

The Quadrilateral Congressional District Rule: A simple solution for our miserable do-nothing government

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Our government has failed us numerous times in recent decades, but, alas, no one failure has been as shocking as the recent escalation in failures ranging from that of the bipartisan Congressional Super Committee in 2011 and the Autumn 2013 “Obamacare” shutdown. Our government is not serving us well. In fact, to many of us, they are working against us. But make no mistake that the bickering is simply because the power that be needs to keep us, the voters, distracted. One easy solution promises to put power back in the hand of voters, and most 20 year olds majoring in Earth science, public health, or geography at a university would be able to solve the problem in a few hours for every state. It is called the Quadrilateral Congressional District Rule.

Technology offers us voters potentially simple legislation that could repair this gaping, gerrymandered wound in our system. If the federal government defines every Congressional district as a quadrilateral (a shape with only 4 straight sides), the sides of which can also be a state’s boundaries, then gerrymandering as it was will become impossible. States will still have power to control exactly where their districts are located because the federal guideline will not create the districts; it will only constrain how states can draw boundaries around them. The guideline would limit gerrymandering as we have come to know it. Try as they may, no power that be will be able to sell our government to the extremes like it has been able to do for the last few decades.

The best part of this solution is that the new rules will be easy to implement. If we assume that only 0.1% of the U.S. population has some experience with Geographical Information Systems (GIS) software (and 100% of us have access to Census information), then there are about 3 hundred thousand people that could probably do this for their state in less than 8 workday hours. During that time, they could draw up several solutions for the Congressional districts to their state, provide voter statistics in each district, and let the entity in control of delineating the districts (which varies from state to state) chose which district map they like the best. Even if they chose the most extremely polarizing delineation every time, it would not be as extreme as it is now. I am an assistant professor in an Earth Science department at a major university, and most students in my department and in similar departments around the country know how to use GIS software by the time they are 20 (disclaimer: I could not do this as quickly because GIS is not my expertise and I have not received the same extent of training that our students have). Then it would be up to Congress to swallow a hard pill – would they vote to give away some of their power to pit voters against voters while they kowtow to special and corporate interests?

If so, they would be voting against decades of trends in the other direction. The problem is clear: A bickering House of Representatives ensures that the only entities happy with their inaction are corporations - the insurance companies that get to game Obamacare, arms makers that benefit from war and lack of regulation on home soil, the energy industry that does not have to pay for the external costs of energy including pollution, banks that risk our money and receive more of it with no strings attached when they fail miserably, corporations that hide taxable revenue overseas, etc. The list goes on, and many of us work in and directly benefit from these entities that win when the government turns a bickering blind eye. The logic is that if we are paid our salaries and commissions by those in charge, we will continue to be happy with the system. An old saying holds, "If your boss is happy, you'll be happy too." But it is maddening when we cannot even visit the national parks of our beautiful country, our museums, and, most importantly, we cannot obtain crucial government services. And it is downright embarrassing if you have any international acquaintances or colleagues, like many of us do.

We elected those in the House of Representatives, so the problem is ours to own. But the real question is how and why do we continue to elect into this important body people that act like children? As we elect them, and they take office, their voter influence is removed and they bow to the corporate interests that are much more efficient at funding campaigns and other direct and indirect pay-offs. Congress in turn rigs the system in a way that ensures we continue to elect ineffective people – a process coined gerrymandering in 1812 (when it ironically benefitted the Democrat-Republican Party of Massachusetts). What has changed since 1812 is that the process has gradually resulted in unintelligible voting districts designed to elect a Congress that is even more unintelligible (collectively, unintelligent too).

With the power vested in them by the voters, officials have drawn lines around heavily stocked populations of similar-minded voters, carefully excluding voters of another side. The result, besides confusing maps that do not follow any geographic or otherwise logical boundaries, brings us bitterly divided Congressional delegations that cannot do what Congress is hired to do – to compromise. And it costs us dearly.

Only in the case that reform such as the Quadrilateral Congressional District rule were adopted, would we have a Congress that can actually do what the Constitution strongly implores it to do – to compromise in the best interest of all citizens, not just a few of us. In such a case, we would also have to talk to 'new neighbors' who may have different political views than us; and perhaps that will make us more civil and less parroting. It would definitely be more in line with what the founding fathers imagined and what made us the envy of the world for some time in the past.