

Slay the Dragon

“Slay the Dragon” is a strong advocacy documentary ripe for our hyper-partisan times. The political “dragon” here is gerrymandering, the practice of redrawing electoral maps to serve the party in power. Those redrawn electoral maps show convoluted districts which resemble dragons, snakes, or, from its original moniker, salamanders, contorted figures bearing no relation to coherent jurisdictions.

This practice, originally named over two centuries ago, has long assisted both parties, but, after the 2010 elections, a well-funded conservative initiative called Project REDMAP, poured money into state legislative races in key swing states to gain control of their redistricting processes, since state legislatures have typically controlled redistricting. Additionally, new high-tech analytics plus vast amounts of demographic data became available to define voting patterns at the granular level and dramatically skew voting maps to solidify one-party power.

Today’s extreme gerrymandering has been further fueled by the elimination of corporate contribution limits, allowing conservative donors like the Koch brothers to spend millions to protect ideological lines. The documentary describes the result of these electoral manipulations and discusses the actors and actions that look to reform them.

The inspiration for the film, said co-director Barak Goodman, was a 2016 book by Dave Daley, “Ratf**ked: Why Your Vote Doesn’t Count,” which outlines the story of REDMAP and how it remade state politics. Daley is now a senior fellow at FairVote and appears as a consultant on the film and a prominent talking head.

“Slay the Dragon,” co-directed by Goodman and Chris Durrance, highlights states’ grassroots efforts to reform gerrymandering, principally through lobbying to install state redistricting commissions, non-partisan groups that could bring coherence to our electoral maps.

The film begins and ends with the progress of a grassroots movement called Voters Not Politicians (VNP) in Michigan led by a young woman with zero political experience named Katie Fahey. Fahey, innocent of face and chatty of delivery, could not be farther from the standard stereotype of the blow-dried, bespoke-suited pol, but it appears she is a natural. Her impetus towards reform was the water supply calamity in Flint, Michigan in 2014, which arose because of a gerrymandered legislature that fostered the disaster and which led to her formation of VNP.

Meanwhile, similar electoral activists in Wisconsin sued on behalf of Democratic residents of Wisconsin and challenged the state's redistricting plan on the grounds of partisan gerrymandering. They won their case in district court, only to have its ruling appealed to the US Supreme Court, which heard the case in October 2017. The Court, though, refused to make a ruling and kicked the case back to the states.

To make the picture more than a political dissertation, the filmmakers offer us the compelling suspense plot line of Fahey's and VNP's heroic efforts to counter gerrymandering. Fahey and friends are not to be deterred; they collect almost 5000,000 signatures get an anti-gerrymandering initiative on the November 2018 ballot.

For a finale, the film takes us almost breathlessly up to the climactic point during the 2018 Michigan election when their measure wins their right for a state-wide vote. This is a triumphant moment for ordinary folks to take on an entrenched political establishment to fix a broken system.

(The film is not rated and runs 101 minutes. Without a chance to view it in theaters, "Slay the Dragon" will be available on Video on Demand on April 3rd)

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Activist Katie Fahey in "Slay the Dragon" from Magnolia Pictures. Photo courtesy of Magnolia Pictures