

Carol Kuniholm PA House Hearing Remarks —September 18, 2019

Good morning, Chair Everett, Boyle and members of the State Government Committee.

I'm Carol Kuniholm. Chair of Fair Districts PA, a statewide, non-partisan, grassroots coalition dedicated to reform of Pennsylvania's redistricting process for both Congressional and state legislative districts. I'm a volunteer, as are all our Fair Districts PA leaders, speakers and coordinators across the state. With us today are supporters from Altoona, State College, Allentown, Pittsburgh, Lebanon, Gettysburg, Philadelphia, Lancaster, Dauphin, Bucks, Montgomery and Chester Counties. We all have very personal reasons for our attention to this. I want to share my own.

I first heard the word "gerrymandering" four years ago when Senator Lisa Boscola convened a meeting of all the past prime sponsors of redistricting reform legislation. She also invited members of advocacy organizations that had expressed interest. The goal was to review past bills, legislation from other states and responses from colleagues, then to craft a reasonable solution for Pennsylvania's gerrymandering problem.

As the newly elected election reform specialist on the state board of the League of Women Voters of Pennsylvania, I was interested to learn more and encouraged to see the honest conversation between senators, representatives, policy staff and advocates.

Those discussions resulted in bills in Senate and House in 2016. Redraft discussions at the end of 2016 incorporated more feedback from legislators to create Senate Bill 22 and House Bill 722 in the 2017-18 session. Those bills, plus feedback from legislators, became the basis of the current House Bills 22 and 23.

I helped launch Fair Districts PA as a coalition in early 2016 to give support to the good work being done by Pennsylvania legislators on these bills, and to help PA voters understand the importance of underlying systems that can protect or destroy the values essential to our nation's success.

Gerrymandering has long been a concern, but new mapping and data mining technologies have made it increasingly more possible for those who draw the maps to accomplish their own partisan or personal agendas behind closed doors.

Our 2011 congressional map by some standards was the worst in the nation. While congressional districts are easiest to measure, and often draw the most attention, our

legislative districts have also been distorted in ways that undermine representation and diminish confidence in our elections. According to recent research, ours are among the worst in the country. Sources for some of that research are included in our written testimony.

But we don't need research to tell us something's wrong. In the November 2016 election I worked a polling place in Phoenixville, near my home in Chester County. None of the poll workers, or voters, could understand why there were two different ballots in one polling place. When I sat down to look at our district maps, I saw that my own house district, 155, slices through a precinct in downtown Phoenixville, then wanders through three more school districts. You can see that divided precinct in Appendix C.

Distorted districts hurt all of us. I'm an unaffiliated voter and have been most of my life. I live in a very purple part of Chester County. I attend church alongside lifelong Republicans and passionate young progressives. Once they look at our district maps - no matter who they are, no matter the party - they want to know why anyone would allow district lines to be drawn in such a way.

In the past three years, I've traveled around the state, from Lawrence to Lycoming to Luzerne to Lancaster, speaking with voters in rural, urban, and suburban districts, all impacted by gerrymandering.

I've heard stories about ways maps have been drawn to punish colleagues and entire communities for petty, personal reasons. I've heard stories of constituents rebuffed and refused meetings, because the legislator isn't interested, and doesn't need to be interested, because of the way the district is drawn. I've had phone calls from angry voters - in places I've never been - about districts dissected by mountains, rivers, railroads and turnpikes. I've heard the stories about long drives through other districts to reach a legislator's office.

Once citizens start to look at our house and senate maps, they see a cynical game in which we are the pawns: a game that undercuts community, dilutes representation and diminishes accountability. I've shared just a sampling in the appendix of our testimony: counties divided in direct defiance of constitutional requirements, districts that have evolved over time into strange shapes reaching across multiple county lines.

You can also see in our written testimony details about county and municipal resolutions passed in support of an independent citizens commission. These resolutions cover over $\frac{2}{3}$ of the state's population. Of the 21 counties that have passed resolutions, 15 did so unanimously. About $\frac{2}{3}$ of those county resolutions were passed by Republican majorities.

In September 2017, fifteen Republican statewide officials, including past Governors John Kasich, Christine Todd Whitman and Arnold Schwarzenegger, as well as past Senators Bob Dole and John Danforth, filed an amicus brief in the Wisconsin Gill v Whitford redistricting case.

That brief said emphatically:

PARTISAN GERRYMANDERS ARE REPUGNANT TO THE CONSTITUTION

Partisan Gerrymanders Violate The First And Fourteenth Amendments

Partisan gerrymanders are designed to subvert [the] principle of republican government.

Partisan gerrymanders frustrate majority rule by entrenching political parties in ways they do not earn on the merits. As a result of partisan gerrymanders, politicians feel constrained to toe their legislative leaders' agenda at the expense of their own, their constituents', or even good governance. It is no surprise that "[i]ntelligent voters, regardless of party affiliation, resent this sort of political manipulation of the electorate for no public purpose" and simply cease participating in a game they view as rigged.

All of that is true here in Pennsylvania.

All of it needs to change.

The people of Pennsylvania want a fair redistricting process and a responsive legislature. We believe House Bills 22 and 23 contain the best avenue to ensure a truly independent commission in time for the 2021 redistricting process. At the same time, we welcome continued conversation about specific provisions. Thank you again, Representatives Everett and Boyle, for furthering this important work.
