

STATE OF NEW JERSEY

GOVERNOR PHIL MURPHY

ICYMI: NEW JERSEY DEMOCRATS PLAY POWER GAMES TOO

12/15/2018

A proposal would change redistricting procedures to help ensure their party controls the Legislature.

From the New York Times Editorial Board:

NEW YORK – The Republican Party has recently shown great creativity — and great lack of shame — in seeking to hold on to power at all costs, even after losing elections. Lame-duck Republican legislatures in Wisconsin and Michigan are trying to strip incoming Democratic governors and attorneys general of power.

Now, here come the Democrats with their own attempt at an antidemocratic maneuver, in New Jersey.

Of course, it's not the first time. The Republican power grabs in Wisconsin and Michigan recall how, in 2004, the Democratic-controlled Massachusetts Legislature changed the law to prevent the Republican governor, Mitt Romney, from picking a long-term replacement to fill the seat of then-Senator John Kerry if he won the presidency.

Yet one might think, in 2018, that the widespread outrage at those attempted Midwestern coups would deter Democrats from playing such games. Apparently not.

Democrats controlling the New Jersey Legislature, including the Senate president, Stephen Sweeney, are proposing an amendment to the state's Constitution making it more likely that congressional and state legislative district lines could be drawn to give their party the advantage.

The proposal would change the makeup of the committee that draws district lines to allow legislative leaders to appoint eight of 13 members, four of whom would be state lawmakers. For arcane reasons that would be headache-inducing to explain, this strengthens the hand of one faction of New Jersey's Democratic Party against the other.

More important, the plan would require that districting account for how major political parties performed statewide in elections for governor, senator and president — elections that Democratic candidates have dominated for years in New Jersey. While most legislative districts could be drawn to the advantage of one party or the other, the proposal would require that at least 25 percent of the districts be "competitive." That would mean that their partisan breakdown would be within five points of the statewide average in those major races. Since the average Democratic statewide vote over the past 10 years has been about 55 percent, according to a study by the Princeton Gerrymandering Project, the "competitive" districts could be 50 to 60 percent Democratic. The study also found that under the plan, Democrats could win as many 70 percent of the legislative seats by winning only 57 percent of the statewide vote.

Rather than following the growing trend of establishing independent nonpartisan redistricting commissions, this plan just reworks a bad setup. (The current commission, which operates with no methodological guidance, is appointed by state party leaders, with a tiebreaking person in charge appointed by the State Supreme Court chief justice.)

It's not a surprising move by veteran politicians who are experts in protecting their own power. But it flies in the face of Democrats' frustration at extreme gerrymandering by the other side. (In Wisconsin, Democrats got 54 percent of the total votes in November's State Assembly elections but won only 36 percent of the seats.)

Luckily, New Jersey's Democratic governor, Phil Murphy, opposes the move, and several Democrats nationally have criticized it. Also, the fate of the measure depends on a statewide vote by New Jersey residents, not on a vote by members of a gerrymandered Legislature.

The response to Republican gerrymandering should not be more of the same from Democrats, and it's reassuring that Mr. Murphy and so many other party leaders recognize that, continuing to push instead for nonpartisan, independent redistricting.

The next move on the measure comes on Monday, when the Legislature will cast the first of two votes — the second would come in January — to place it on the ballot next November. Legislators should heed the widespread criticism of the measure and drop it.

View the article at the New York Times (https://urldefense.proofpoint.com/v2/url?u=https-3A__t.e2ma.net_click_rarv1_nrddit_zozxag&d=DwMFaQ&c=4BTEw-1msHjOY4ITcFLmDM6JB8x6ZgbU2J24IH0HZLU&r=xF3DPDNEH8rwpTwktOjb4MHQ0EgF6v3M0zt3hszQvyU&m=dRpwOhUedik69nQAGPONWymAoMtn5VcqMsjR6av0EAY&s)

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