

# Committee hears bipartisan compromise on redistricting panel

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A bipartisan compromise introduced in a Senate committee Wednesday could pave the way for getting politics out of the process of drawing New Hampshire's legislative districts.

Supporters argue the current system that puts lawmakers in charge of redistricting allows for gerrymandering, in which boundaries are drawn to benefit the party in power.

Both the House and Senate have passed similar bills to create a 15-member independent commission to redraw districts for Congressional seats, the Executive Council and the 424-member Legislature, though Republican critics have argued the Legislature shouldn't outsource its responsibilities, and Republican Gov. Chris Sununu opposed those plans.

But Republican Sen. James Gray and Democratic Rep. Marjorie Smith proposed a bipartisan amendment to the House bill Wednesday that would give lawmakers more control over appointing the commission members. Instead of having the secretary of state appoint members with input from legislative leaders, the amendment calls for House and Senate leaders of both parties to nominate 10 people each from the applicant pool, and then pick five from the other party's list. Those 10 would then together select the remaining five members.

Smith, D-Durham, told the Senate Election Law Committee that her experience working on the 2000 redistricting plan was the worst experience she's had in more than 20 years of serving in the House.

"What we want to do with an independent redistricting commission is level the playing field. Some people are willing that their teams will be in charge, but I don't believe in gambling with the basic rights citizens in democracy," she said.

Smith said the amendment "honors independence, balance and compromise in order to have the best community-based decision making."

"This is not about Democrat and Republican. It's not about liberal and conservative. It's not about left and right," she said. "It's about right and wrong."

While Democrats now hold majorities in both the House and Senate, the current district designations were approved in 2012, when Republicans controlled the Legislature. But the map was vetoed by Democratic Gov. John Lynch, who argued it was unconstitutional because it denied 62 towns and wards their own seats in the House and that it needlessly broke up municipalities. The Legislature overrode the veto, and the state Supreme Court later found the plan constitutional.

Rep. Ned Gordon, D-Bristol, told the committee that he represents five towns that are part of four different school districts. One of the towns is big enough to warrant its own district, but is lumped in with others, he said. Another is only connected to the rest by a dirt road. And two of the towns are so far apart, "there is no community of interest between the two towns at all."

"I represent a salamander. Ashland is its head, Bristol, Bridgewater and Alexandria are the body and Grafton is the tail," he said. "It was a district that was constructed in the last redistricting and it's problematic."

Attorney Yuriy Rudensky of the Brennan Center for Justice said he has studied redistricting across the country, and that the proposed commission in New Hampshire combines the best practices of what other states have done while also remaining true to New Hampshire values.

“I couldn’t be more excited about how this process came together and the product that it yielded. I really do think that New Hampshire, by passing this bill, would become a national leader in terms of the types of systems that help promote the key and core values of American democracy,” he said.

Sununu declined to take a position on the amendment Wednesday, telling reporters he will review the changes.