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GUEST COMMENTARY

Redistricting requires compromise DeSantis can't muster | Commentary

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Guest Columnists

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Almost every state has completed drawing their new congressional maps. The two states that continue to be at the center of discussions are Maryland and Florida.

Maryland is unique, in that it is a deep blue state with a Democrat-controlled legislature and a Republican governor. Their old map gave Democrats seven of the eight Congressional seats. The new map gives Republicans a chance to win a second seat. Gov. Larry Hogan signed the map into law, after the previous map was rejected by the courts. With most gerrymandering in the nation focused around states with Republican-controlled legislatures, Maryland stands out as a poster child for compromise and how gerrymandering can be addressed in constructive ways.

Florida's map represents the antithesis of compromise and showcases the darkest side of gerrymandering. Gov. Ron DeSantis has vetoed maps put forward by the Republican-controlled House, even though they offered advantages to Republican candidates. DeSantis is working for an even more gerrymandered map, hoping to leverage the extra seat gained by Florida in the 2020 census were released. The state Legislature has bowed to DeSantis' wishes, creating an environment that foments distrust amongst all stakeholders.

Hogan should be commended for his willingness to compromise, while DeSantis should be showcased as a prime example of avoiding compromise. Compromise can best occur in an environment of transparency, and transparency is possible when maps are drawn and evaluated using computational algorithms.

Some will argue that using computational algorithms places too much power in a computer. The exact opposite is true. When computational algorithms create and score maps, they expose any possible nefarious properties of maps, and allow legislators and voters to see what maps offer voters. Computational algorithm do not decide which map should be chosen and enacted into law. They provide viable alternatives so those empowered to make the decision are informed of their choices and held accountable.

Maps are constructed using census blocks and census tracts. These small groups of voters are the pieces of the puzzle that permits maps to be drawn. The shifting or swapping of a few targeted census blocks or census tracts can make the difference between a map that empowers voters versus one that give political parties control over the results of an election. When partisan groups have the power to make such shifts or swaps, small changes in maps can lead to significant changes in election results. Computational algorithms can serve as a gatekeeper and watchdog for such manipulations.

What both Maryland and Florida demonstrate is the need for more transparency in the mapping process, and that computational algorithms offer a mechanism to create such transparency. Federal legislation is needed to take the power of mapping away from the political parties, the very people who can leverage such power to their own benefit. Such obvious conflicts of interest are a cancer to democracy, yet they persist because the very people who can change the process are also the very people who benefit from the status quo.

Although most states have drafted and adopted initial 2020 maps, a growing number of these maps are being challenged in the courts, steadily proceeding through the judicial system. Consequently, computational algorithms are uniquely positioned to provide analyses, both pro and con, for these cases where the aggrieved parties believe that the dominant state party has abused its power. Furthermore, computational algorithms can help enrich the conversation with alternative maps, perhaps aiding the process of moving towards a suitable compromise.

It is likely that many state maps will be continually contested throughout the decade, with Florida's enacted map created by Governor DeSantis a likely target. This constant bickering helps to highlight the need to work towards legislation that will make the 2030 remapping process transparent, ultimately serving the interests of all voters.

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