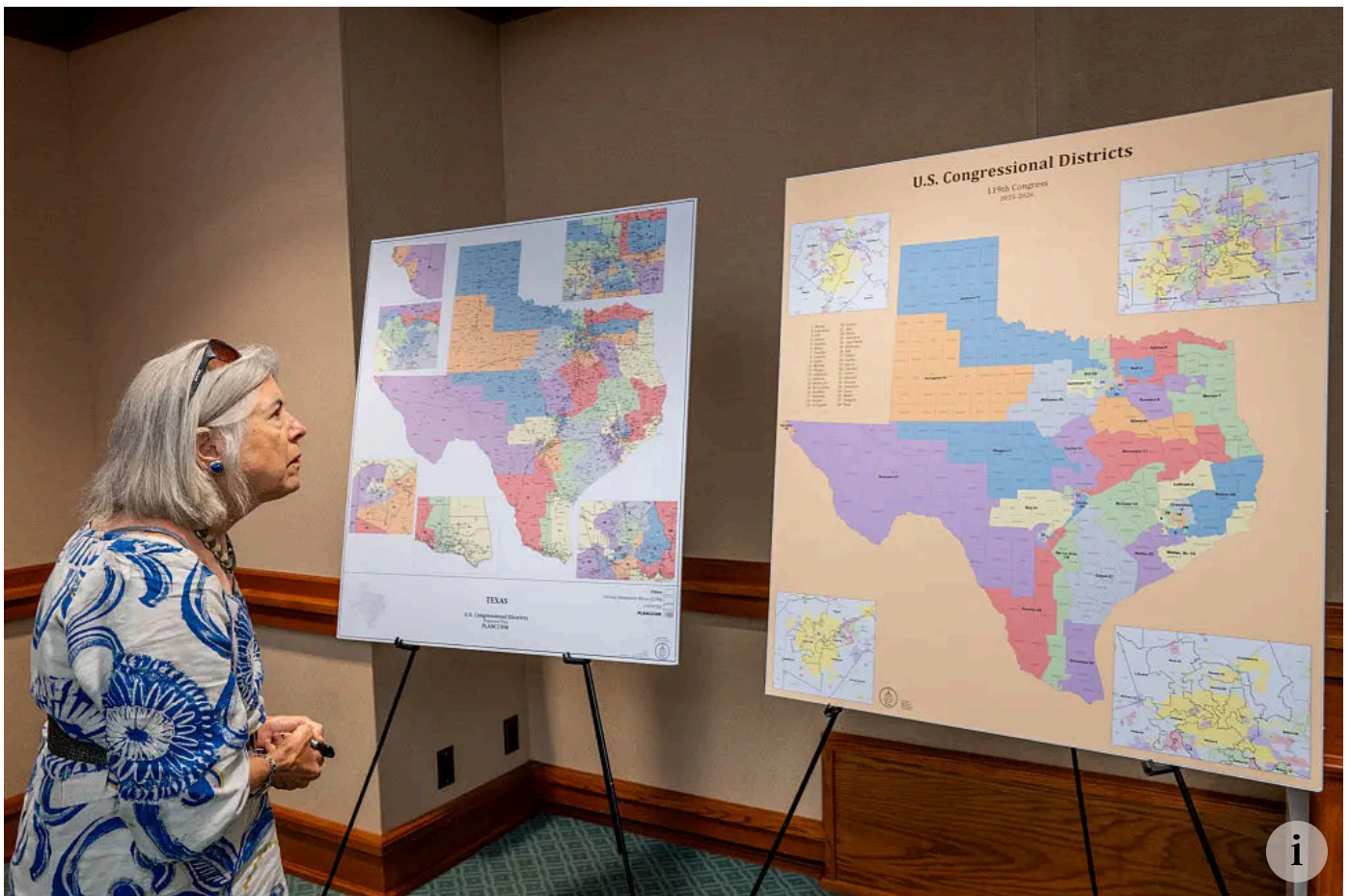AUG 14, 2025 10:42 AM ET

The Dangers of America's Gerrymandering Problem— And How to Fix It

IDEAS · POLITICS

Brandon Bell—Getty Images

by Benjamin Schneer and Maxwell Palmer

President Donald Trump has <u>thrust</u> the country into a new political battle: mutually assured gerrymandering. And the antidote is what we call "mutually assured representation."

The current saga began in June, when Trump called for Texas to start a congressional redistricting process in the middle of the decade—rather than after the next census in 2030. Last month, Republican Texas Governor Greg Abbott called a special legislative session to replace the state's current House map which would favor his party.

Now, Trump's push for mid-decade redistricting in Republican-controlled states appears likely to spread to Missouri, Ohio, and Florida. If this happens, Democrats would have retaliate in the states they control in order to have a chance at winning a majority of the seats in the House of Representatives in 2026. In New York, Governor Kathy Hochul has declared her readiness to "fight fire with fire." In California, Governor Gavin Newsom has proposed holding a special election in November for voters to approve a ballot initiative allowing the legislature to redraw the state's congressional map.

Read More: [‘Time to Stand Down’: Newsom Gives Trump Deadline to Call Off Redistricting Plan](#)

In Texas, Republicans are claiming that they are entitled to five more congressional seats—even if they receive the exact same number of votes as before. To achieve this, they can redraw the boundaries of the districts that Democrats won in 2024, moving Democratic voters into heavily Republican districts where their votes will not matter, and moving Republican voters into previously Democratic districts so that they can win these seats. In 2024, Republicans in Texas won 25 of the state's 38 seats, and Democrats won 13. With this new map, Republicans could win in 30 of 38 congressional districts.

The proposed gerrymander is likely to give Republicans four or five new seats even if Democrats win substantially more votes for Congress than they did in 2025. According to our calculation, this will happen even if there is a five percentage point swing towards Democrats in the 2026 elections. In recent years, just a few congressional seats have determined control of the House, and a flip of just five seats on its own might determine the national result.

Partisan gerrymandering makes it harder for voters to hold their representatives accountable. Congressional district elections become uncompetitive. With reelection in the general assured, candidates are focused on catering to their own party base, which tends to be a more extreme subset of their constituents. Through this process, partisan gerrymandering often reduces effective representation in Congress and can play a role in crowding out moderate and independent voters.

But here's a twist: President Trump's new wave of extreme gerrymandering may actually backfire, paving the way for electoral reform. Partisan gerrymandering is unpopular with voters, as we've seen repeatedly in recent years. Voters in states such as Michigan, Arizona, Colorado, and New Jersey, have supported nonpartisan redistricting commissions.

In 2021, Democrats tried and failed to pass the _For the People Act_, a bill that would have limited partisan gerrymandering nationwide and implemented non-partisan redistricting commissions in every state. But Republican senators blocked the bill.

Gerrymandering reform often fails because only one party makes the necessary reforms. For instance, previous successful anti-gerrymandering measures in states like California and New York created fairer maps in each state—but actually cost the party in power (Democrats in both instances) more seats than the margin determining control of the House in 2024.

One proposed solution is bipartisan redistricting commissions. These can fail when the parties cannot agree on a map. For instance, the Virginia commission deadlocked in 2022, leaving the courts to draw the maps. Then there are more radical solutions that effectively blow up the current electoral system as we know it, such as multi-member districts or aproportional representation. But we think it is unrealistic to get rid of a system that has been in place for two hundred and fifty years.

Instead, we believe it is possible to make reforms that keep the current electoral system while also overcoming some of its flaws. We've developed a process-based solution that has a number of appealing properties. It's inspired by the problem parents face when dividing a cake between two children. How can they make sure everyone gets an equal slice? One child cuts the cake in two, and the other child chooses between the two pieces.

Our approach, which we call the "Define-Combine Procedure," splits the map drawing process into two simple stages. First, one party divides the state into twice the number of needed districts—for example, 20 sub-districts for a state that needs 10 congressional seats. Then, the second party pairs those sub-districts into the final 10 districts. The result is a fairer map than either party would have drawn on its own. Instead of mutually assured gerrymandering, this approach leads to mutually assured representation.

Read More: Gerrymandering Isn't New—But Now We Have a Solution

We used real-world census and election data from 2020 in each state to forecast the results of extreme partisan gerrymandering and the Define-Combine Procedure in every state. In

Texas, Republicans could draw a map where they won 30 of 38 congressional seats. If Democrats could unilaterally gerrymander Texas, they could create a map with 28 Democratic and 10 Republican seats. Depending on party control of redistricting in Texas, a whopping 20 seats could change hands. When we used the Define-Combine Procedure, the resulting map would produce 19 Republicans seats and 17 Democratic seats, with the two remaining seats changing hands depending on which party defines and which combines. This result comes much closer to the 53% of the two-party vote that Republicans won in 2020.

Scaling nationwide, we estimate that extreme gerrymandering could determine which party holds almost 200 seats, out of the 435 seats in the House. Processes like ours could reduce the advantage that a party can earn just from drawing a map, with outcomes that are less biased and closer to proportional. The trick here is to use the impulse to score more seats for your party as a tool for fairness instead. It's a partisan solution for a partisan problem.

One party alone cannot protect voting rights and ensure fair representation. That's why, in 1965, Democrats and Republicans came together to pass the Voting Rights Act—and why they continued to amend and renew it for the next 40 years. But, a series of Supreme Court decisions over the last 12 years have substantially weakened the Voting Rights Act and allowed states to engage in extreme partisan gerrymandering.

Now, a case before the court next year is likely to further diminish its remaining provisions. Instead of settling for mutually assured gerrymandering, with less effective representation, reduced accountability, and uncompetitive elections, both parties should unite behind solutions that achieve fairer outcomes nationwide. Such an outcome seems unrealistic right now as tit-for-tat gerrymandering ramps up, but the moment when the dust settles and voters take stock of the damage done may well be the best opportunity to address the scourge of partisan gerrymandering.

If we don't seize this opportunity, America will pay the price.