

Once again, Michigan Dems receive more votes in the State House, but Republicans hold onto power

By [Tom Perkins](#)

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There's a lot of justifiable outrage over a Republican presidential candidate coming up short in the popular vote but winning the presidency for the second time since 2000.

Just imagine a world without W and Trump. The electoral college is frustrating Democrats, to put it mildly.

But just as outrageous is the similar scenario that played out in the last two election cycles at the state level in Michigan. In 2014 and 2016, Democrats received more votes in the State House races, yet Republicans hold a huge 63-47 majority and push a deeply conservative agenda that a majority of voters don't want.

How could that be? That's classic gerrymandering. As MT reported a year ago, Republicans redrew the state's 110 state legislative districts in 2010 in such a way that Democratic voters are herded into a small number of districts. The majority of Republican voters, conversely, are spread among a much larger number of districts.

Whoever controls more districts controls the House. So "packing and stacking" Democrats into a small number of districts makes it easy for Republicans to hold onto power, even if Democrats get more votes statewide. And when that happens, the government passes laws that are unpopular, but it's difficult to vote Republicans out of office.

To put it bluntly, gerrymandering is a legal form of election theft, and the results support that.

According to numbers posted on the Michigan Secretary of State's website, Democratic House of Representative candidates received 2,302,417 in 2016. Republican candidates received 2,283,727 — an advantage of about 18,000 for Democrats.

In 2014, Michigan voters cast 30,000 more ballots for Democrats than Republicans in the state's House of Representatives races. Despite that, Republicans held and continue to hold a 63-47 advantage.

The same scenario played out in the Congressional races in 2014. Democratic candidates received 50,000 more votes that year, but Republicans sent nine representatives to Washington, D.C. while Dems sent five. Republican candidates edged Dems in the 2016 Congressional races, but are again sending four more representatives to Washington.

Voters only cast ballots for one senate race in 2016, but in 2014, the raw count came in close to even, yet Republicans hold a 27-11 majority.

That insulates Republicans from voter anger, and allows them to pass conservative laws that are highly unpopular, says Brandon Dillon, chair of the Michigan Democratic Party.

"It's clear that Republicans have done a masterful job of manipulating the legislative lines to give themselves a structural advantage in these elections," he tells MT. "This goes back to 2012. We've consistently gotten more votes than Republicans statewide, because of how the lines are drawn, but it doesn't translate into equal representation."

The link between gerrymandered districts and unpopular laws isn't direct, but it's clearly there. Exhibit A is the "Religious Freedom Restoration Act" passed in 2015. It allows religious adoption agencies that receive taxpayer money to deny an adoption to same-sex couples, or anyone else seeking to adopt who doesn't subscribe to Christianity.

Public polling found the law to be highly unpopular among Michigan residents, who also supported expanding rights for same sex couples, yet Republicans unanimously voted for it.

Over a clear majority of residents' objections, Republicans also pressed forward with "rape insurance" the emergency financial manager law, allowing guns in school, and defunding schools.

In 2014, polls found widespread support for increasing the minimum wage to \$10.10 an hour. Republicans initially blocked that effort but, under intense public pressure, agreed to increase the minimum wage to \$9.20 in 2017.

Perhaps the most blatant example of defying residents' wishes occurred in 2012 when Michiganders voted to repeal the unpopular emergency manager legislation. The law allowed the state to strip locally elected governments of their power, and residents were uncomfortable with that. Republicans didn't care, drafted a new version of the law, and rammed it through a month later.

Gerrymandered districts are also breeding grounds for insane politicians, and Michigan's roster of loons includes those like Todd Courser or Cindy Gamrat, who likely wouldn't have lasted long had they faced any serious competition from Democrats.

Former Grand Rapids area tea party Rep. Dave Agema makes Donald Trump look like MLK, trading in racial politics before it was fashionable. He served between 2007 and 2013 and earned his reputation by quoting KKK leaders on his social media accounts.

Beyond that, Republicans booted Agema from the House Appropriations Committee after he chose to take a trip to Siberia to hunt snow sheep during the state's 2008 budget crisis. Yet he survived his re-election bids.

Gary Glenn, a Midland tea party Republican, is cut from the same cloth. He's president of the American Family Association of Michigan, a conservative religious organization that the Southern Poverty Law Center labels a hate group.

And the political lunacy is bi-partisan. Democratic State Rep. Brian Banks won just under 70 percent of the vote in 2014 while facing sexual harassment charges for allegedly forcing a male staffer to perform a sexual act on him.

Sen. Virgil Smith, also a Democrat representing Detroit, held onto his seat while facing felony charges for shooting at his wife, and didn't let go until earlier this year when he went to jail for 10 months

The list continues, though the remedy is simple — more competitive districts.

The problem is illustrated in the State House's 3rd district, which holds parts of Detroit and Hamtramck. Rep. Wendell Byrd captured 96.7 percent of its vote in 2016. His opponent, Republican John Broderson, only received 941 votes.

With that kind of opposition, there's not a lot of ballot box incentive for Byrd — or any Republican or Democrat capturing 96 percent of the vote — to behave. They simply won't be voted out of office.

Jack Lessenberry, a political analyst for Michigan Public Radio and an MT columnist, previously offered a colorful but honest take of the state's extreme politicians.

"This is the way people in insane asylums act," he says. "Most of these people ought to be on some kind of medication and strapped down. The results are they are destroying our state ... and effectively destroying any chance of anything getting done."

The issue is difficult to resolve because gerrymandering is a complex topic that deals with the mechanics of politics.

A 2012 EPIC/MRA poll shows a majority favor redistricting reform, and Bernie Porn, a pollster with the agency, tells MT he suspects that's still the case. Especially as the legislature's approval rating hangs around 15 percent.

But he adds that it's not that simple because gerrymandering is "an issue people do not understand a whole heckuva lot."

The non-partisan League of Women Voters discussed gerrymandering when it held 70 meetings across Michigan last year that dealt with voting issues. Sue Smith, the League's vice president for redistricting, said the group didn't get particularly encouraging feedback.

"The general public doesn't understand gerrymandering, nor do they care to because they don't see the relation between how the lines are drawn and what happens in their lives," she says.

Voters in other states that faced similar situations have established non-partisan redistricting commissions, and Dillon says Michigan must go that route if it's to remedy the situation.

But with little reporting on the issue — only national outlets mentioned Michigan's 2014 results, and no one has looked at the 2016 numbers — and less understanding of the consequences, Michiganders may continue getting the conservative state government they didn't want.

