



PENNSYLVANIA REDISTRICTING Reform Commission



Appendix 7: Online Public Comment Summary

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Overview

The Pennsylvania Redistricting Reform Commission, established last November, held a total of nine public meetings over the last six months in order to gather feedback from the public concerning their thoughts about redistricting. The Commission also offered the public an opportunity to submit comments online for several months, closing on June 30, 2019. The public was asked to respond to these questions:

1. How has the redistricting process affected you or your community? Do you have a story that illustrates how you or your community are impacted by the drawing of political boundaries?
2. Who do you believe should draw, change, or approve the maps in Pennsylvania? (Note: These responsibilities can belong to different groups.)
3. What types of criteria or values do you believe should be prioritized in the redistricting process in Pennsylvania? (Note: These can include, for example: compactness and equal population between districts, but there are numerous others.)
4. Please submit any other thoughts, questions, concerns, or comments not included in the prior responses.

There were a total of 240 unique public comments received from respondents. Not every respondent answered all four questions. What follows is a thematic summary that captures the diversity of responses and includes several quotes that stuck out as the comments were reviewed.

Question 1

How has the redistricting process affected you or your community? Do you have a story that illustrates how you or your community are impacted by the drawing of political boundaries?

Gerrymandering has affected many people and communities across the Commonwealth in an acute way. Respondents to this question feel that many of their districts have been created or redrawn in order to pre-determine the political affiliation of the representative for their district. This process affects communities across the Commonwealth because it depresses turnout as people lose faith in the system. They believe that politicians in safe seats lack any sort of accountability.

Dozens of the comments came from residents of Erie County and revolve around their concerns that their voices and votes are not heard due to the partisan splitting of Erie. These respondents, and more, feel that there are distinct differences in the needs of urban, suburban, and rural places and legislators should be equipped to deal with the concerns of their respective areas, preserving the continuity of community, rather than splitting them up for (at least perceived) partisan purposes. The splitting of communities also hurts the organizing ability of Pennsylvanians; several shared stories of being turned away from activism because they were unable to effectively discuss community issues with friends and neighbors because their representation is split between different districts. Some respondents also shared a story of a school district attempting to advocate for themselves by contacting their legislator, but that legislator was completely unaware that he represented that school district.

Gerrymandering has also contributed to a general sense of distrust of the legislators themselves. Many citizens believe that gerrymandering, a practice that many defined as legislators picking their voters, rather than voters picking their legislators, would be practiced by both parties if afforded the chance. Furthermore, respondents feel this process contributes, in large part, to fewer contested races. They feel gerrymandering leads to legislators only catering to certain voters in their district, and that districts drawn to benefit a legislator create a lack of accountability. This forms a legislature that is unresponsive to constituents and that refuses to advance many bills that have bipartisan and mass citizen support. Respondents feel that historically gerrymandered, and thus underrepresented, areas of the Commonwealth are the most adversely impacted because they did not, and do not, have legislators that feel obligated to help these communities because the legislators know they do not need their votes. They also feel that gerrymandering creates a sense of hopelessness, contributing to a depressed turnout in elections. These factors, felt by many of the respondents, contribute to a general sense of an erosion of trust in democracy.

However, many Pennsylvanians from Representative Conor Lamb's district wrote in positively, talking about how much the redistricting had benefited them and their communities, increasing their trust in democracy and electing a candidate "whose views better align with [their] community."

Question 2

Who do you believe should draw, change, or approve the maps in Pennsylvania? (Note: These responsibilities can belong to different groups.)

Almost every respondent believes that the current process of drawing maps should be changed. The general consensus was that responsibility for map drawing should move away from being solely vested in the legislature – which many see as a conflict of interest. There are two overarching themes that emerge in almost every comment – that the citizens of Pennsylvania want a more transparent process, as well as a process that includes some form of public input.

However, respondents' perspectives differed drastically as to how these objectives should be achieved.

Many advocated for some form of independent, citizen-led commission to draw the maps. Some supporters of this strategy believe that there should be no input from politicians, or anyone involved in the political sphere. These advocates point to California as a state with a model commission that contains a laundry list of criteria as to which citizens can serve. These criteria are focused around citizens being nonpartisan, and largely reflect the provisions laid out in HB23 – a bill that these respondents strongly supported. Other supporters of the independent commission model believe that, while an independent commission should draw the maps, the legislature should have some form of approval.

Respondents were largely split on how this would be achieved in an actionable manner, with some believing that the state legislature should approve the congressional maps, while deferring to an entity such as the Pennsylvania Supreme Court for final approval of the state legislative maps in order to avoid a conflict of interest. Still others believe that the commission should create several maps, one of which would be approved by the legislature, which would have the ability to make small, largely technical changes to the maps. Moving away from the independent commission model, other respondents believe that a commission should be formed with either an equal number of Republicans and Democrats, or an equal mix of Republicans, Democrats, and independents. A similar split existed as to whether this commission should be allowed to simply create the maps, or whether respondents believe they should be approved by the legislature.

A different set of respondents approached the transparency angle from another perspective. They argue that with the advanced technology that is now available, maps should be drawn using advanced computer software and artificial intelligence, because, in their words, humans may always be corruptible, but computers will be able to produce the most unbiased and fairest maps. The last idea to increase public input and transparency into the map-drawing process was for this commission, or the legislature, to come up with a plan to 'fix' redistricting and have voters approve or reject the plan via referendum.

Question 3

What types of criteria or values do you believe should be prioritized in the redistricting process in Pennsylvania? (Note: These can include, for example: compactness and equal population between districts, but there are numerous others.)

The vast majority of respondents believe in similar types of values and criteria that should be prioritized in the redistricting process in Pennsylvania. One overarching theme that emerged throughout the comments was that people did not want communities divided. They want compact, contiguous districts that respect municipal boundaries while maintaining equal populations. Respondents want to ensure that communities of color and communities of interest

would not be divided. Other respondents believe that, regardless of what the criteria ended up being, they want them to be clear and well-defined.

Several respondents want to clarify what exactly the goals of redistricting would be – for example promoting more competition in districts across the Commonwealth generally, or whether maps should reflect partisan symmetry (e.g. if Democrats win 55% of statewide votes, should they receive 55% of the statewide seats). The last set of commenters explicitly cite and believe in the values and criteria already laid out in Article II, Section 16 of the Pennsylvania Constitution, which states that it should be a priority to create "... districts [that are] composed of compact and contiguous territory as nearly equal in population as practicable... [and u]nless absolutely necessary no county, city, incorporated town, borough, township or ward shall be divided in forming either a senatorial or representative district."

Question 4

Please submit any other thoughts, questions, concerns, or comments not included in the prior responses.

Respondents used the final question to thank the Commission for addressing the issue of gerrymandering and advocated for a variety of governmental reforms that, in their words, would increase the voice of the citizens of Pennsylvania. They want to ensure that redistricting would be resolved before the next redistricting cycle. They want to trust the people of the Commonwealth and maximize transparency. They want the Commonwealth to more broadly identify and implement policies that will increase voter turnout and lead to more competitive elections, beyond gerrymandering.

Some advocated for eliminating the Electoral College. Others believed that Pennsylvania should move towards an open primary system, and more broadly a jungle primary system, where the top two vote getters in the primary, regardless of party affiliation, face off in the general election. Other voting reforms were mentioned as well, including transitioning to an instant runoff and/or ranked choice voting systems. Other reforms mentioned included requiring voting systems to have a physical paper trail, same-day voter registration, and automatic voter registration when an eligible citizen turns 18.