

Proponent Testimony of:

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In support of Fair Districts

Testimony
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My name is Betsy Rader and I live in Russell Township in Geauga County. I am testifying as a citizen, a voter, and a Democratic candidate who has recently run for office for United States Congress in Ohio's 14th District and for Ohio State Senate District 18. I regret that I cannot comment today on actual proposed maps as Ohio's citizens intended when they passed the new redistricting laws.

The districts in which I vote and ran for office are both grossly gerrymandered. For instance, Ohio's 18th State Senate District carves up Lake and Geauga counties in a convoluted fashion to remove from the district cities like Painesville, Chardon and much of Mentor, excising the precincts with more Democratic voters in order to make the district as unfair as possible. The current boundaries of state senate district 18 make sense only when the point is to create a sure winner for the Republican party.

Ohio's 14th congressional district spreads over 7 counties with very different interests and affinities, including two counties that are split among four districts -- Cuyahoga and Summit counties -- and one that is split among three districts -- Portage county. These counties have been scientifically carved up to make the 14th District as Republican as possible in a northeast Ohio area that is actually diverse politically.

Gerrymandering in northeast Ohio is creating an unhealthy one-party system where sometimes only one party is even represented on the ballot in the general election, giving voters no choice at all. Unfairly drawn districts leading to routine 20 and 30 point victory margins discourage both candidates and voters from even participating in the democratic process. Unfairly gerrymandered districts lead to extremist candidates in party primaries who need only appeal to the party's base before sailing through the general election. And once those candidates are in office, they are often unresponsive to citizens because they are so confident of re-election. For instance, my Republican state representative did not even bother to vote on the removal of Larry Householder.

Running for office, I regularly met voters who did not know what district they lived in because even the street where they lived was divided among different districts. I met voters who did not know who represents them because their representatives felt no need to reach out to voters. I met voters who were reluctant to get involved in a political campaign by volunteering because they were justifiably hopeless that their efforts could make a difference. I found it difficult to raise the money to run competitive races because potential donors could see how severely gerrymandered my districts were and were rightfully skeptical that even an excellent candidate could win. This compounds the unfairness of gerrymandering by adding extremely unbalanced financial resources to the mix in many campaigns.

Competitive districts are good for everyone no matter what their political persuasion. A one-party system where voters have no choice is what we see in corrupt and autocratic countries with unaccountable leaders. Discouraging voters and candidates by presenting them with an unfair, undemocratic election system is destroying our democracy and our great state of Ohio, pushing our politics to the extremes at a time when we desperately need to be able to work together on life and death matters. I ask this Commission to listen to the clear will of Ohio's voters and create fair districts.