

A Real Prospect For Political Reform – Forum Reviews __
A New Initiative For Fair Congressional Districts In Ohio
by Bill Woods

An opportunity to achieve significant political reform now exists in Ohio. An initiative was just launched to bring about fair Congressional districts in the state. Encouraged that voters passed an Ohio Constitutional Amendment in 2015 to establish fair state districts, the Fair Elections Coalition in Columbus drafted a proposal to reach the same end when Congressional districts are redrawn after the next U.S. Census.

At the May 11th Community Issues Forum at Christ Church Cathedral, Catherine Turcer, Policy Analyst for Common Cause/Ohio, used a power point presentation to depict the present situation in terms of Congressional Districts in the state and to outline the content of the proposed Amendment that would reform the current redistricting process. She was joined at the podium by Elizabeth Brown, Vice President of the League of Women Voters of the Cincinnati Area, who helped lead the discussion of why this reform is so badly needed.



Ohio, noted Turcer, provides a model for gerrymandered Congressional districts in the U.S. After showing a picture of the results of the original gerrymandering carried out by Massachusetts Governor Elbridge Gerry in 1812, she used several maps of Ohio to portray how this state's districts were drawn after the last Census. Taking full advantage of their ability to control the Congressional district drafting process in 2011, Republicans utilized computer experts to create a district map that assured them of a large majority of Congressional seats. Working in a hotel room near the State House, the GOP technicians crafted districts that assured their Party's dominance until 2022. In a state that is approximately fifty/fifty in terms of votes for Republicans and Democrats, Republicans now hold twelve of the sixteen Congressional seats.

Both Turcer and Brown took on the question of why having unfairly drawn districts is so unhealthy for the democratic process. Since political parties have indulged in some form of gerrymandering for over two-hundred years, why not just accept it? The speakers emphasized that today's extreme gerrymandering done with "the power of the computer" makes districts so safe for one party's candidates that campaigns are superfluous. No real

debates or discussions take place that allow citizens to learn and talk about complex and important public issues.

Many citizens, they noted, come to realize that their votes are meaningless. They simply see no reason to vote in Congressional elections. Do we really want a system where politicians pick their voters rather than “we the people” electing our representative?

An active participant in drafting the current reform proposal, Catherine Turcer described how this initiative would prevent this kind of partisan abuse in the future. The Congressional redistricting proposal mirrors the state redistricting Amendment that was approved by the voters in 2015. It specifically prohibits drawing districts that favor or disfavor a political party. Requiring districts to be geographically compact, it says that splitting counties, cities, and townships must be kept to a minimum. Districts, according to the proposal, must be nearly equal in population, and the overall district map for Ohio must reflect statewide election results over the previous ten years.

As approved in 2015, the Ohio Redistricting Commission will include the Governor, the Auditor, the Secretary of State, and appointees by the Speaker of the House, the House Minority Leader, the Ohio Senate President, and the Senate Minority Leader. To officially approve a new Congressional District map will require a majority of the Commission that includes at least two members from the minor political party. Finally public input is a requirement throughout the redistricting process, and any Ohio citizen can submit a Congressional map proposal to the Commission.

Initially, explained Turcer, reformers hoped the General Assembly would vote to put their plan on the ballot. When the House and Senate turned their backs on it, the reform coalition decided to move forward with a citizen initiative. Faced with making a revision on the summary of the proposed Constitutional Amendment for Attorney General Mike DeWine, the coalition hopes to be ready to gather signatures in approximately three weeks. Preparing for the daunting task of collecting over 300,000 signatures of registered voters in Ohio, Turcer and Brown believe that citizens are ready to support a reform that will help revitalize democracy in this state.