

Testimony concerning Redistricting to the Ohio Redistricting Commission, September 12, 2021

The Social Justice and Peacemaking Ministry Unit of College Hill Community Presbyterian Church, Dayton, Ohio appears and writes to oppose the proposed commission maps announced just 3 days ago September 9. They are gerrymandered, a University of Cincinnati professor called them “the essence of gerrymandering” and, for our area, they essentially preserve the structure of the 2010 gerrymandering. The voters rejected that process in creating the present system. The new maps show various strategic divisions and combinations of groups, bizarre shapes, and discontinuities that can have no purpose but to turn a small advantage in voters into a large advantage in legislative seats. And that is what they do. A 53% Republican advantage at the polls becomes 68-70% of seats and mostly uncompetitive districts.

We object to these maps because we demand fair representative districts for all voters and to oppose all manipulation of the redistricting process for the gain of some politicians or political parties at the expense of others or voters generally, particularly minority voters. Every American should have the right to vote and have their vote have equal influence in the government that results.

We contact you because our faith tradition expects justice from the powerful, care for the needy and vulnerable, and love for the worth of all people in all their diversity. Greed and exploitation are to be avoided. These values are not limited to our Judeo-Christian faith tradition but are found throughout American society.

Our Church is a racial and cultural rainbow that values all people. We are located in a mostly African American neighborhood in northwest Dayton, Ohio. Many around us are low or moderate income. Our community has been a target for numerous kinds of disinvestment, and is often described as a desert, in food, healthcare, retail and employment. It can also be seen as a democracy desert. Because of a number of institutional issues including gerrymandering, belief in the responsiveness of government to the needs of people here is comparatively low, election participation is low, many do not believe that they should invest emotionally in a process that is stacked against them. This needs to change now.

We Americans believe in a democratic system, meaning that the people choose their leaders, the best decisions are made with the approval of the most people, and from the bottom up rather than the top down. Since the Constitution was adopted people seeking power have studied how to game the system and generate unfair advantages that diminish the democratic process. One way of doing so is the manipulation of electoral districts for partisan advantage, named “Gerrymandering” after one of its original perpetrators.

Since then pretty much everyone who was able to get away with gerrymandering has done it, including both political parties in Ohio and elsewhere. The Chair of the Hamilton County Republican Party recently stated he saw it as a the spoils of victory, that a consequence of

winning this last election means you can rig the system to make sure you also win the next 10 years of elections, not because of how you govern and solve the people's problems, but because of how you draw the districts. He is not alone. Computers have made it easy to manipulate data, dividing and combining voters for partisan advantage.

A look at the Ohio maps adopted after the 2010 census makes it obvious that this happened then. Unfortunately it is happening again. Ohio voters have rejected this tactic when they endorsed these new procedures for this census. They expect fair districts and for this Commission to provide them.

Looking at these new maps, using the analytical tools available, the House districts in Montgomery County have essentially the same pattern they had in 2010, with only minor changes. In the House 4 of the 5 districts are safely Republican, in particular African American votes are diluted being either concentrated in district 38, or with Huber Heights and Trotwood sliced into districts 35 and 39 with overwhelming addition from Preble and Warren counties. District 39 has the white republican community of Trenton cut off from its surrounding communities like an appendage, and jagged lines in the Englewood/Clayton area guarantee that both 39 and 39 are safely Republican.

In the Senate District 6 is again essentially two pieces barely held together by a tiny string of Kettering, while the City of Dayton and Trotwood, with heavy minority populations, are overwhelmed by parts of 4 Republican counties. Both of these Districts are expected to be Republican.

The metropolitan areas of the state are where the test of fairness or abuse is, and similar issues can be seen in the new maps in other metropolitan areas. Senate District 7 looks like a frying pan with a handle part of Hamilton County. Nearby Republican areas are added to District 8 make it a 17 point Republican advantage, surrounding District 9 which is 3-1 Democrat. The same is true of the underlying House districts there.

A look at Akron, Youngstown and Toledo shows a similar concentration of heavy Democrat districts enabling surrounding districts to be heavily Republican.

This does not have to be the case. The Fair Districts movement has produced a number of maps that did a better job of compactness, minority representation, not splitting political subdivisions, and competitiveness. Look at them and look at yours. It can be done, if you wanted to do it.

In addition, political insiders in Ohio have not yet engendered confidence in your handling of the process. You release these on Thursday, have hearings on Sunday and expect to pass them on Wednesday. Attention has been focused on Remembering September 11. While census data has taken longer than expected due to COVID, no maps or proposals for maps were forthcoming for weeks and months. There has been minimal notice around the state in advance of your actions. The first round of public hearings were held only during working hours when many Ohioans could not attend. The absence of maps has limited the discussions to generalities

over whether this iteration of redistricting will be different, more transparent and fairer than the last. However now the process has been much the same as last time, pushing this through at the last minute without the time it takes to get the public to understand, digest and approve or disapprove the result.

Gerrymandering generally creates uncompetitive districts, divides communities with common interests, and discourages and disillusiones voters who feel that the districting has determined the outcome and that their votes don't count. They will disengage and not participate. This is true in our area and it is true everywhere. This is harmful to democracy. Officials will serve, not the voters but those who draw the districts. Thus legislation that the people need and want does not get passed. When the districts are competitive, politicians must try to solve problems and must listen to voters. In this decade few elections for Congress and the Ohio legislature have been competitive. You have proposed the same for the future.

Principles of Ohio law now say that district drawing should give no advantage to any political party or candidate. Communities are to be preserved and there is limited division of existing political entities. Communities should be broadly defined to first include metropolitan areas who share economic and social interdependence. You didn't do that.

Elections are also covered by the voting rights act and civil rights act. Racial inequality in America's history has been enforced by various election mechanisms including voter suppression and gerrymandering, designed to minimize the political power of minorities. You didn't do that, and some have admitted as much.

Accordingly we call on you to change your direction, open up the process, and ultimately draw districts that are fair, compact, representative, competitive, unbiased and respectful of the rights of minorities. Gerrymandering must end.

Thank you for your attention.

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