

WHITHER POLITICAL REFORM IN OHIO?
A REVIEW OF THE NEW REDISTRICTING REFORM PROPOSAL

Whither political reform in Ohio? That's the question that brought many of the attendees to the Community Issues Forum at Christ Church Cathedral on February 5th. The Citizens United Supreme Court decision, the huge flood of "big money" in recent campaigns, and the perfection of gerrymandering in states like Ohio have left activists looking for any ray of hope for launching initiatives to begin restoring the health of a battered democratic process.

That ray of hope emerged from the Ohio General Assembly in December, and Catherine Turcer, Policy Analyst for Common Cause, travelled from Columbus to inform Forum attendees about their opportunity to support redistricting reform in this state this year. Just before Christmas, both the House and Senate passed redistricting reform bills, and they then reconciled their differences into a Constitutional Amendment proposal that must now be accepted or rejected by Ohio voters. Turcer's goal at the Forum was to depict the content of the new proposal and to place it in context with our current redistricting process and other models that exist in other states.

Turcer explained from the outset that the General Assembly's proposed Amendment only deals with state legislative districts and not Congressional district lines. She believes, however, that due to bipartisan support, the proposal has a good chance of winning at the polls. She sees it as a potential wedge issue that if successful could launch activists on further political reforms.

Turcer also finds that enough changes exist in this proposal that it will significantly improve the process for drawing state House and Senate district lines. Under this plan, a new bipartisan redistricting commission would be established that includes the governor, auditor, secretary of state, and Republican and Democratic appointees from the House and Senate. Although nothing prevents a majority of members coming from one party, at least two members from the minority party must vote in favor of a ten-year redistricting plan before it is officially adopted. If a two member minority party assent cannot be reached, then the plan goes into effect for only four years, and a new commission is charged with drafting a new redistricting map. Admitting that she preferred the nonpartisan citizen commission that was part of the defeated initiative of 2012, Turcer still contends that the proposed bipartisan commission is a great improvement over the one-party, behind closed doors process of 2011.

Furthermore, noted, Turcer, the new commission would be required to follow certain criteria that would insure a fairer plan. The most important criterion requires that communities are kept together by strictly minimizing the number of splits of counties, municipalities, and contiguous townships. Under this guideline, the priority is to keep large counties, other counties, and then cities from being split into two or three districts. A second criterion requires that "no General Assembly district plan shall be drawn primarily to favor or disfavor a political party." It calls on the map makers to accurately reflect the percent of votes a party has received in a geographical area.

A final important criterion requires that the map-making be transparent. This means that real public hearings will take place during all phases of the redistricting process, and that citizens can offer their own plans and ideas to the Commission. This criterion should also make it easier for citizens to make official objections if they believe the criteria have not been followed by the Commission.

Turcer used a power point presentation that allowed her to show how terribly gerrymandered our current state and Congressional districts are. She kept up a constant interplay with members from the Forum audience as she sought to convince them that “this non-perfect” proposal deserves their attention and eventual support. She compared reformers like herself to pesky gnats who keep swarming around politicians who do their best to swat them away. “Eventually,” she concluded, “they have to come up with something to satisfy us, because they are tired of the constant aggravation.”