

Opinion by Max McCoy: Kansas Reflector, August 8, 2021

Information about Max McCoy, Max McCoy is an award-winning author and journalist. A native Kansan, he started his career at the Pittsburg Morning Sun and was soon writing for national magazines. His investigative stories on unsolved murders, serial killers and hate groups earned him first-place awards from the Associated Press Managing Editors and other organizations. Max teaches journalism at Emporia State University.

I have chosen to share this opinion by Mr. McCoy because his opinions reflect my thoughts and frustrations about this redistricting process.

My name is Pam Ensley, and I am a retired Kansas educator. Because I am retired, I have the time to attend this meeting offering input into the Congressional districts of Kansas. That opportunity has not been fairly afforded to citizens of these Congressional districts who might like to offer input in the drawing of these districts. During the last redistricting, in 2011, it took four months to hold 14 town hall meetings to gather input from voters across the state. This year, those town halls have been compressed into a single week, that began at 9 a.m. Monday in Manhattan. All of them have been held on weekdays, and only four have taken place after business hours. In addition, each town hall is slated for only 75 minutes.

This schedule is a clear signal from the GOP-led House and Senate joint redistricting committee that public participation in the process is discouraged. Coming with little more than a week's notice, it leaves little time for the public to prepare in-person testimony — always the most powerful — and makes it difficult for those who work for a living to appear. Redistricting hearings have happened prior to results from the release of the recent census data, and these results are necessary to redraw fairly the Congressional districts. We already know the Kansas population grew about 3% in the past 10 years and will keep its four congressional seats. What we don't know yet is neighborhood-by-neighborhood detail on race, Hispanic origin, age, and housing levels. The Census Bureau has scheduled a news conference for 1 p.m. Thursday to provide analysis of the “first local level results” on redistricting data. That's the kind of information you need to redraw districts fairly — or to arm yourself with the facts in advance of a town hall on redistricting. By the time of the Census Bureau release, however, the Kansas “listening” sessions will be nearly over.

But the goals of the GOP-controlled effort have already been announced, and the objective is retaining and increasing political power, not fairness or seeking public input. As in too many legislatures that are controlled by one party, and have no fear of a governor's veto, the politicians will be picking their voters. The current town hall schedule, taking place in a compressed timeline, during hours when most voters can't attend and ahead of the needed Census data, and orchestrated by a partisan-led commission, does not serve democracy.

Lines on maps have long been used to discriminate. Think of redlining in past decades, which denied residents in minority neighborhoods the possibility of home loans. Ten years ago, the Republicans gave us "[Project Redmap](#)," a plan to flip congressional districts and legislatures across the country by redrawing districts. The plan was so secret that in some states lawmakers were required to sign secrecy agreements. But the result was successful enough — in Pennsylvania, Michigan, Wisconsin and elsewhere — to give the GOP a 33-seat majority in the U.S. House, despite collectively receiving 1.4 million fewer votes.

Today's gerrymandering is no less bigoted than the old sin of redlining was. And that appears to be the intent of these partisan hearings in Kansas this past week.

Susan Wagle, a Wichita Republican and the former Senate president, said the part you're not supposed to say out loud at a September 2020 meeting of the Pachyderm Club — that redistricting would be an opportunity to unseat U.S. Rep. Sharice Davids by gerrymandering.”

#### REDISTRICTING 101 - Gerrymandering

Two common strategies for gerrymandering are packing and cracking maps.

**1 Packing** is when officials concentrate one voting group together to reduce their voting power in other districts.

**2 Cracked** is diluting a group's voting power across many districts.

These strategies make races uncontested or less competitive giving one group an unfair advantage. In the 2020 general election, there were 58 uncontested races in the Kansas House, Senate, and State Board of Education.

The League of Women Voters is advocating for an independent non-partisan commission to draw fair district maps.

Democracy is served when districts are drawn with respect for fairness and the integrity of neighborhoods, when classes of voters are not targeted for suppression, and when those in power practice the golden rule of politics — that is, remembering that they will not always be in power, at least not in a true democracy. And the true purpose of Congressional districts is to allow as many people as possible the opportunity to let our voices as voters be heard in the voting process.

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