

Redistricting Reform Goes Awry In Ohio - Republican Officials Ignore The 2015 And 2018 Constitutional Amendments

(by Bill Woods for StreetVibes)

This was the year Ohio reformers were to reap the rewards of their hard work. After leading successful campaigns in 2015 and 2018 that brought the passage of two Ohio Constitutional Amendments designed to end gerrymandering in this State, they looked forward to monitoring the new procedures that would insure equitable political districts for Ohioans. The 2015 Amendment dealt with state districts, while the second Amendment focused on Congressional Districts.

Needless to say, reformers were not prepared for the events that have taken place so far in the redistricting process. The Republican majority on the Redistricting Commission established to draw the districts for the Ohio House and Senate have approved new maps that are every bit as gerrymandered as the maps drawn in 2011. Even though a large majority of Ohio voters approved the 2015 Amendment, the GOP-majority chose to ignore the new law. Even Governor DeWine, a member of the Commission, admitted publicly that these maps failed to meet the guidelines of the Amendment.

Ironically, the process started off well with a series of public meetings of the Commission in communities across the State. Set up to hear from citizens about their views on redistricting, these sessions were well attended and participatory. At the meeting in Cincinnati, many participants voiced their views about the need for fair districts that were not drawn to favor a political party. These public sessions did not foreshadow the maps that were approved by Republicans on the Commission on September 15th.



Republicans were forced to accept one ruling of the 2015 Amendment. It states that minus the support of the minority party's members on the Commission the new district maps will only be in effect for four years instead of ten. After this shorter period, the Commission must go back to the drawing board. Republican members must have decided that short term dominance was preferable to a decade of more equitable districts.

Another stipulation in the Amendment gives citizens the option to challenge what they deem to be gerrymandered districts in Court.

The new state maps immediately prompted two such law suits. The initial suit was filed with the Ohio Supreme Court by the Ohio branch of the American Civil Liberties Union. Also representing several good government groups such as the Ohio League of Women Voters and the Ohio branch of the A. Philip Randolph Institute, the ACLU contends that the new state districts fail to meet the standards established by the 2015 Constitutional Amendment. In fact, Freda Levenson, Director of the Ohio ACLU, declared these maps constitute "a flagrant violation of the Ohio Constitution." If the Court determines this challenge is true, then the Commission must then redraw some or all of the proposed districts.

A second law suit was also filed by a national organization established to protect voting rights in the U.S. The National Redistricting Action Fund is led by Eric Holder, the former Attorney

General under President Obama, and besides its Ohio suit, it is challenging gerrymandering efforts in other states such as Texas. In announcing the NRAF's challenge to the Republican supported state districts in Ohio, Holder declared: "They (the districts) fail to reflect the will of Ohio voters, and ultimately fail to meet the requirements of the state constitution." Both law suits hone in on the Amendment's stricture to draw maps that match statewide voting results.

While the fate of the state district maps gets decided in the Ohio Supreme Court, the second phase of redistricting is taking place behind closed doors in Columbus. The second Constitutional Amendment passed by Ohio voters in 2018 focused on ending political party gerrymandering when drawing new Congressional districts.

This Amendment includes clearly worded guidelines such as drawing compact districts that are not intentionally created to favor a political party. The guidelines also require a majority of both parties in the Ohio General Assembly to approve the final maps. However, the map making process is left in the hands of members of the Legislature to complete. Furthermore, if both parties cannot agree on the maps, then an alternative process kicks in that establishes Congressional districts for only four years.



The General Assembly is using the Ohio Redistricting Commission to also draw the maps for the new Congressional Districts. The Commission has until October 31st to produce them, but according to Common Cause Ohio all the work is being done in secret without any public input. No public hearings have been held or even announced.

This secrecy has prompted Common Cause and other reform groups to organize two weeks of protests in Columbus. With the goal of showing that citizens are both aware of what is going on and care about the process of creating non-gerrymandered Congressional Districts, these protests took place from Monday October 18th to Thursday the 28th from noon to 1:00 in front of the Riffe Center on High Street. These public sessions featured participants speaking about the need for fair districts in Ohio, and they were designed to get the attention of Governor DeWine and the other members of the Commission.

On Thursday October 28th, Catherine Turcer, Executive Director of Common Cause Ohio, will provide Cincinnati activists with an update on what citizens can do to revive the redistricting reform processes established by the 2015 and 2018 Ohio Constitutional Amendments. As part of a Zoom Community Issues Forum labelled "The Horrors of Gerrymandering," Turcer will show how geographically and politically distorted Ohio's district maps are today.

