

Testimony before Ohio Redistricting Commission
Akron, Ohio - August 27, 2021

Good morning. My name is Sarah DeBolt Badawi. I live in Akron and vote in the 34th Ohio house district represented by Minority Leader Emilia Sykes, Ohio Senate District 28 represented by Sen. Vernon Sykes, and the 13th congressional district of the U.S. House represented by congressman Tim Ryan. Though I live and vote in overwhelmingly Democratic Akron today, I graduated from high school in overwhelmingly Republican Findlay, in Hancock County. So I know that the Buckeye State truly contains multitudes, and fair redistricting is essential for making sure all those voices are truly heard.

I'm here today as a voter but especially as an educator. I taught middle and high school history, civics, and government, for 15 years in the U.S. and overseas. Now I work with students and teachers across the country in my job with a national, nonpartisan, civic education nonprofit. Before becoming a teacher I worked as an organizer and policy advocate in Washington, D.C., challenging U.S. foreign policy to protect human rights and sustainable development.

All of that to say: I have spent my entire professional life actively believing in, engaging with, teaching about, and encouraging others to participate in democracy in the United States.

Today I want to focus on addressing how partisan redistricting or gerrymandering, by any political party, undermines my work -- and any teacher's work -- with and for our students.

A few days ago, I was working with colleagues on revising a lesson plan, to be shared with teachers nationwide, that gives students the opportunity to analyze public policy using a case study. They're asked to examine the goal of the policy, consider its opponents and supporters, evaluate its advantages, spot its disadvantages, and evaluate whether or not it's likely to be effective. It's a really smart lesson that stretches kids' critical thinking in meaningful ways.

But as I reviewed some of its introductory language, with these hearings on my mind, the message of the lesson felt problematic at best and disingenuous at worst. Here's what it says: "Government policies can profoundly affect our nation and your life. In a democracy, you have a say in government policies and proposed policies. It's important that you take a critical look at them."

I think it's safe to say that a voter from any party can agree with the gist of that introduction. And we know that voters across party lines in Ohio have repeatedly called on our elected officials to make that statement less aspirational than it is today: Ohio voters overwhelmingly supported redistricting reforms in 2015 and again in 2018. Both reform efforts won in all 88 Ohio counties and by more than 70% of the vote. Anything that passes with that kind of majority in both Hancock County AND Summit County is nothing short of an unequivocal call and a resounding, powerful directive to this commission.

But what about the part of the lesson that says, "In a democracy, you have a say in government policies and proposed policies"? In the context of eye-popping partisan gerrymandering in Ohio, that claim is a myth for millions of people in this state.

For us educators who want our students to be able to believe and participate in the promise of democracy, unfairly drawn districts make liars of us. Because no matter what the policy issue is -- whether it's vaccination mandates, school funding, talking about racism, protecting (or curtailing) the right to vote and to protest, grappling with the fallout of a public utility bribery scandal, dealing with the opioid crisis, or safeguarding the waters of Lake Erie -- in a state so marked by partisan gerrymandering, only very, very few people *actually* have a say. I am asking you to follow through on the mandate you have been given by Ohioans of all political stripes so that educators like me can talk to our students about participatory democracy with a straight face and a clear conscience. This goes for this commission, and I would send the same message to the legislature as they draw Ohio's U.S. congressional districts.

It's an often-repeated truism in conversations about partisan redistricting that in a democracy, voters are supposed to choose their representatives; representatives are not supposed to choose their voters. Voters in Ohio know this, and I'm asking you please to follow through on their calls to you.

- Keep redistricting fair, transparent, non-discriminatory and politically impartial.
- Let all of our voices be heard in hearings like this one. Please ensure that everyone's voices are included in this process.
- Fulfill the promise of the redistricting reforms placed into the Ohio Constitution. Make this process transparent, open, and bipartisan. Maps should serve the voters - not the political interests of parties or candidates

On behalf of me, all my students over the years, and kids and teachers in Ohio classrooms right now, thank you for the opportunity to address you today.