

Testimony on Redistricting

Thank you for this chance to speak. My name is Laura Rushton. I'm here to talk to you today about why it's so important to me that this Commission and the legislature honor our call for a transparent and bipartisan approach to redistricting. I am a former teacher who used to take my fourth-grade classes to the Statehouse every year to meet their representatives and tour that magnificent building where laws are passed that could affect their lives. I lived in Richland County then, in Mansfield, where I taught fourth grade in a private school for seven years and then moved to a public school in Shelby to teach third grade. I made sure my students understood how the government worked, how laws are made and changed, and what it meant to be an actively engaged citizen of our democracy. These are essential values to me. Now I live in Cleveland, where I tutor adults preparing to become US citizens, and I am active in the League of Women Voters and other civic organizations. I have helped in campaigns, served as a poll worker, and voted in almost every election since I was old enough to vote. After my family and my church, nothing is more sacred to me than the right to participate in our democracy.

While I was teaching, during the 1990's and 2000's, I knew who my representatives were and took it for granted that my city was in one district, where my member of Congress and state representatives knew the area and at least occasionally mingled with the people they represented, at our county fair, town halls, and other events. After 2010, that changed dramatically. My Congressional district stretched across seven counties, and our midsized city of Mansfield was split between two districts. The 12th may not have been the most gerrymandered district in the state, but it struck me as completely illogical that a very small slice of Richland County was carved out to be part of a district that ran all the way to Zanesville in the southern half of Muskingum County. For some odd reason, it also included the Columbus neighborhood of Clintonville. After seeing the district map, it was no surprise to find out that it had been created in secret by one party with no input from the other, just to make it harder for minority candidates to win elections.

Gerrymandering hurts our state by splitting up counties and communities. In Mansfield, I was in a different Congressional District from friends who lived no more than a mile away. My representative's office was an hour's drive to Columbus, and he failed to respond when constituents called for a town hall about the proposed repeal of the Affordable Care Act. We had to have a town hall without our Congressman, who apparently didn't find it necessary to listen to our concerns. Gerrymandered districts create safe seats for incumbents, so they don't have to work to win the votes of all the people they represent. It has resulted in sharper partisan divisions and a deep sense of futility, and it allows more extreme views to dominate in the legislature while long term problems remain unsolved.

I understand that this Commission's primary job is to create legislative districts for the Ohio General Assembly, so I would also like to say that I have been in touch with my representatives in the Ohio House and Senate on various issues. They will listen to my concerns, but over the past decade it has been increasingly clear that their party leaders influence the bills they support or oppose, regardless of the issues I raise. This was certainly true with House Bill 6, which I strongly opposed.

I live in Strongsville now, which is in the 7th House District and the 24th Senate District. I attempted to draw a map of my Senate district, which has a funny horseshoe shape. It includes only the outermost suburbs of Cleveland, so my Senator is all the way out in Chagrin Falls on the far east side, an hour's drive from where I live. The east and west sides of Cleveland have very different perspectives and problems, which our Senate district as it's currently drawn does not reflect.

Now that Ohio voters have spoken, twice, by a clear majority in all 88 counties, it is time to redraw the maps with compact districts that make sense. The Constitutional amendments passed in 2015 and 2018 call for public hearings and transparency. “We the people” have been ignored for too long. When the new maps are drawn, all we ask is that you listen to your voters. Follow the guidelines laid out in these amendments and work toward bipartisan consensus. Listen to experts and voting advocates. Pass the Public Submissions bill so there is a timely process for submitting sample maps. This is your opportunity to restore the people’s faith in our system of government.

Thank you for taking the time to listen to my testimony.

Laura Rushton, Strongsville OH