**OUR VIEW:** Independence is key for redistricting
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Gerrymandering districts for political gain is frowned upon widely — unless, of course, it is your party that’s in power. Then, too often, the end justifies the means.

Gerrymandering to preserve power and incumbency is popular because it works. Just look at the House of Representatives after the midterm elections, where Florida’s Ron DeSantis-led redistricting boosted the GOP margin by four seats. So partisan were the DeSantis maps, even Republicans in the Florida Legislature resisted before the governor pushed them through.

Considering the narrow margin by which Republicans have retaken the House — not all races are decided, but the GOP has reached the 218 threshold for majority — the four additional Florida seats are proving crucial to victory.

New Mexico, too, saw a different congressional map in 2022, one that weighted the 2nd Congressional District with more Democratic voters by adding Albuquerque’s South Valley to the district and splitting GOP strongholds between the 2nd and the 3rd districts.

That map, which still faces a court challenge, does have one important distinction from similar gerrymandered districts around the country — all three congressional districts in New Mexico are potentially competitive.

New Mexico’s redistricting system can be improved to remove partisanship even further.

Redistricting takes place every decade after the census count is in. For the 2022 election, a Citizen Redistricting Committee was appointed to jump-start the process. Members held hearings around the state, took testimony from the public and drew the maps — but deciding the final districts was up to the Legislature, as required under the state Constitution. The committee was advisory only.

Interestingly, a report — co-authored by University of New Mexico professor Gabriel Sanchez — on the 2022 redistricting has shown the Legislature appeared less worried about empowering Democrats than protecting incumbents. That is, lawmakers wanted to draw districts where elected lawmakers did not have to run against one another. This form of gerrymandering is known as “buddymandering.”

This much is clear: An advisory committee to redistrict is not enough. Redistricting needs to be left to an independent group that can’t be ignored. For that to happen, voters will have to weigh in.

In the 2023 Legislature, the group Fair Districts for New Mexico says state Rep. Natalie Figueroa will sponsor a House Joint Resolution to put the question of creating an Independent Redistricting Commission on the 2024 ballot. A constitutional amendment would remove legislative authority over maps, ensuring a more independent process.

Nonpartisan redistricting is a potent method of reducing partisanship in our political system. While it is painful to redistrict fairly in one state only to see another party abuse the system elsewhere, changing the redistricting process to eliminate favoritism — for political parties or incumbents — is an important step forward.

We’ll be watching the progress of this proposal and urge Democrats and Republicans to support it. Whether forming districts for congressional seats or drawing up state House and Senate seats, the emphasis should be on fairness and doing what’s best for voters — the politicians can take care of themselves.