



Good Morning. My name is Maria Bruno and I am the Public Policy Director of Equality Ohio, a nonpartisan statewide LGBTQ+ education and advocacy organization.

First, I just have to point out, I've rewritten this testimony three times in four days. I've tried to adjust my feedback based on some of the comments from this commission and do my best not to reiterate arguments that I wholeheartedly agree with, but have already been hammered home by other wonderful testimonies.

But a frequent demand I've heard from you all is to keep this feedback narrowly focused on the lines on the map, and I feel obligated to point out the absurdity of that demand. Process & methodology - **how** these lines were decided on in the first place - is the whole ball game here.

Despite no meaningful public dialogue where you all explain with specificity how these maps were drawn, we are expected to take you all at your word that these maps were drafted purely on good faith. When we've been denied the opportunity to see the "sausage get made", that's a big ask. No one saw any of these maps before this past Thursday - nine days *after* the original constitutional deadline for this commission. No rough drafts, no public debate among the commissioners. We've seen proposed amendments as recently as last night.

And as I understand it, these maps will likely be passed tomorrow regardless of what is said today. These hearings are going several hours because this is not a sufficient forum for creating a meaningful opportunity to participate in this process. Advocacy is my full time job and even I don't have the time and expertise to dig deep into each line on the map with that turnaround time. To expect this of the general public seems out of touch at best.

That all said, let me get into the meat of it. While Equality Ohio might not seem like the most obvious interested party in district line drawing, the interests of our communities we serve are very much hanging in the balance of what this commission decides to do. LGBTQ+ people are in every single one of our Ohio communities, with a wide range of political ideologies, and gerrymandered maps fail all of us.

Gerrymandering results in an increased incentive to villainize the other political party, along with anyone who disagrees with you, but also those who simply live differently than you do. LGBTQ+ individuals are often first in the line of fire during this mudslinging. Gerrymandering is a main contributing factor to the polarization and culture wars that have taken over our state's political discourse.

Gerrymandering is why, instead of passing the Ohio Fairness Act (a bill that has been introduced every general assembly for more than a decade and has the wide support of Ohio businesses, chambers of commerce, and public opinion), this legislature instead spent this spring attempting (and thankfully, failing) to sneak through a bill that not only lacks broad public support, but that villainizes trans girls just trying to play on a team with their friends.



While I haven't been in my current role long, I previously coordinated the Ohio Votes program, a statewide nonpartisan get-out-the-vote initiative targeting underserved and low-propensity Ohio voters. If you've ever seen voter registration opportunities at food banks, libraries, or your local YMCA, you were likely seeing an Ohio Votes partner at work.

So needless to say, I have spent a lot of time studying how best to engage disillusioned Ohioans without relying on demonizing other people or playing party politics. And let me tell you, there are a *lot* of disillusioned Ohioans. I regularly heard things like, "Why bother to vote? Politicians don't care about what the people think." Or "I try not to get too worked up about things I can't do anything about."

I don't hear people say they are so satisfied with their government that they don't feel a need to participate in elections. I hear people who have completely resigned themselves from ever believing they would be heard, even if they bothered to speak up.

We've talked a lot about fairness and competitiveness and proportionality, but I think there is a more obvious point to be made as well. Complicated district lines that unnecessarily look like Rorschach tests confuse voters. All voters of all political persuasions. So every time I see a teeny tiny sliver connecting a single district, I think of all the voters who live within and around that sliver who will be confused about which district they live in. I think of how that will become one more reason Ohio voters won't feel heard.

I know, regardless of what is said today, you will likely pass this map unmoved. I'm under no illusions that one testimony could do what two constitutional amendments approved overwhelmingly by Ohio voters has not.

I am begging you to prove me wrong. I hope that you will take these impassioned pleas for fairness and representation seriously, and honor what remains of the constitutional process Ohioans voted for.

I promise you, the people of Ohio will be watching. And as is evident by the many, many passionate testimonies we've seen just in the last few days, we have no intention of looking away any time soon.

We were here yesterday, We're here today. We will be here tomorrow and the day after that. And no matter how squiggly these districts become, no matter how many constitutional provisions requiring transparency and accountability go ignored, we will still be here. Getting in the way. Every single time.

Thank you and I would be happy to answer any questions.