

Jacob Downey is this year's winner of the Huron County Democratic Party's scholarship essay contest. Jacob is a graduating senior from Norwalk High School. He has also been attending college-level courses at BGSU Firelands since his freshman high school year and will simultaneously receive an Associate's Degree from BGSU Firelands. Jacob will attend The Ohio State University this fall and plans to major in business. His scholarship of \$2500 will be sent to OSU to be applied toward his school expenses. Jacob loves to cook and hopes one day to open his own restaurant. He comes from a large family and has eight sisters, four of them adopted.

This essay contest was very close. There was less than a single point spread between the first and third place essays. Although there is no money attached, the second-place essay was written by Kathryn Lindenberger, a graduating senior from Plymouth High School. Her sister, Megan, was last year's scholarship essay winner. The third-place essay was written by Aiden Perez, a graduating senior from Western Reserve High School.

This year's topic was **"What is gerrymandering and how is it affecting our politics today?"** Several questions were offered to help structure the essay. The contest was judged blind by a panel of three educators, who did not know the name, gender or school of the essayists they were judging. The content was defined by the topic and judged on a point scale based on content, style and mechanics (grammar, spelling, ect). This is the fourth year of Huron County Democratic Party's essay contest. We hold this annual essay contest as a challenge to our young people to become politically aware, to seek to learn about politicians at the local, state and federal levels, who will be making decisions and passing laws that will affect our lives, both now and into the future. We hope they will become informed and regular voters.

Of his essay, Jacob says: "I meant everything I wrote in my essay. I'm thankful for this scholarship and I'm excited to be voting for the first time this coming November." Here is Jacob's essay:

*Simply put, gerrymandering is a political loophole allowing politicians to manipulate votes in their favor by dividing the constituencies of an area in a way that serves some machinated purpose. Each state is divided into districts based on population size, and these districts elect public officials to represent them. Each representative is tasked with making decisions that align with the district's beliefs and interests. To make sure the representatives are aligned with the people, an election is held allowing citizens to choose the candidate who best fits their needs. Sometimes though, these elections are not held fairly.*

*Gerrymandering is often used to box in the "good" voters and box out the "bad" voters to secure some purpose, such as a particular representative's seat in the House. Ideally, voters pick the candidate who will best represent them. Gerrymandering twists this process and allows the candidates to, instead, pick their voters. The candidates know which parts of the state lean toward their views, and those are the people they want to be in their district. Gerrymandering, in a sense, interferes with citizens' fundamental right to vote by making their votes less legitimate, and thus, less meaningful.*

*Gerrymandering can be used to manipulate elections by redrawing boundaries so that opposing voters are placed into one larger district, reducing the opposition's congressional representation. Elections can also be manipulated by diluting the opposition's voting power by drawing maps in a way that spreads opposition voters across many districts. Sometimes when a candidate is required to live in the district they represent, opponents can defeat them by drawing maps that force that candidate into a district that would be harder for them to win.*

*In some cases, this manipulation is so blatant, it's hard to imagine that it's legal. In Pennsylvania, Democratic representative Frank Mascara was first elected into Congress in 1994. In 2002, the Republican-dominated state legislature changed the boundaries of the district he represented so he had to run against fellow Democrat John Murtha instead of a Republican opponent. The redrawing of maps was so outrageous that Mascara's new district formed a narrow finger that stopped just after encompassing his home. It is very easy for schemes like this to change the outcome of elections; that is why gerrymandering is so unethical.*

*The current system often results in chaos, power plays, and a lot of wasted time. Every ten years after the U.S. Census, Ohio's 99 House districts and 33 Senate districts are redrawn to reflect the new population information. In response to the skewed maps approved by Ohio Republicans after the 2010 census, voters passed amendments in 2015 and 2018 to try to put an end to partisan gerrymandering. Now, any map passed without bipartisan support can only stand for four years and can't unfairly disadvantage any political party. New maps can also now be challenged before the Ohio Supreme Court.*

*This was a giant step forward in protecting voting rights in Ohio, but enforcement has been a disaster. After the data from the 2020 census was released, the Ohio Redistricting Committee (ORC) approved new, obviously gerrymandered, maps with only Republican support. The maps were immediately challenged in the state Supreme Court and struck down as unconstitutional partisan gerrymandering. The ORC kept submitting new partisan maps to be struck down again and again until voters were forced to vote under unconstitutional maps in 2022.*

*In addition to unfairly altering election outcomes, gerrymandering affects politics today by contributing to a growing disillusionment in the political process and a growing lack of trust in the government. Americans trust their elected representatives to speak on their behalf, but when the system is manipulated, this trust is violated and can be lost. Disillusionment and distrust lead many citizens not to vote at all. For America to be a true democracy, everyone's voice should be heard. Each vote has to be taken into equal consideration without the influence of gerrymandering or other forms of manipulation or voter suppression. Corruption, manipulation, and scheming for power have no place in this process.*

*One solution would be to use a purely mathematical, computerized algorithm to divide states into districts based on population data. This would increase fairness and take the guesswork and opinion out of the matter. It would standardize the process and save a lot of unnecessary arguing and confusion. Candidates would have to stand on their ideas and records and would no longer have the option of choosing their voters.*