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Derails bid to stop Missouri gerrymander for 2

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In a bruising blow to direct democracy, a court [has ruled](#) that Repul

gerrymandered congressional map in the 2026 midterms before voters weigh in on the plan.

Beyond giving the GOP an advantage in the upcoming election, Friday’s ruling from Circuit Judge Brian Stumpe will allow Republicans to blatantly sidestep Missourians’ right under the state constitution to have the final say on laws approved by the legislature through a so-called “veto referendum.”

And it raises a fundamental question: Do Missouri voters’ constitutional rights actually mean anything if Republican officials aren’t willing to enforce them?

Stumpe’s dismissal will likely be appealed to the Western District. But with election deadlines rapidly approaching on Mar. 31, the ruling has likely killed attempts to stop Republicans from imposing the new map for the midterms.

People Not Politicians, the group leading the referendum effort, said Friday that the ruling would not be the final word.

“More than 305,000 Missourians have already demanded a vote, the Constitution is on the side of voters, and no single ruling can override the right of the people to decide their own representation,” executive director Richard von Glahn said in a statement. “This fight is far from over, and voters will ultimately have the final say.”

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Missouri is one of three GOP-controlled states that [redrew their congressional maps](#) last year at President Donald Trump’s request, part of a [scheme to use unprecedented mid-decade redistricting](#) to help Republicans win the 2026 midterms.

The new map would likely flip one of the two Missouri congressional seats held by Democrats to a Republican.

But Missouri voters fought back. The state constitution unambiguously declares that the people “reserve power to approve or reject by referendum any act of the general assembly,” with only a few exceptions related to health, safety and budget appropriations.

So they started gathering signatures to put the new map to a statewide vote. In December, they [turned in](#) more than 300,000 signatures — roughly three times the amount required to hold the referendum. People Not Politicians [announced](#) March 23 that they had cleared a major milestone: Local election officials had verified enough signatures for the measure to qualify for the ballot.

But Republicans have not yet run out of procedural hurdles to inflict. Missouri Secretary of State Denny Hoskins (R) could still drag out the official signature verification process for months, and he’s indicated that he may declare the [entire petition unlawful](#).

Ultimately, Friday’s ruling could mark the culmination in Republicans’ plan to win the redistricting battle, at least for this year, by running out the clock on the referendum — an outcome Richard von Glahn, executive director of People Not Politicians, warned about.

“What they are hoping to do is to lose slowly enough so that they may conduct an illegal election and provide President Trump a congressional seat against the requirements of the Missouri Constitution and, I think, the wish of Missouri voters,” von Glahn told Democracy Docket in March.

When Missourians have gathered enough signatures for a referendum to proceed, state officials historically have paused the challenged legislation from going into effect until voters weighed in on it.

But Missouri Republicans, hellbent on thwarting the referendum, defied precedent, insisting the new map was already in effect — a decision that Mike Wolff, a former Missouri Supreme Court justice, said disregarded case law going back to the earliest days of the referendum provision.

“Once the people present a petition with what, on its face, appears to be a required number of signatures, then the law is suspended,” Wolff said at a December press briefing.

Two voters [filed a lawsuit](#) asking a court to [stop the state](#) from using the new congressional map until the public had the chance to approve or reject the measure in a referendum. They are represented by the ACLU of Missouri and the law firm [Perkins Coie](#).

In their lawsuit, the plaintiffs explained that voters’ referendum power is meant to serve as a check on the legislature, so the legislation in question must be suspended until a vote occurs.

“This must be the rule; otherwise, referred legislation could take effect before the People have their say, vitiating the referendum process and rendering those constitutional provisions decidedly hollow,” they argued, adding that the new map cannot be used without violating the state constitution.

In his dismissal, Stumpe appeared to ignore voters’ concerns about the map going into effect before a vote is held.

“Regardless of whether this Court grants or denies Plaintiffs’ requested relief, Plaintiffs will retain the same ability to approve or reject [the map] at the ballot box in the next general election, assuming the referendum is certified as sufficient, they will suffer no damage,” the judge wrote.

Since October, Republicans have sought to block the referendum at every turn.

Hoskins dragged his feet while carrying out his constitutional duty to approve the referendum petition and verify signatures. GOP defendants strategically changed judicial venues and judges — six times in four cases — to delay court rulings and seek favorable outcomes in cases challenging both the new map and the referendum itself. State officials proposed misleading ballot language for the referendum. The state attorney general opened an immigration investigation into signature gatherers. Republicans even deployed paid agitators to harass volunteers gathering signatures.

Their efforts didn’t stop Missourians from turning in nearly three times the required number of signatures before the deadline. But it appears some of the GOP tactics have proven to be effective.

Hoskins successfully convinced a judge to [pause](#) a case challenging his rejection of roughly a third of the signatures collected before the governor signed the new map into law. And on Mar. 20, Stumpe ruled that while part of the ballot language likely prejudiced voters, the majority of the language set by the Secretary of State — including language stating the new map “keep[s] more cities and counties intact, are more compact, and better reflects statewide voting patterns” — is “fair and sufficient.” Plaintiffs have appealed the ruling to the Missouri Supreme Court.

On Mar. 24, the Missouri Supreme Court in a 4-3 decision ruled that the legislature did not violate the state’s constitution last year when it redistricted mid-decade.

On Feb. 13, Circuit Judge Christopher Kirby Limbaugh ruled that the governor did not violate the state’s constitution by calling a special session to conduct mid-decade redistricting. On Mar. 12, Circuit Judge Adam Caine ruled that the gerrymandered map will stand because it met the equal-population requirements and plaintiffs failed to “prove clearly and

undoubtedly that the 2025 Plan was not as compact as may be.” Pro-voting plaintiffs have appealed both rulings to the Missouri Supreme Court.

But the remaining rulings and appeals most likely will not impact the 2026 midterms. The reason is more practical than legal: Missouri’s candidate filing period is scheduled to close on March 31.

With Friday’s ruling, Republicans may have effectively run out the clock on their challengers. Even if an appeal is eventually successful, the GOP may have already used the map to secure an advantage in the highly consequential 2026 midterms.

NEXT UP

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