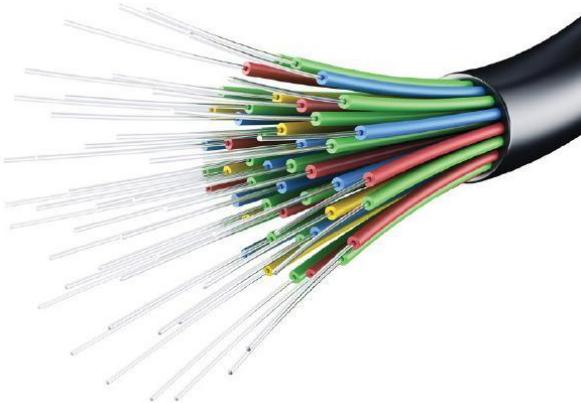


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For a moment, anti-gerrymandering advocates in Pennsylvania had a victory in sight. Fed up with political districts that experts said were drawn to benefit one party over another, grassroots groups launched a campaign to take lawmakers out of the process and create a commission of everyday voters to do the work instead. They held rallies, demanded public hearings, and even showed up on the doorstep of one top lawmaker's home, all with the goal of getting a constitutional amendment to voters before maps are drawn again in 2021.

The stakes are significant: Independent research shows gerrymandering protects incumbents and strips communities of political power by heavily concentrating one party's voters into a single district or spreading them out unnaturally. But with the General Assembly on summer break, time has officially run out, said Fair Districts PA co-founder Carol Kuniholm: "The bills that were constitutional amendments are dead."

Advocates are now turning their attention to Plan B, a bill that would keep lawmakers at the helm of the process but check them through new transparency requirements. It would also institute new rules that would prohibit the most egregious practices, like disregarding county and city boundaries to pack voters into a single district. That was one of the problems the Pennsylvania Supreme Court identified in 2018, when it overturned and later redrew the state's congressional map. "It was a map that was drawn entirely behind closed doors," said Benjamin Geffen, an attorney at the Public Interest Law Center, which led the lawsuit on behalf of the League of Women Voters of Pennsylvania and individual state residents. "It was voted on the very same day they released the map. ... Then it passed in the Senate two weeks later."

Much for TV, Per Hub

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Washington Post
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The Hill
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Every ten years, lawmakers use new census information to draw a congressional map that must garner the approval of the governor. The state House and Senate maps, however, are a different story. They are drawn by a five-member commission made up of Democratic and Republican leaders from the legislature as well as a chair picked by those lawmakers or, if they can't agree, the state Supreme Court. That process is enshrined in the state Constitution, making it a lot tougher to change than a simple law.

Critics of Pennsylvania's redistricting system have long focused on who draws the maps as the most important area in need of reform. But experts from the nonpartisan Brennan Center for Justice at New York University Law School have argued that just as important are the rules for how it's done. A bill introduced in June by Rep. Wendi Thomas (R., Bucks) targets those rules, and has the backing of good-government advocates including the Committee of Seventy and Fair Districts PA. When lawmakers draw both the legislative and congressional maps, they must ensure districts have equal population. Thomas' measure would put in place even more criteria, including a cap on how many times legislators can split a county. Geffen said this would provide a "check on doing the most outrageous of gerrymanders."

The measure would also codify into law years-long efforts by grassroots groups like Fair Districts PA to make the redistricting process more transparent. Videos of meetings and the underlying data used to create or evaluate maps would be made available on a website, and public hearings would be held several times before and after lawmakers finalize the plans. "I really believe that at all times, that it's humanly possible, the government needs to be completely transparent," Thomas said. "Transparency for me is critically important. We need to be as crystal clear as we possibly can, in all acts of government."

If the legislature acts before the end of January, and Gov. Tom Wolf signs off, the new rules would be in place when lawmakers begin drawing the legislative and congressional maps next year. Geffen said the bill would not be "the gold standard," as it wouldn't "empower an independent commission to draw maps in a fully public process." "But recognizing that we don't have time before the next redistricting cycle to get a constitutional amendment, a bill like this would certainly be an improvement over the status quo," he said.

Whether the House and Senate will agree to rules that limit their ability to draw districts — and pick voters — remains to be seen, though in the past they've been slow to pass legislation that reduces their influence or power. When lawmakers return in the fall, they'll also have to grapple with the ever-present threat of the coronavirus and an incomplete state budget. Thomas' bill was recently sent to the House State Government Committee, chaired by Rep. Garth Everett (R., Lycoming), who did not respond to request for comment.

Sen. John Disanto (R., Dauphin), who chairs the State Government Committee in the upper chamber, said his panel has been focused on COVID-19 legislation and "immediate election code changes for this year's primary and general elections." Good-government advocates are also still pushing for a vote on a bill from Rep. Jim Gregory (R., Blair) that would create an independent commission to draw the congressional map — a measure that doesn't require a constitutional amendment and could, in theory, be in place by 2021.

Sen. Lisa Boscola (D., Lehigh), the prime sponsor of an independent commission bill that moved out of committee but stalled on the Senate floor, said the GOP has used the pandemic "as an excuse" to not progress redistricting measures. "I don't buy it. I get that they said we had to do other things in the past couple of months, but I don't know," she said. "I just don't think there was the will." A spokesperson for Senate Republicans said the caucus has "long supported changing the process by which districts are drawn for both state government and members of Congress." "We remain open to

passing similar legislation this year, but also recognize that nothing will become law without finding common ground with the House,” the spokesperson, Jennifer Kocher, said. “We continue to work to find that ground.”

Even if lawmakers fail to embrace any reforms, the 2021 redistricting process will look different than it did in 2011, as power in two key posts has shifted to Democrats. Wolf, the state’s Democratic governor, will have to sign off on the congressional map put forth by GOP leaders in the legislature. And the state Supreme Court, now controlled by Democrats, will likely get to appoint a fifth member to the panel that draws the House and Senate maps.

But ideally, good-government advocates said, people in power from either party should not decide how the maps are drawn. “It should not be about helping one party or incumbents for one party … making a mutual, back-scratching agreement,” Geffen said. “What they should be doing is drawing a map designed to make it possible for voters to have … competitive races all across the commonwealth.” — **Spotlight PA**

When the coronavirus pandemic left Ron Mueller without a market for the 3,200 piglets his hog breeding operation cranks out weekly and facing huge bills, his local electricity provider offered to cut the Illinois farmer some slack.

Eastern Illini Electric Cooperative (EIEC), which powers Mueller’s farm and serves farmers, small businesses and residents across 10 rural counties, was willing to delay his bills as he scrambled to make ends meet. “I want to pay my bills,” said Mueller, who had been forced to euthanize nearly 5,000 piglets in late March but still refused EIEC’s offer. “If I can’t afford to feed them (the pigs), I’ll just quit feeding them.” Others in the area have been unable to avoid falling behind. From March to April, EIEC’s number of 90-day past-due accounts jumped by 50%. Mueller’s dire choice between his pigs and paying the bills shows the indirect effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on rural areas of America like Cropsey in central Illinois, which in general have been less hard hit by cases of the highly contagious coronavirus than metropolitan areas.

Electric cooperatives, which serve about 42 million rural Americans, are a window of sorts into the far-reaching effects of the pandemic. Revenues of the cooperatives have taken a hit as the outbreak has curbed demand from commercial users and left many workers unemployed and unable to pay their bills. Farmers like Mueller were hit as restaurants and schools shut down and demand for milk, bacon and pork fell. Exports dried up and meatpacking plants closed, with major facilities now running at about 75% capacity. Oil prices plunged, so Midwestern ethanol production crashed.

Unemployment rates in largely rural states are lower than the national average but have risen rapidly. For instance, Oklahoma’s unemployment rate of 12.6% in May was lower than the national rate of 13.3%, but still a huge shift from the state’s 3.2% jobless rate in February. “What we’re seeing here is the collateral damage,” said Jeff Hohn, chief executive officer of Kenergy Corp, an electric cooperative that serves 14 rural counties in northwestern Kentucky where manufacturing plants including paper mills and auto suppliers have been hit by shutdowns. “The concern here is whether some of those businesses will come back.”

Kenergy and other not-for-profit electric cooperatives serve rural areas that have already been buffeted by President Donald Trump’s trade wars. “With the trade wars, our ag community has really endured some hard times the last few years,” said Rick Olesen, CEO of the Iowa Lakes Electric Cooperative (ILEC) in northern Iowa that serves farmers and three large ethanol plants that shut down as fuel demand collapsed. One of those plants has since reopened, but ILEC is projecting a 15% drop in revenue this year.

The National Rural Electric Cooperative Association (NRECA) estimates its members will suffer a revenue shortfall of \$10 billion through 2021. That matters because the electric cooperatives have high fixed costs serving far fewer customers per mile than for-profit utilities in cities and suburbs. The NRECA has lobbied the U.S. Congress to adopt legislation allowing cooperatives to refinance government loans at lower interest rates to ease the pain. A bill was introduced in the House and Senate on July 2 that would do just that.

Association President Jim Matheson says the bill, if passed, could save the average cooperative \$2 million in annual interest payments. Otherwise cooperatives might be forced to raise electricity rates to pay their bills. "They (Congress) understand the challenges we face," he said. "They are giving us a sympathetic ear, but it's hard to get anything through Congress these days."

EIEC customer Jim Niewold said the pandemic has impacted every single market for the corn and soybeans he grows on around 2,100 acres of land in Loda, Illinois, and many farmers are stuck sitting on last year's crop. "The question is where are we going to put this year's crop if something doesn't change?" he said. "Eventually I'm sure we'll get rid of all of our product – but at what price?" Niewold, 65, has low debts and says he should be able to weather the crisis, but he and EIEC's CEO, Bob Hunzinger, both worry about the impact on younger farmers still paying off loans for land or equipment.

Hunzinger is also concerned this may further erode the local rural population. "You'll see farmhouses around here that have been lived in for over 100 years," he said. "But next year, they might be empty." Jennifer Meason, CEO of electric cooperative Cotton Electric, which serves eight rural counties in southwestern Oklahoma, says many of the people her cooperative serves have been laid off from the oil and gas industry.

Overdue accounts, which normally average a combined \$30,000, spiked to \$240,000 in the spring before unemployment benefits started to trickle in, she said. Cotton Electric also serves oil and gas producers and Meason estimates sales could fall nearly 10% this year. "We're still wondering whether it's going to be just a few months or will it be into 2021 before some oil producers get close to normal production," she said.

At Kenergy in northwestern Kentucky, electricity sales have been down nearly \$5 million, or 15%, per month. CEO Hohn said unless the cooperative is able to refinance its federal loans to lower costs, he will face a hard choice. "If things stay like this, we will have to go for a rate increase," he said. "Not this year, but probably next year." He hopes Congress will take action so he can refinance his loans, but worries the cooperatives may not get heard in the midst of a national crisis. "There's only so much money to go around and everyone's in line right now," Hohn said. – **Reuters**

