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Testimony Submitted Before the Ohio Redistricting Commission

Members of the Ohio Redistricting Commission,

My name is Steven Hooten, and I am a resident of Uniontown, Ohio in southern Summit County. I stand before you today in response to the proposed Ohio General Assembly maps which I believe not only offend the Constitution of our great state, but also offend each and every Ohioan who voted, in an overwhelming manner, for a fair, transparent, and non-partisan process to result in maps that represent the will of the people.

In 2015, the voters of this state chose, 71 percent to 29 percent, for the Issue 1, the Ohio Bipartisan Redistricting Commission. No statewide official in Ohio has come close to this margin, and very few members of the General Assembly do either. Part of the requirements of this Constitutional Amendment state that “The statewide proportion of districts whose voters, based on statewide state and federal partisan general election results during the last ten years, favor each political party SHALL correspond closely to the statewide preferences of the voters of Ohio.” I put emphasis on the word “shall.” I am an attorney, and one of my first classes during law school was Statutory Interpretation. The word “shall” has been understood to be an imperative command, something that is mandatory, not permissive. 5 out of 7 of this Commission have a Juris Doctor, so we know that you know this.

Over the past 10 years, the statewide total of votes has split, on average, with about 55% of votes for Republican candidates and 45% of votes to Democratic candidates. The letter of the law requires that you attempt to make a map that reflects this. Instead, the map that the majority has put forward would create a 68% Republican majority in the Statehouse and a 75% majority in the State Senate, a 13% and 20% margin above the statewide average respectively. It is correct that these maps would change the landscape of the General Assembly from today’s highly gerrymandered and inequitable maps. However, it is not for the better, and it is certainly not what was considered by 71% of Ohio voters when they voted for a bi-partisan commission to make these maps. At best, these maps are a Republican incumbent protection plan, at worst, a blatant disregard for the law in the name of pure, vicious partisanship.

One of the members of this commission commented that to design a map that would reflect the average vote totals would be gerrymandering. That is simply incorrect, and disingenuous. Gerrymandering is to draw the boundaries of districts in such a way that favors one political party. Certainly, the map put forward by the majority meets this description; a map that reflects the will of the people, not so much.

I, and many others here today, implore you to follow the law and provide General Assembly maps that reflect our great state. You have been given a great responsibility by the people of our state. What we ask, no, what we demand, is that you take this responsibility seriously, and work together to create a map that reflects the will of Ohioans. It is my sincere hope that our words here today are not in vain. However, if they are in vain, please know that we will, respectfully, keep up the fight, in the courts, in the meeting rooms, and at the ballot box, until our voices are truly heard. Thank you for your time.

Sincerely,

Steven M. Hooten