

REGIONAL VIEW

Judiciary is no place for partisanship

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We're not about to argue that a thorough updating of our state's judicial districts is unnecessary. The last large-scale redrawing of the court districts was in 1955. There obviously have been a few changes in North Carolina's population patterns since then, and our judicial districts could most likely use some tweaks to reflect them.

But we're having a hard time trusting our General Assembly to draw those new lines in a way that makes the fair and equitable administration of justice the first and only goal of redistricting.

Our lawmakers have raised gerrymandering to a high art, drawing legislative boundaries whose only purpose is to give the dominant Republican Party an even tighter lock on state government. The party's legislative power is way out of proportion to its actual registration numbers, which significantly trail Democratic registrations and seem likely to be overtaken in the next few years by the fast-growing legion of unenrolled voters.

We're troubled too by the GOP's recent efforts to politicize our judiciary. Since the early 1990s, the party affiliation of judicial candidates was left off ballots. In recent years, some judges have taken it a step further and registered as unenrolled voters, deliberately distancing themselves from the policies and philosophies of any political party.

But instead of rewarding judicial impartiality, the General Assembly has restored the antiquated requirement that judges' political parties be listed on ballots. And it further punished nonpartisan judicial, requiring them to gather hundreds of signatures to get their name on the ballot. Partisan judges need only one signature — their own.

Earlier this year, N.C. Supreme Court Chief Justice Mark Martin, told the N.C. Bar Association that he wants a ballot question asking voters if judges should even be elected. Martin, who's a Republican, favors appointing judges after they are vetted by an independent, objective judicial commission, a system that some other states use.

We don't see this state switching from election to appointment of judges anytime soon, but we remain worried about the General Assembly's clear attempt to undermine judicial independence by encouraging — almost requiring — political partisanship.

We'd all be best served if lawmakers created an independent judicial redistricting commission to draw the new court jurisdiction boundaries. Staff the commission with nonpartisan experts and jurists who have demonstrated their impartiality. Judicial independence is among the most fundamental pillars of our republic and faith in the judiciary's fairness and impartiality is essential to its functioning.

We expect partisanship in our legislature, but not in our judiciary. Find a better way to redraw those judicial districts.