A woman fills out her ballot at an early voting station in Green Bay, Wis., March 19, 2025. (OS

A woman fills out her ballot at an early voting station in Green Bay, Wis., March 19, 2025. (OSV News/Reuters/Eric Cox)



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The process of carefully drawing the lines of congressional districts to ensure a partisan outcome, known as gerrymandering, is not new. Elbridge Gerry, who lent his name to the process, was the eighth governor of Massachusetts, vice president to James Monroe and a signer of the Declaration of Independence. The Brennan Center for Justice has a fine "explainer" about gerrymandering.

Gerrymandering is corrosive of democracy. It allows the politicians in the state legislature to pick which voters they want their party's candidates to face. Elections are supposed to be about voters picking politicians, not the other way round.

The Founding Fathers were determined that political decisions would be made by the political branches; they distrusted the idea of impartiality. What the founders could not foresee is the way computer technology permits political parties to be far more precise in drawing congressional districts to achieve the result they want. That precision has reduced the number of competitive districts in the country. According to the Cook Political Report, there are 18 districts out of 435 that are rated as "toss-

ups" and another 18 that only lean to one party or the other. It lists 189 districts as "solid Democratic" and 186 as "solid Republican."

"If you give voters a reason to think that the political system is rigged and that it works against them, and that it's political elites that are essentially crafting the outcome before votes are cast, well, then, you know, guess what? You get really low voter turnout," Brandon Rottinghaus, a political science professor at the University of Houston, told The Texas Tribune. "And Texas has some of the lowest voter turnout of all 50 states."

Last year, Texas redrew its congressional maps to try and secure five additional seats for the GOP and, in December, the U.S. Supreme Court dismissed challenges to the new maps. The Supreme Court has not ruled on California's new map, which was specifically enacted to counter the redistricting in Texas.

This year, however, might bring a new word into the political lexicon: dummymandering. This happens when the people drawing the maps spread their own voters a little too thinly in the newly redrawn districts. So, for example a district that once had an R +10 partisan rating shares some of its voters to make them easier to win, but simultaneously diluting the partisan advantage in the first district. An R +10 margin may be fine, but if you dilute an R +6 district to an R +4, and there is a wave election in which Democrats improve nationwide by, say, 6percentage points, the district could flip. Wouldn't it be a kicker if the new Texas maps end up helping Democrats?

This scenario seemed unlikely until Democratic candidate Taylor Rehmet won a special election Jan. 31 to fill a vacancy in the Texas State Senate. President Trump carried that same district 15 months ago by 17 points. That suggests there might be a wave.

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Still, we shouldn't rely on flukes to save democracy. Former California Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger has led an effort to create nonpartisan commissions that draw congressional lines. He rightly understood that "safe" districts make our politics more extreme, as incumbents have little incentive to compromise with the other party. The only way they lose their seat is from a primary challenge, almost always

from the extreme.

Until we can do better than 36 competitive races out of 435, our democracy will be imperiled. One of the reasons Donald Trump became a plausible candidate was because of the dysfunction that has gripped Washington for so long. As noted Monday, the president's crackdown on immigration could have been averted had Congress succeeded in passing comprehensive immigration reform in 2007, 2014 or 2024. When a problem is not addressed, it becomes more susceptible to demagoguery and fodder for authoritarianism.

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