

Montana is not a Pumpkin

October is here, leaves are falling, and perhaps Montanans should not be surprised that the Montana Democrats on the Districting and Apportionment Commission are carving up our state like a pumpkin. While they claim they want to create a “competitive” district, their maps go far beyond that. So far in fact, that they fail to meet the mandatory criteria in the Montana Constitution, that the districts be as equal in population as is practicable, be contiguous, and be compact. Democrats often lament “gerrymandering”; however, a quick view illustrates that is their current intent. Do Kalispell and Libby belong with Sidney and Ekalaka in eastern Montana? Or would they be more accurately situated with Missoula and Helena in western Montana? You may be surprised at the difference of opinion!

Various measures of competitiveness are found on the publicly accessible map drawing software options that Montanans used in unprecedented numbers to draw suggested maps. Most of those were some version of an East-West split which has been our historical precedent and which was supported by the last Democrat to represent the Western District, Pat Williams. But those software models all suffer from a common weakness in that they use the big Trump presidential victories in Montana in 2016 and 2020 as a proxy for average Republican voting strength. That is a bad proxy and here is why.

In 2016 Trump won 55% to 35% or a 20% win while the average vote for Montana Republicans winning statewide (except the AG’s race which was an outlier) was less than a 9% win. Similarly in 2020, Trump ran ahead of most Montana Republicans. Clearly, many Montana voters who supported Trump also voted for Montana Democrats or third-party candidates. You cannot simply use the Presidential race as a proxy for average Republican voting strength when Trump’s brand of fiery populism attracted many people who would not vote Republican on down ballot races. The “I vote for the man, not the party” is still heard around these parts.

In contrast, when Republicans on the commission drew our suggested East-West map splits, we used the 2016 Governor election, and the 2018 U.S. Senate election to measure competitiveness. In both, Democrats Steve Bullock and Jon Tester won after very competitive campaigns. We focused on drawing suggested maps that followed historical precedent and met the constitutional mandatory criteria, rather than attempting to draw two safe seats for Republican candidates. All four Republican proposals showed Bullock and Tester winning the western district comfortably. In contrast, the Democrat’s map proposals using the Bullock 2016 and Tester 2018 wins create Democrat districts with a margin of 56-58% D to 40% R. That is uncompetitive by any measure.

Republicans have been transparent throughout this entire process, while the Democratic party has yet to comment, instead utilizing partisan interest groups for messaging. This may be because they are looking to place about half of Montana’s Democratic counties, mostly Native American reservations, in a district that they’ll never have a chance at winning, while awkwardly contorting counties to create a Democratic congressional seat.

Please email the Chair of the Commission appointed by the Montana Supreme Court, Maylinn Smith at Maylinn.smith@mtleg.gov and ask her respectfully to follow the mandatory criteria of the Montana Constitution and lead the Commission to draw congressional districts that follow the Constitution, follow the law, represent Montana's interests and do not "unduly favor" one political party. View the Commissions 9 proposals at mtredistricting.gov and comment. Comments are due by October 19th.

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Republican Commissioners
Montana Districting and Apportionment Commission