

A Political Reform Update - A Review Of What Reform Groups Are Doing Prior To The Midterm Elections

(by Bill Woods for StreetVibes)

An update on where political reforms stand in Ohio and the rest of the country seems timely. Since important midterm elections loom before us this fall, it is critical to know what activists can do to make these contests viable and fair, while also working to improve the health of representative democracy. This topic is particularly germane at a time when one of the two major Parties is so intent on suppressing the vote and promoting other policies that move this nation in an autocratic direction.

Ohio finds itself in the middle of this conflict over the future of representative democracy. Gerrymandered political districts are a current issue in a number of states including Ohio. Because it has majorities in numerous state legislatures, the Republican Party has been able to draw extremely gerrymandered districts that insure it lopsided majorities in Congressional and state legislative races. These recently drawn gerrymandered districts are being challenged in state and federal courts in a number of states by a coalition of reform groups.



Republican Party gerrymandering is especially egregious in Ohio, because it violates the law. As readers will remember, voters passed two Amendments to the Ohio Constitution in 2015 and 2018 designed to end this practice. The first Amendment dealt with state legislative offices, while the second focused on Congressional districts.

Reformers thought they had won the day, but the

Republican majority on the Redistricting Commission and the Republican controlled General Assembly have drawn highly partisan district maps that ignore the guidelines spelled out in the Amendments. In addition, these Republican public officials then failed to comply with rulings handed down by the Ohio Supreme Court that these maps violated Ohio law. To date, both the state and Congressional maps have been rejected twice by the Court for failing to comply with the Constitutional Amendments.

The most recent Ohio Supreme Court ruling came in mid-July with its second rejection of the Republican majority's Congressional District maps. Chief Justice Maureen O'Connor, a Republican, clearly spelled out in her remarks about the Court's decision that Senate President Huffman and other GOP officials did not believe that the Ohio Redistricting Commission was constrained to follow the standards established for drawing Congressional maps set forth in the 2018 Amendment. The Court gave the General Assembly thirty days to produce new, non-gerrymandered maps, and if this body failed to comply, the Commission would have thirty more days to complete this work.

Although reform groups such as Common a Cause Ohio applauded the Court's recent ruling, they



are frustrated that this November's elections will be held using the rejected maps for Congressional and state district races. If fair districts are finally drawn, they will not go into effect until the 1924 election cycle. In a sense, Republicans have won round one of this battle by running out the clock in terms of having reform districts in place for the upcoming election. This leaves reform organizations with the task of continuing to monitor the unfinished work of drawing maps that comply with the two Amendments, while attempting to keep citizens up

to date and concerned about this issue.

One thing that Common Cause is doing is tying fair districts to the upcoming November election of three Ohio Supreme Court Justices. Chief Justice Maureen O'Connor is retiring, and since the pro-reform verdicts of the Court have been four to three decisions, it is critical that a majority of future Justices continue to uphold the two Constitutional Amendments. Common Cause is already passing out leaflets that depict the gerrymandering issue and that emphasize the importance of electing pro-reform Justices in November.

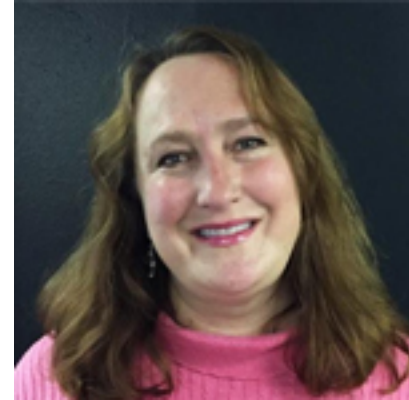
Another organization that focuses on redistricting reform is the National Democratic Redistricting Committee. The brainchild of former President Obama, its Director, Eric Holder, was Obama's Attorney General. Obtaining fair election districts, according to Obama and Holder, is a major way to restore public faith in representative democracy. It has been involved and a plaintiff in a number of recent redistricting court challenges including the Ohio Supreme Court cases. Beyond, redistricting, it is also working to make it easier for citizens to vote while fighting against the many voter suppression laws that Republicans have proposed and passed in various state legislatures.

The NDRC is also warning and preparing us for a Case that the Supreme Court will hear this fall that could have a disastrous impact on reform efforts. For several decades, the Supreme Court has been an enemy of needed political reforms. It gutted the Voting Rights Act, and its decisions in cases like Citizens United have made it almost impossible to address the dominant role of big and often dark money in our elections. Now the Court will consider Moore v. Harper, a case where the right wing majority of the nine Justices might determine that state legislatures are the sole deciders on redistricting and election rulings and decisions.

Such a ruling would be based on "the independent state legislature theory," a doctrine that purports that the Constitution delegated all powers related to elections to state government. This usually discredited theory is now embraced by the Republican Party, and it was used to justify Trump's efforts to have state officials replace Biden's Electoral vote slates with pro-Trump slates. The NDRC and other reform groups are now mounting legal arguments to refute this theory when the Supreme Court takes up Moore v. Harper this fall.

In the meantime, reform groups such as NDRC and Common Cause turn their attention and energies to the Midterm elections in November. As a partisan organization connected to the Democratic Party, NDRC can endorse and work to elect Democrats who support its views.

Meanwhile, non-partisan reform groups such as Common Cause and the League of Women Voters actively recruit volunteers as monitors to protect voting rights and to insure elections in their locales are fair and honestly and efficiently administered.



Catherine Turcer, Executive Director of Common Cause Ohio, outlined what her organization is doing in this state prior to the Midterms. Besides continuing its advocacy for non-gerrymandered districts, it has launched a program to educate voters about what is at stake in electing Ohio Supreme Court Justices this November who support the 2015 and 2018 Constitutional Amendments. It is recruiting volunteers, who in the weeks prior to the election, will pass out its Supreme Court Cards. Another pre-election activity emphasized by Turcer is its Social Media Monitoring Program. It recruits and trains volunteers to monitor social media sites for incorrect or misleading information about election issues or voting procedures. With so much misinformation now being spread on social media, this initiative is badly needed.

Finally like its Washington, D.C. headquarters, Common Cause Ohio is also vigorously recruiting volunteers for Election Day monitoring in communities across the state. Besides fielding volunteers to watch out for problems that could take place at polling places, a group will be trained to intervene if threatening behavior occurs at the polls. At a time when right wing extremists are announcing they will be a local presence on Election Day, groups like Common Cause are concerned about possible voter intimidation that prevents people from casting their ballots. "These are troubling times in our politics," noted Turcer, "and we need to be prepared to protect the democratic process from the kind of hatred and violence that occurred on January 6th."