



Applied Information Resources Newsletter
Spring, 2018

Assessing Issue I - Is It an Adequate
Reform Of Congressional
Redistricting In Ohio?

by Bill Woods

When the new year began, a citizen initiative was well underway to reform the process for Congressional redistricting in Ohio. The Fair Districts/ Fair Elections Coalition, comprised of most of the same groups and individuals who supported the successful reform of state redistricting in 2015, had mounted a well organized and energetic campaign to place an Ohio Constitutional Amendment proposal on the November ballot. Volunteers throughout the state had already collected two thirds of the signatures of registered voters needed to qualify the proposal for that election.

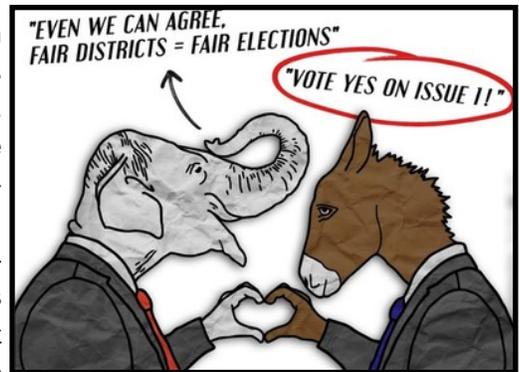
The Coalition determined last spring to launch a citizen initiative because the Ohio General Assembly had failed to join forces with the reformers in supporting their redistricting plan. Suddenly in December and January, state legislators began to talk about drafting their own re-

districting proposal. Republican Representatives dominate both Ohio Houses, and reformers feared that GOP-members would devise an Amendment that would essentially protect the Legislature's ability to gerrymander Congressional districts.

Initially that appeared to be exactly what a group of Republican legislators intended. In fact, the reform Coalition urged its supporters throughout the state to

tell their Representatives to either put the citizen plan on the ballot or to stop their interference. The fear was that Republican majorities in both Houses would vote to put a counter reform Amendment proposal on

the May primary ballot. A legislative miracle happened during the first weekend in February. Democratic and Republican members of the General Assembly got together and hammered out a redistricting proposal that both major parties could support. When the dust settled, and a Bill incorporating this plan passed both



Houses of the Legislature by nearly unanimous votes, reformers were shocked to read language that would

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Applied Information Resources

830 Main Street,
Suite 900
Cincinnati, Ohio 45202

Staff

William K. Woods
Edward Burdell
Alice B. Schneider

The Contents of the Proposed Amendment

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essentially eliminate one party gerrymandering in Ohio.

Although this proposed Ohio Constitutional Amendment is complex and not without flaws, it still constitutes a huge improvement of the current process for creating Congressional districts. So much so, that major groups that comprise the Fair Districts/ Fair Elections Coalition decided to support it. The immediate task at hand is to educate voters about this proposal that will confront them on the May 8th ballot.

What is the essential content of Issue I? The most important fact is that the majority party in the General Assembly can no longer control the entire process of drawing and approving new Congressional district lines every ten years. In fact, the adoption of the final district maps requires the approval of half the members of the two major parties in both the House and the Senate. Three fifths of the members of each body must also approve these maps.

The proposed Amendment also assures public input in the process. It invites citizens to draft and submit their Congressional District maps for consideration. It also calls for at least two public hearings before the new districts are approved by the General Assembly.

Issue I includes language concerning the geographic size and com-

pactness of future Congressional Districts. Probably the most important sentence in this section of the proposed Amendment reads: "Every congressional district shall be compact." Then follows a series of criteria that define what is meant by compact. For instance, it stipulates that if city has a population greater than the number of people designated for a Congressional District, then the map makers must attempt to include "a significant portion of the municipality in one district. This section concludes with a guideline that sixty-five of Ohio's eighty

-eight counties must be contained in single districts, while eighteen counties can be split "not more than once." Five counties can be split twice.

The other complex portion of the proposed Amendment deals with the consequences of the General Assembly failing to adopt new Congressional District maps within the designated time frame and with the required number of votes from the two major parties. If such a failure occurs, the proposal includes several alterna-

tive procedures for drawing and approving new districts. Under the first alternative plan, the Ohio Redistricting Commission assumes the role of drawing the maps. Comprised of the Governor, the Secretary of State, the Auditor of State, and four members appointed by the House Speaker, the minority party House leader, the minority party Senate leader, and the President of the Senate, the Commission also creates the new districts for the General Assembly. At least two Commission members who represent the minority party must vote for the final Congressional District maps before they are officially adopted.

If the Commission process fails, then the third plan again involves the Ohio House and Senate drawing the maps. This time, only one-third of the members of both major parties are needed to adopt the new districts. However if only a simple majority in both Houses vote for the plan, then a series of criteria come into play such as further defining "compactness." The most important criterion says: "The general assembly shall not pass a plan that unduly favors or disfavors a political party or its incumbents." Furthermore, the districts adopted by this mere majority vote of the General Assembly are in place for only two Congressional elections. After the two elections, the whole process of drawing district maps begins again.

The proposed amendment assures public input in the process

The Flaws in the Proposed Amendment

Probably the biggest flaw in the proposed Amendment is not establishing a non-partisan commission to draw the new district maps. By leaving the process in the hands of the members of the legislature, political wheeling and dealing between the two major parties is inevitable. A non-

partisan commission would be more inclined to focus on creating districts that make sense to citizens and their communities rather than to partisan interests.

The second flaw that stands out is the rather complex series of follow up processes that are written

into the proposed amendment should the initial map making process founder. The drafters of Issue I appear to be expecting the General Assembly to fail the first time around. Proposing one process with the potential intervention of the courts would have been a much cleaner plan.

Plusses for The Proposed Amendment

The biggest achievement of Issue I would be the elimination of the ability of the majority party in the General Assembly to draw Congressional District maps that give it a lopsided majority of seats in the U.S. House of Representatives for a ten year period. The opportunity for one party to dominate by gerrymandering would come to an end. Since extremely gerrymandered districts are the current reality in Ohio, the Proposal would be a major

step toward making elections fairer.

Another plus is language in the proposal that mandates public hearings and the opportunity for citizens to submit their own district plans during the period when new Congressional Districts are being mapped. The two public hearings that are called for before the General Assembly adopts the final maps insure that the new districts will receive scrutiny by citizens and the news media.

If voters pass Issue I on May 8th, weirdly shaped districts that make no sense except to serve political objectives will not exist after 2020. The proposal states that Congressional Districts shall be compact. Going even further, it says that map makers must strive to keep counties and cities within one district, and then spells out that only eighteen counties can be split once, while five counties can be split twice.

Conclusion

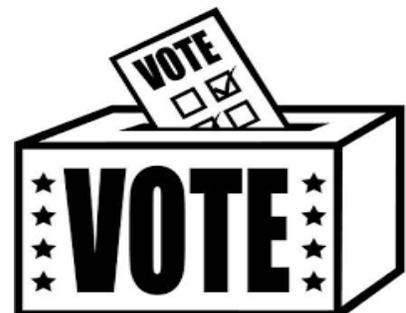
Remember the saying: "Perfection is the enemy of the good." While Issue I is not perfect, it does make one party gerrymandering almost impossible to achieve. It certainly would represent a huge step in making Congressional elections in Ohio fairer.

Timing is another factor that promotes endorsing Issue I rather than waiting for a more perfect reform. The Census will occur in 2020, and Con-

gressional redistricting will take place one year later.

Time is running out to pass a reform before the next redistricting process. With the current flaws in our election system, do we really want to put off Congressional redistricting reform until 2030?

For that reason alone, most good government groups and civic activists are endorsing Issue I.



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Will Issue 1 End Gerrymandered Districts?

Ohio Congressional Districts 2012-2022

(As Adopted 2012)

