

Testimony concerning Redistricting to the Ohio Redistricting Commission, September 9, 2021

The Social Justice and Peacemaking Ministry Unit of College Hill Community Presbyterian Church, Dayton, Ohio appears and writes to support fair representative districts for all voters and to oppose all gerrymandering, or 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. Accordingly outsiders and the poor are to be valued, everyone's vote should have equal influence, workers are to be paid a fair wage, a fair marketplace is required, and 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 an employment desert, a food desert, a healthcare desert, and a retail desert. 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. The US Constitution provided a general framework, but it was a relatively new system when it was adopted. So since then 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 nearly 200 years ago.

Since then pretty much everyone who was able to get away with gerrymandering has done it, including both political parties in Ohio and elsewhere. Computers have made it easy to manipulate the same data, dividing and combining voters for partisan advantage. A look at the Ohio maps adopted after the 2010 census show various bizarre shapes and discontinuities that can have no purpose but to turn a small advantage in voters into a large advantage in legislative seats. 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.

To date, political insiders in Ohio have not yet engendered confidence in their handling of the process. They have requested delays, and while census data has taken longer than expected due to COVID, no maps or proposals for maps have been forthcoming. The meeting scheduled for September 9 was called with minimal notice to the public. Public hearings have been held around the state, with most commissioners sending surrogates. These have been held only during working hours when many Ohioans can not attend. The absence of maps has limited the discussions to generalities about the public expectations that this iteration of redistricting will be different, more transparent and fairer than the last. At the same time politicians like Hamilton County Republican chair Alex Triantafilou have called for gerrymandering as usual as the spoils of victory, as if the winner of one election should be able to rig the system to ensure that they also win future elections, not because of the merits of their governing but because of their skill at drawing districts with predetermined outcomes.

Gerrymandering generally creates uncompetitive districts, divides communities with common interests, and discouraging and disillusioning 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 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.

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.

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. These efforts continue today and are unacceptable.

Accordingly we call on the commission to change its direction, and 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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