

## Redistricting

Rep. Cupp, Sen. Sykes, and members of the Ohio Redistricting Commission,

I am Rev Joan VanBecelaere, the Director of Unitarian Universalist Justice Ohio. I live in Ohio Senate District 19 and House District 22. I want to raise up the importance of the process for the creation of new district maps and our democratic process as a means of honoring the inherent worth and dignity of all people in our state. We need to hear all voices when we work together to create Beloved Community. For democracy to work for all of us, it must **include us all**.

No matter our color, background, or zip code, I think most of us can agree that voters should pick their leaders; leaders shouldn't pick their voters.,

Consequently, our electoral maps are supposed to ensure each of our votes have equal weight, each of our voices are equally heard, and each of our communities receive equal government resources. At least, as I understand it, that's what's supposed to happen.

Ten years ago, as Ohio district maps were drawn up, Ohio communities were sliced and diced in private meetings which allowed politicians could pick and choose who they represented.

Ten years ago, there was no transparency, and we have the inequitable and unfair maps we have today.

Ten years ago, Ohio became one of the worst gerrymandered states in the country. From the Snake on the Lake to the Duck, our gerrymandered districts are considered a joke across the country.

Even worse, gerrymandering polarizes our politics. When all our districts are pre-destined to be either Republican or Democrat because of how they are drawn, then candidates must out-Right or out-Left each other to win. It's no accident our national politics have become more and more polarized. That's a direct result of gerrymandering in so many states, but especially Ohio.

Because of gerrymandering, the Ohio legislature is 75% Republican even though Ohio voters are split pretty evenly between Republicans and Democrats. But over the last decade, Ohio Republicans have received about 55% of the statewide vote, not 75%. We actually are more of a purple state, which should be a good thing and an environment for honest discussion about policy differences. But on the political map we are red because of gerrymandering. We need representational fairness to have confidence in the final maps, regardless of whether this is named as a specific constitutional requirement or not.

So now, in 2021, Ohio will be drawing maps for the first time using the new rules Ohioans demanded, and voted overwhelmingly to approve, in 2015 and 2018. These rules – if they are followed in good faith and transparency -- were designed to eliminate gerrymandered electoral maps and replace them with a transparent process that allows the public to offer meaningful input, and ensure voting districts are drawn to keep communities together, rather than to divide us for partisan benefit.

I was very disappointed to hear at 10 am Thursday morning that the Republican map presented had not taken into account the requirements of the Voting Rights Act. It is vital that the Voting Rights Act requirements be taken into account. I will also add that none of us have had time before the meeting to review this map presented today.

A transparent process and fair maps are essential to the successful continuation of our democratic process. But this hurried schedule for hearings today and the secrecy of the maps being created is anything but transparent. The hearings held across the state have not been equitable since their timing and locations made it nearly impossible for working people to participate. I'm simply fortunate that I can be here today during a weekday afternoon. Most folk can't do that.

I want to ask that our officials ensure the human dignity of every Ohioan and that our state's redistricting process upholds **the letter and spirit** of the important 2015 and 2018 redistricting reforms that Ohioans overwhelmingly voted into place.

Dear Commission members -- Please listen to the voice of the people and ensure a fair and transparent process. This Commission will literally shape our state's future and the future of our democracy. I ask you to support people over political parties to protect our democracy and our freedoms and build a better future for us all.

The late Civil Rights icon and representative John Lewis once said:

"Freedom is not a state; it is an act. It is not some enchanted garden perched high on a distant plateau where we can finally sit down and rest. **Freedom is the continuous action we all must take, and each generation must do its part to create an even more fair, more just society.**"

The path to a more fair, more just society begins here and now with a more fair and just redistricting process.