

2 Parties, 2 Maps: Democrats and Republicans Squabble on Redistricting

Two competing proposals advance, and the failure to compromise may pave the way for Democrats to step in and knock out Republican congressional seats.

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New York's new bipartisan redistricting commission got off to an inauspicious start on Wednesday, as its Democratic and Republican members failed to reach an agreement on an initial set of congressional and legislative map proposals.

Instead, the New York State Independent Redistricting Commission, the body empowered by voters to remove politics from the mapmaking process, said it would proceed for now with two competing proposals, one drawn up by its Democratic members and another by Republicans.

With New York slated to lose a seat in its congressional delegation after last year's census, both parties proposed collapsing a district upstate, where the population has declined.

But the Republican plan would do so by rejiggering a handful of Hudson Valley and Capital Region districts that could pit Democratic incumbents against one another, while preserving the shapes of rural red seats in the western part of the state. Democrats propose the opposite, potentially displacing Republican incumbents in central and western New York while shoring up Hudson Valley Democratic incumbents.

Other vast differences were evident. While the Republicans would redraw lines across New York City, potentially imperiling several long-serving Democrats in Manhattan and Brooklyn, they would basically leave intact the Staten Island-based district now held by Nicole Malliotakis, a Republican.

Democrats, on the other hand, would leave city lines more intact, but redraw Ms. Malliotakis's seat to include Coney Island in Brooklyn, which is largely Democratic, a move that would make the district more competitive. Their map also appeared to create a new opportunity for Democrats on Long Island to pick up a seat.

Nothing in the New York State Constitution requires the commission, which is drawing lines for the first time since it was created in 2014, to agree to a single set of maps for congressional, Assembly and State Senate districts at this point in the process. But the partisan squabble over what amounts to a preliminary discussion does not spur optimism that the commission can unite around a single set of bipartisan maps to present to Albany for ratification.

Its failure could pave the way for Democratic supermajorities in Albany to step in to determine the final maps early next year. Party leaders there and in Washington are already quietly circling in case the commission cannot reach a final agreement or produce a final result party leaders like. They hope to use the process to knock out as many as five Republican congressional seats, boosting the party nationwide as it tries to maintain a narrow House majority, and to firm up permanent majorities in the Legislature.

Under the New York Constitution, the redistricting commission leads the way in drawing maps. But if it fails to come to a consensus among itself or delivers lawmakers a map that they don't like, the Legislature can overpower the body and establish almost any map it chooses, so long as the districts meet constitutional requirements and are roughly equal in size.

Republicans in New York and Albany are already balking at the process and could challenge the outcome in the courts, which drew the current congressional map in 2012 amid a partisan dispute in Albany.

Republican commissioners wasted little time pointing fingers on Wednesday at their Democratic counterparts, whom they accused of cutting off talks in recent days that had been intended to try to reconcile the competing maps. Privately, the Republicans fear that Democratic commissioners have no intention of finding an agreement and would prefer to let the body fail so they can kick the process directly to the Legislature to draw more advantageous maps for their party.

"The constitution is pretty clear in what we are supposed to do: They appointed the commission as an independent body for it to have to work together and find a nonpartisan way forward by actually discussing things," Jack Martins, the commission's Republican vice-chair, said in an interview. "The fact that a portion of the commission has decided to walk away from that is very disappointing."

Democrats argued that the competing maps could be a good thing, allowing voters to provide feedback as to which they liked best. Commissioners stressed that the presentation of two sets of maps Wednesday did not close the door on the possibility that they would eventually find consensus before their January deadline.

Understand How U.S. Redistricting Works

What is redistricting? It's the redrawing of the boundaries of congressional and state legislative districts. It happens every 10 years, after the census, to reflect changes in population.

"We could either draw these maps in a smoke-filled Zoom in 48 hours or we could put the maps out to the public and let the public weigh in," said David Imamura, the Democratic appointee who chairs the panel. "In the interest of public participation, we decided to put both sets of maps out."

Members of Congress in both parties largely withheld comment, though Ms. Malliotakis said she was not worried.

"Regardless of what the final configuration of the district is, I'm extremely confident I will be re-elected next year," she said.

New York voters created the independent commission by constitutional amendment in 2014, but its contours were the product of a compromise between Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo and Republicans, who controlled the State Senate at the time. The idea was to take line drawing out of the hands of politicians in the Legislature eager to protect their party and their incumbents and give it, starting this year, to a bipartisan body that could fairly divide up the state.

But the commission struggled to assert its independence from the start, and critics say its structure — with most appointees designated by the party leaders in the Legislature — makes compromise exceedingly difficult.

The panel did not receive funding from Albany until April, forcing commissioners to volunteer their time for months. The Legislature, in contrast, has continued to fund its own map-drawing task force year after year.

The panel did not receive detailed census data until last month because of national delays; it is still waiting on official data on the state's prison population that the commission needs to fine-tune its maps. And even as the commission prepared to release the maps, another hiccup emerged: Its website briefly crashed on Wednesday.