

Saving Democracy In The Ukraine And The U.S.
And Its Connection To Ohio's Ongoing Redistricting Process
(by Bill Woods for StreetVibes)

In order to succeed and survive, democracies require continual attention and protection from the citizens they are established to serve. At the moment, our attention is riveted on the war in the Ukraine, where the Ukrainian people fight valiantly to save their democratic system from being overthrown by Russian invaders and replaced with a dictatorship allied to the government of Vladimir Putin. The stakes are very clear in this battle between the forces of an absolute dictator and a people determined to keep their freedoms.

Sometimes the circumstances are less clear and much less dramatic. Such is the struggle to preserve democracy in the U.S. Unlike the Ukraine, it is not a stark life or death situation, and many Americans remain oblivious to the dangers that threaten our representative form of government. This factor makes it more difficult for reform groups and citizen activists to mount successful campaigns to thwart the current efforts to promote autocracy at both the national and state levels.



Although no bombs are falling on citizen activists in this country, there exists sufficient evidence to raise the alarm. The most dramatic event to date was the January 6th invasion of the Capitol that did result in destruction, injuries, and deaths. In addition, more and more evidence mounts up to show that January 6th was not an isolated happening but an integral part of a plot to prevent the normal transfer of power after a democratically determined Presidential election. Although the January 6th Congressional Committee has compiled evidence

that directly connects former President Trump and the failed coup, the Republican Party in general still feeds on the "alternative fact" that the 2020 election was stolen due to fraudulent voting.

In fact, the Republican Party, realizing its limited white base and its lack of diversity, works at all levels to suppress the vote and to create safe gerrymandered districts for its candidates. For instance, Ohioans are currently experiencing a redistricting crisis, because a Republican majority in the General Assembly and on the Redistricting Commission continue to put forward highly partisan district maps in violation of two Constitutional Amendments that were enacted in 2015 and 2018. To date, the Ohio Supreme Court has rejected state district maps three times for their failure to meet the standards of the 2015 Amendment. The Court also did not accept the initial maps for Congressional Districts.

What is the current status of this redistricting fight, and what do citizens need to know in order to get involved? Ohio is scheduled for a primary election on May 3rd, but the unresolved situation with the new district boundaries may mandate its postponement. Catherine Turcer, the Executive Director of Common Cause Ohio, has just reported where things currently stand.

After the Ohio Supreme Court found the third version of the state district maps unacceptable, another process for map making was put in place by the Ohio Redistricting Commission last week. Noting that "Ohioans are currently paying the price for maps drawn behind closed doors by political operatives," Turcer described how the Commission is now following a procedure for map making directed by the Court. Commission members of both parties will work together with independent map makers. Furthermore, emphasized Turcer, the Commission will do its work in public.

Turcer and other political reform activists actively promote public participation in these new meetings of the Redistricting Commission as a way of showing that citizens are concerned about finally getting fair district maps. If possible, she called on Common Cause members to attend the Commission meetings at the Statehouse in Columbus, but she also reported that people could view them via the Ohio TV Channel. Not only will the Ohio Channel provide public access to the meetings, but it will also allow people to watch the actual drawing of the maps in another room at the Statehouse. The week of Monday March 28th is the date set by the Court for the completion of this fourth edition of state district maps.

The status of new Congressional District maps is still very much up in the air. After the Ohio Supreme Court rejected the Republican drawn initial set of maps for violating the 2018 Constitutional Amendment, the Republican majority in the General Assembly, without Democratic Party support or participation in the process, passed a second round of maps. On March 21st, the National Redistricting Action Fund filed a new lawsuit with the Court calling for the rejection of these maps for also failing to comply with the strictures of the Amendment. As this article is being written, the Court has not taken any action in terms of this new challenge.

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At the moment, the Republican majority in the General Assembly is currently inclined to support two primary elections. It would hold the May 3rd Primary that would include local and Congressional candidates, and then schedule a second primary for state district races. Common Cause Ohio and other reform groups oppose the two primary approach as too expensive and too confusing for voters. They support one primary rescheduled for a later date. Not only would this later primary save \$25-million in tax dollars, but Ohioans by that time would have further clarity about both state and Congressional Districts. Turcer suggests people write or call their State Representatives and Senators to advocate for one rescheduled primary.

The effort going on in Ohio to bring about fair political districts is part of a movement by reformers in this country to renew the democratic process and to actually save our representative system from sliding toward autocracy. Although not nearly as dramatic as the Ukraine's battle to prevent Putin's Russia from taking its freedoms away, it is just as important. So, we can applaud the bravery and valor of the Ukrainians, but still keep our attention on what we citizens here in Ohio and the U..S can do to restore our democracy to a healthy status.

