

Will Cuomo Draw the Line on Gerrymandering?

by {ga=rfauss}

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Elkanah Tisdale (1771-1835) This 1812 cartoon of legislative districts in Massachusetts shows the original gerrymander -- a division of the state aimed at boosting the fortunes of Gov. Elbridge Gerry and the Democrats.

On Nov. 2, voters in [California](#) and [Florida](#) approved measures on the ballot to take the politics out of drawing legislative district lines.

In New York, the voters do not have the power to go to the ballot to change the redistricting process. That leaves it up to Gov.-elect Andrew Cuomo and the State Legislature to decide whether to keep redistricting in the hands of legislators or enact reforms to create a more independent process. With the state receiving census data from the federal government by April 1, 2011, and new districts needing to be drawn before the 2012 legislative elections, the clock is ticking on this important issue.

Cuomo and a majority of members of the legislature have expressed their support for change. But whether that will become a reality in time for the upcoming redistricting remains to be seen, along with how the governor, legislators and advocates will draw independent lines.

Gerrymandering in New York

Line drawing, known as redistricting, occurs every 10 years after the completion of the U.S. Census to ensure that the all citizens are equally represented across congressional, state legislative and local council districts. The next round is slated to begin in 2011.

When legislators draw their own lines -- as is the case in New York -- it often becomes inherently political. Known as "gerrymandering," lines are configured in the best interests of the elected officials who draw them. (The term "gerrymander" was from a district formed in Massachusetts under Gov. Elbridge Gerry, which resembled a salamander, hence "gerry-mander.")



To avoid this, California recently formed a citizen redistricting commission, made up entirely of

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members of the public. In New York, the majority party in each house of the state legislature appoints the members of the Legislative Task Force on Demographic Research and Reapportionment or "LATFOR," which draws the maps. In addition to drawing their own lines through LATFOR, the leadership also draws lines for New York's congressional districts. The political decisions made by line-drawers can split natural communities, create oddly shaped districts and reconfigure lines to put potential challengers out of districts, sometimes by only a block or two.