

SB 258 Opposition, Nov. 7, 2021

Chairperson Gavarone, Vice Chair O'Brien, Ranking Member Maharath, and members of the Ohio Senate Local Government and Elections Committee,

I am the Rev Joan VanBecelaere, a retired Unitarian Universalist minister living in north Columbus near the Polaris Mall. I want to speak in opposition to the congressional map presented in SB 258.

Our Ohio electoral maps are supposed to ensure each of our votes has a fair and equal weight, each of our voices are equally heard, and each of our communities receive equal government resources. At least, that is what's supposed to happen -- especially after we voted in 2015 and again in 2018 to make our redistricting process fair, transparent, and bipartisan

It is extremely disappointing to see that the Ohio House and Senate maps proposed so far by the Ohio Redistricting Commission and now the US Congressional map presented in SB 258 all ignore the new rules that require representational proportionality based on voter patterns over the last 10 years.

Ohioans voted for representational fairness, and we need this if we are to have confidence in the final product. But the map proposed in SB 258 contains quite a bit of gerrymandering – especially in the districts around Columbus and Cincinnati.

The proposed map in SB 258 is problematic on a number of levels, especially in the way it creates the two strange fingers into Franklin County. I live in Franklin County, near the Polaris Mall. I look to Columbus for everything from grocery shopping to restaurants to my congregation. HB 258 would have me voting with people in rural Shelby and Allen counties. I do like the folk in Lima, but my political and policy concerns are quite different from theirs.

It is not right that we cut urban areas like Columbus and Cincinnati into small pieces and parts and attach them to large swaths of rural counties. I can see that HB 258 seems designed to negate my concerns and disempower my vote.

The map presented in SB 258 creates six districts that favor Republicans, two districts that favor Democrats, and seven districts that lean Republican. This is gerrymandering at its finest and does not meet the Constitutional requirement of producing fair maps.

Across the last 10 years, Ohioans have voted on average 54% Republican and 46% Democratic. Looking at how Ohioans actually vote, we are a purple state, which should be a good thing that sets the stage for honest and open discussion about policy differences that matter. But because of gerrymandering, the current Ohio legislature is 75% Republican and Ohio is red on the political map. Fair district maps should reflect how Ohioans REALLY vote. This allows us to elect leaders who represent our values.

Even worse, gerrymandering polarizes our politics. When all our districts are pre-destined to be either Republican or Democrat because of how they are drawn, then candidates must out-Right or out-Left each other to win. It's no accident our national politics have become so incredibly polarized. That's a direct result of gerrymandering in the states, including and especially Ohio.

Ten years ago, Ohio became one of the worst gerrymandered states in the country. We see this reflected in the fact that Republicans currently control our state's U.S. Congressional seats 12-4 despite our 54% R, 46% D voting history.

Now, in 2021, Ohio is drawing maps for the first time using the new rules we demanded, and voted overwhelmingly to put in place in 2015. These rules, if they are followed in good faith, are designed to eliminate gerrymandered maps and ensure voting districts keep communities together, rather than divide us for partisan benefit.

It is possible to follow the new rules and create maps that reflect our voting history in the state. Democrats in the Ohio House put forward a congressional map that would likely give Republicans a 9-6 or 8-7 advantage, according to election data compiled by the redistricting site Dave's Redistricting App. Competitive districts are defined as a partisan index of between 45% and 55%. There is still a lot of room for compromise on this map, but it is much closer to being fair than what we have now.

The process of creating the new district maps should honor the worth and dignity of all people in our state. **It is a moral imperative** that we make every effort to hear all voices when we engage in our democratic process. For democracy to work for all of us, **it must include us all.**

We demand that our electoral maps support the human dignity of every Ohioan by creating districts that allow all voices to be heard. And ensure that our state's redistricting maps reflect the **letter and spirit** of the important redistricting reforms that Ohioans voted into place. This redistricting process will literally shape the future of our democracy.

Please hear us. Please support people over political parties to protect our voting rights and build a better future for us all.

I want to close with a quote by the late Rep John Lewis: "Freedom is not a state; it is an act. It is not some enchanted garden perched high on a distant plateau where we can finally sit down and rest. **Freedom is the continuous action we all must take, and each generation must do its part to create an even more fair, more just society.**"

The path to a more fair, more just society begins today with more fair and just electoral maps.