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Gerrymandering, Pure and Corrupt

Of all the tricks that New York's legislators use to hang on to office, the one that works best — for the politicians, that is — is redistricting. Mapmaking in Albany is a dark art form designed to make absolutely certain that incumbents in the majority party are safe from electoral competition (a k a democracy).

In the years the Republicans controlled the Senate, former Senator Guy Velella, a Bronx Republican, had his own war room to choose voters block by block. The result is an inkblot that would confuse even Hermann Rorschach. In the last redistricting in 2002, Mr. Velella even managed to excise the house of a former challenger, Lorraine Coyle Koppell, from the district. Mr. Velella lost his seat after 18 years only when he was convicted of bribery in 2004 and was forced to resign.

This process has worked so well for so many politicians that the New York Public Interest Research Group reports that in 2008 more than half of the state's 212 legislators were re-elected with more than 80 percent of their districts' votes. In 57 districts, the incumbents ran unopposed. New faces appear rarely, usually when a lawmaker retires, dies or, increasingly, gets convicted of abusing the public trust.

This isn't the way it is supposed to work.

Every 10 years, legislatures across the country draw new Congressional districts and their own districts — a clear conflict of interest. Under federal and state law, each district is supposed to have about the same number of people and be reasonably compact, but the laws are porous and many of the details are left to the states. Politicians and their experts are masters at finding loopholes — especially in New York, where gerrymandering is still rampant.

There is little chance of changing Albany's corrupt culture without real political competition and the possibility of a full legislative housecleaning. The only way to do that is to wring much of the party politics and self-interest out of the redistricting process. New York lawmakers need to establish an independent mapmaking system that gives voters a real choice on Election Day.

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Here are some of the worst examples of gerrymandering from the last redistricting in 2002:

ASSEMBLY DISTRICT 131 For decades, Democrats have controlled the Assembly, and the mapmaking for their own house. That is why the district for Democrat Susan John in the Rochester area looks a little like a teapot. The bulk of her district is in the suburbs, prime Republican territory, but to keep Ms. John in office, the mapmakers added what looks like a curl of steam that runs through the most Democratic areas of Rochester. Without it, Ms. John's seat could easily turn Republican.

ASSEMBLY DISTRICT 8 Assemblyman Philip Boyle, a Republican of Suffolk County, often calls himself the poster child for redistricting reform. In 2002, his good Republican home was carefully drawn into a Democratic district. As a result, Mr. Boyle decided not to run again until a few years later when a Republican assemblyman in the district next door resigned. Of course, Mr. Boyle had to sell his home and move. He has learned his lesson. "I rent now," he says. "I'm concerned that they're going to change the lines again."

SENATE DISTRICT 45 Each district needs about the same population, give or take 10 percent (about 300,000 for a Senate district and 124,000 for an Assembly district). But partisan mapmakers have always found ways to fiddle with the numbers. The upstate district for Senator Elizabeth Little, a Republican, is a perfect example. Mrs. Little's district has 299,600 people, but about 13,000 of those are prisoners from 12 prisons in her district. These prisoners do not vote, and they should be counted where they live, which is probably not in her district. But the prisoner scam is one way to keep upstate districts intact and Republican, as the area steadily loses population.

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The next redistricting is in 2012. Long before that — before next year's elections — New York's lawmakers should create a nonpartisan, independent redistricting commission to draw lines fairly for Congressional seats and legislative seats. Assemblyman Michael Gianaris, a Queens Democrat, has been trying for years to get Albany to adopt a system similar to the one that has been in place in Iowa since 1980.

Once the commission draws these maps, the Legislature would have to approve it or reject it, as is. If they vote the maps down once, the commission goes back to the computers. After two rejections, the Legislature would be allowed to modify the maps, but only in a very public way — with maps posted on the Internet for wide perusal and comment. Politicians are not fond of the system in Iowa, but it works.

New York's voters should not elect a legislator next year unless he or she promises to set up an Iowa-style commission. And they should not elect a governor, unless he or she backs that commission — or pledges to veto the next gerrymandered maps. Unless New York's legislative districts are drawn fairly, Albany's status quo of corruption and incompetence will be cemented in place for another 10 years.

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This article is part of a series examining the political and structural crisis in the New York State government.