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Sen. Smith's Efforts to Stop GOP from Doubling Down on Gerrymandering

MADISON – Sen. Jeff Smith (D - Brunswick) introduced an amendment to Senate Joint Resolution 63 to force the Legislature to pass nonpartisan redistricting reform in Wisconsin.

As redistricting court cases continue to mount in state and federal courts, Republican leaders introduced Senate Joint Resolution 63 as a ploy to cement their gerrymandered maps in Wisconsin for the next ten-years.

Republicans rejected Senator Smith's amendment to make the Legislature act on Senate Bill 389 and Assembly Bill 395 introduced by Senator Smith and Representative Deb Andraca (D-Whitefish Bay). Republican leaders voted down efforts to reform redistricting in Wisconsin despite pleas from the public for more than ten years and overwhelming public support for redistricting reform.

Senator Smith shared the following speech on the Senate floor for supporting his amendment to take up nonpartisan redistricting reform in the legislature:

Mr. President and Members, I rise today to speak on behalf of Senate Substitute Amendment 1 to SJR 63.

Just yesterday citizens from all over Wisconsin voiced their opposition to gerrymandering and support for nonpartisan redistricting reform during their Fair Maps Lobby Day.

This isn't a new issue... For years, Wisconsin citizens have called for redistricting reform. Mr. President, this resolution to bake in your Party's gerrymandered maps is disheartening. Not just because of the timing of this resolution, but for all the issues we've left unaddressed in the Legislature.

Mr. President, BadgerCare Expansion, Darkstore Loopholes, Education Funding Reform and even nonpartisan redistricting reform itself have been ignored by this body. It isn't about the policies supported by the public, it's about the politicians who choose to ignore the people of our state.

We are long overdue for Wisconsin's lawmakers to properly reflect the will of the voters.

Mr. President and members, as far as I can tell, I'm the only member of this body who lost an election, left public service and came back. It was tough, but it was necessary for me to gain the perspective I needed to be a better leader. You see, it isn't about me, it isn't about you Mr. President or any other member of this body, it's about the soul of our state.

Gerrymandered maps make life easier for politicians...they silence voters with unaccountable elected officials who cruise to victory in high partisan performing districts. After all, we run for office, right? If we get lazy, we should lose, right? Gerrymandering creates lazy, unaccountable legislators who serve as long as they want.

Our jobs shouldn't be easy. Our jobs should be hard. It's too easy to throw consensus out when we come to Madison if we aren't listening to our constituents.

In 2010, I joined a lot of Democrats who lost their reelection and we all needed to do some soul-searching. Me more than anyone. I was chair of the Assembly Election and Campaign Reform Committee in 2009. I was the only legislator who held a hearing on nonpartisan redistricting reform. I knew deep down it was the right thing to do for the health of democracy in Wisconsin.

I made a big mistake. I should've seen it through. I should've fought tooth and nail with my leadership to pass redistricting reform. Mr. President, as I look around this chamber. I see the same mistake happening today.

This isn't about the fate of Democrats, in fact, this issue is more about the fate of the Republican Party than anything. Mr. President, I mean no disrespect to the members of this body or the Republican Party, but we've all seen the Party held hostage by the far-right.

Mr. President, we've seen members on your side of the aisle question our elections and perpetuate the Big Lie in the press, while secretly agreeing there was no fraud. Political expediency should not, and cannot be a substitute for truth. Partisanship fueled by gerrymandered maps has pushed Parties farther away from the center where commonsense policy prevails. We see it on the Senate floor, we see it in our caucuses, and citizens see it in their elected official's work ethic.

We've heard for over 10 years now that the maps were the most gerrymandered maps in the nation. They were done in secret with high-priced taxpayer funded attorneys. The Majority Party legislators even signed nondisclosure secrecy oaths to shield the public from the redistricting process.

Mr. President, during my time out of public office, I noticed that citizens crave one attribute in their elected officials more than anything else. They want leadership.

I didn't come back here to just sit on my hands. I believe you didn't either. I trust we ALL came here to give our constituents a voice.

Mr. President and members, we cannot fear losing the next election, we must look further than the next 2 years or even the next 10 years. That's real leadership. Elected officials cannot choose their voters, we must allow citizens to choose their elected officials.

Mr. President, I've heard claims that maps weren't gerrymandered in 2011 and Republicans just have better candidates. Only competitive districts will determine the quality of the candidates. Mr. President, if you and the other members of this body show an ounce of leadership today by doing the right thing, you will win reelection. Your leadership in the face of fearing an election loss will show citizens your commitment to service to our state instead of your servitude to your Party.

Mr. President, I'm sure you can agree, in this body, it's not the everyday votes we take with our caucus that makes us memorable. It's the times when we buck our Party or do what's unexpected that defines our service as Senators. I'm not going to be here forever, but while I'm here, I want to do things my children and my grandchildren will be proud of.

Sometimes, we need to take unpopular votes for the public good. I have good news Mr. President. Stepping up to vote for nonpartisan redistricting reform is incredibly popular! You can be a respected leader and do what more than 80% of people agree with. Sure, Mr. President, you and other Republican leaders of this body may not be happy, but we didn't come here to make you happy, we came here to be leaders for our communities.

This is one of the most important debates that we as elected officials will have in our political careers. This is about the future - it's about repairing democracy, now - for our children and our grandchildren's future.

This can be a vote, that once we are all gone from this body, and once we have the chance to tell our children and grandchildren what we are most proud of, we can talk of this day. Grab this chance. Vote no on rejection and move non-partisan redistricting forward.

Thank you Mr. President.

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The 31st Senate District includes all of Buffalo and Pepin counties and portions of Trempealeau, Pierce, Dunn, Eau Claire and Jackson counties and very small portions of Chippewa and St. Croix counties.