Fair representation for all

Instead of gerrymandering single congressional districts, create super-districts that allow every voter's voice to be heard

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The battle over legislative redistricting in Maryland provides only the latest evidence of the failure of winner-take-all congressional elections in single-member districts. In these districts huge numbers of people will, by design, vote regularly for losing candidates and be left feeling that they are without meaningful political representation. As everyone knows, single-member districts are a standing invitation to computer-facilitated partisan gerrymandering, a process that has turned ferocious all over America.

It's time to look for a better way, grounded in our electoral traditions: proportional representation in a fair voting system where nearly all voters can elect a preferred candidate, no matter where they live.

Democrats control the redistricting process in Maryland. Just as Republicans in states like Ohio, Michigan and North Carolina gerrymandered U.S. House seats for next year in order to protect incumbents and pick up new seats, Democrats here hoped to pick up a seventh House seat through redistricting. Not surprisingly, Republicans harshly criticized the plan as a partisan gerrymander. But when elected officials choose voters before voters choose elected officials, the party in control will always draw the most advantageous districts possible. (In North Carolina, a state carried by Barack Obama in 2008, Republican legislators recently drew 10 majority-Republican seats and packed Democrats into three majority-Democratic seats.)

To put voters in the driver's seat and greatly reduce the role of partisan tactics, we need to address the root of the problem: a combination of winner-take-all rules that make gerrymandering inevitable and a national redistricting arms race that makes any kind of fair redistricting by a single state a kind of "unilateral disarmament" in the gerrymander wars.

Independent redistricting commissions can improve things slightly, but under current rules they still cannot guarantee what John Stuart Mill called "full representation." There will still be big-time winners and total losers even in the most competitive single-member districts.

It is time to take on the winner-take-all rule itself by conducting elections in multi-seat "super-districts," with a fair voting system in place.

Used in many national elections and in a growing number of American cities, methods of fair voting (also called proportional voting) allow like-minded voters to pool their votes to elect representatives in numbers mirroring their level of public support. It puts voters, rather than partisan mapmakers, in charge of their representation in every election; citizens essentially "district" themselves by voting.

Several candidate-based forms of fair voting have been upheld by our courts and fit well within our traditions. "Choice voting," now being used in Minneapolis and Cambridge, Mass., is a reform that helped break the power of urban political machines in New York and Cincinnati in the last century. In this system, voters rank favored candidates in order of choice in multi-member super-districts, and as many voters as possible participate in electing one of their top-ranked candidates. A wonderful side-effect is the reduction of negative politics, since candidates have an interest in appealing to all voters, not just their natural "base."

Cumulative voting, which is used in dozens of cities, provides a similar alternative. From 1870 to 1980, members of the Illinois House of Representatives were elected this way, with each voter having three votes to

cast in a three-member district — assigning them to one, two or three candidates as they saw fit. Nearly every district elected both Democrats and Republicans.

Under our alternative proposal for congressional elections, Maryland would be divided into two super-districts: one with five seats and another with three seats. Winning in the three-seat district would take just over 25 percent of the vote. Winning two seats would take just over 50 percent, and sweeping all three would take more than 75 percent. In the five-seat district, winning one seat would take about 17 percent of the vote, and winning a majority of three seats would take just over 50 percent. The result would be fair representation of every major political force in the state.

From a partisan perspective, backers of both major parties would almost certainly have the power to help elect at least one candidate in each super-district. The Democratic majority in the state would still be likely to win most seats — but not all of them. All voters in the state would experience competitive elections, even while very likely helping to elect at least one candidate who truly represents their views.