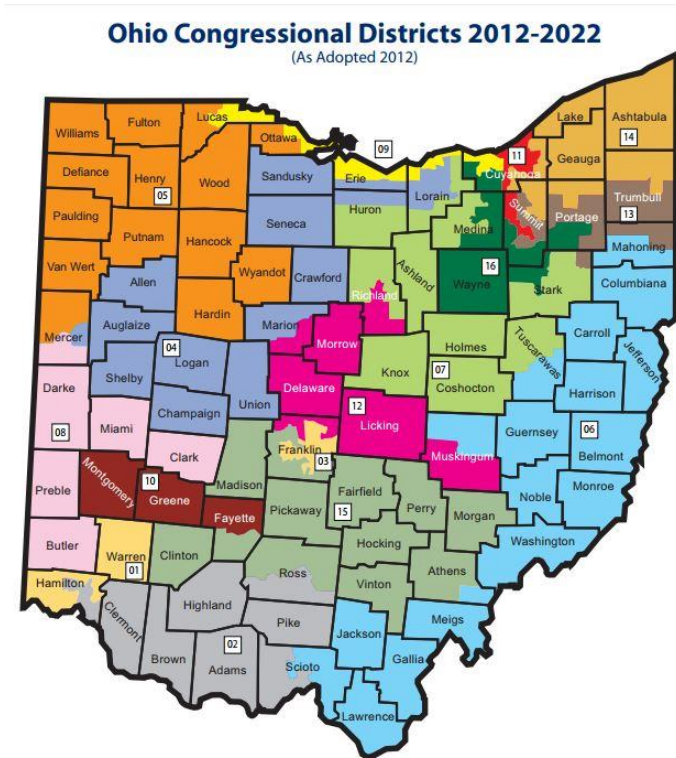


TAKING ON GERRYMANDERING IN OHIO AND ELSEWHERE

by Bill Woods, Contributing Writer, StreetVibes

As reformers in Ohio collect signatures for a state constitutional amendment proposal that would establish a fair process for drawing Congressional Districts, they can take heart that steps to end gerrymandering have gone forward in other states across the country. In fact, the U.S Supreme Court just announced it would hear a case

involving the current Wisconsin redistricting map that insures a Republican majority of legislative seats in that state. The Court will take up this case in the fall.



The Supreme Court has never ruled on whether gerrymandering to create safe seats for a political party violates the Constitution.

Although the Court has determined that legislative districts drawn to protect racial discrimination are unconstitutional, it previously has not intervened when states put in place partisan redistricting processes. Throughout our history,

each state has been responsible for devising its own election procedures.

What has happened to bring this long accepted partisan strategy to the forefront of the political reform agenda? First of all, politics in 2017 has become intensely partisan to the point of promoting party success to the detriment of legislative compromise and governing. Secondly, computers have turned creating gerrymandered districts into a science. Techies and data crunchers can have a field day devising new district maps that greatly favor one party even if the other party is equal or even stronger in overall state vote tallies. Finally, the Republican Party made it a top priority to gain control of as many state redistricting processes as possible after the last U.S. Census in 2010.

The results were Redistricting maps like Wisconsin's and Ohio's. With Republicans in charge of drawing Wisconsin's district maps in 2011, the 2012 election results revealed their handiwork. While Democratic candidates won over 50-percent of the statewide vote, Republicans captured 60 of the 99 legislative seats. This example of extreme gerrymandering prompted reformers to legally challenge the process, and they won their case in a Federal District Court. The case, Gill v. Whitford, then was appealed to U.S. Supreme Court that has agreed to hear arguments this autumn.

Other states that have forged ahead on redistricting reform are California, Arizona, and Florida. Californians passed

an initiative in 2008 that established a citizen commission to draw new district maps after every Census, and Arizonans followed the same course several years later. In both states, these non-partisan commissions receive high marks from reformers and citizens in general, but the Arizona Legislature did challenge the constitutionality of such a commission. The U.S. Supreme Court, however, ruled that such bodies passed constitutional muster.

Voters in Florida passed a state constitutional amendment banning the process of gerrymandering. Reformers, however, then had to go to court when the Legislature ignored this law and created highly partisan districts. Oregon, like Ohio is moving toward reforming its Congressional district map making after succeeding in creating a fair process for drawing state elective districts.