

Gov. Hogan says panel will redraw congressional map

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BALTIMORE (AP) — An emergency commission has been created in Maryland to redraw boundaries for a sprawling congressional district in compliance with a federal court order, the state's Republican governor announced Monday.

Gov. Larry Hogan said a "nonpartisan" nine-member commission will craft a redistricting plan for the state's 6th congressional district that isn't tarnished by gerrymandering. In Maryland, Democrats were in charge of the last controversial redistricting and the state's congressional map is often held up as a highly partisan patchwork.

"The outcome of decades of redistricting cycles has made Maryland's congressional and legislative districts an embarrassment," Hogan told reporters at a news conference.

He said the commission he is creating by executive order will be made up of three Democrats, three Republicans, and three unaffiliated voters.

Hogan's announcement comes weeks after a panel of U.S. judges unanimously ordered Maryland to submit a new map for its meandering 6th district, now stretching from vote-rich suburbs of the nation's capital to rural western parts of the mid-Atlantic state.

The federal panel said the lines must be drawn using "traditional criteria for redistricting," showing regard for "natural boundaries." In a decision written by 4th U.S. Circuit Court Judge Paul Niemeyer, the state's 2011 congressional map that removed roughly 66,000 Republican voters from the 6th district and added around 24,000 Democratic voters brought about "the single greatest alteration of voter makeup in any district in the Nation following the 2010 census."

That Democrat-drawn redistricting in 2011 has been cited by critics as a major reason former Democratic Rep. John Delaney was able to oust 10-term Republican Roscoe Bartlett in 2012. In the November midterm elections, Democrat David Trone won the sixth congressional district, the only open seat due to the departure of Delaney, who is running for president.

Some Republican voters had sued over the 6th district's boundaries, claiming Democrats who controlled the governorship and legislature blatantly redrew the map to put more Democrats in the competitive district. The U.S. Supreme Court reviewed the case before referring it back to a lower court, effectively allowing the 2011 map to remain in place for this year's election cycle.

Earlier this month, Maryland Attorney General Brian Frosh asked the U.S. Supreme Court to review the federal panel's recent order for state officials to draw up a new redistricting plan by early March. Frosh, a Democrat, also filed a separate request for the redistricting case to remain on hold until the Supreme Court acts on the state's appeal.

Hogan on Monday blasted Frosh's involvement, asserting that the state's attorney general "continues to be on the wrong side of this fight and the wrong side of history."

A spokeswoman for Frosh's office said it had no comment.

Hogan on Monday also stressed that it's high time for Maryland politicians to get out of the way of redistricting decisions, arguing that the large majority of state residents want a neutral party to draw electoral maps.

"The legislature cannot continue fighting against the will of the people," said Hogan, who pledged to introduce a bill called the Redistricting Reform Act of 2019 during the first day of the next legislative session.

"The people of Maryland and the federal courts agree that the time for our state to act is now to finally restore balance and fairness to our elections, to once and for all remove the politics and the politicians from the process of drawing their own districts," he said.

Hogan has already appointed three commissioners to redraw the 6th district: Retired Judge Alexander Williams, a registered Democrat; Walter Olson, a senior fellow at the Cato Institute and a registered Republican; and Ashley Oleson, an unaffiliated voter. The remaining six members will be chosen by their applications in coming days and will be made up of a similar political balance, according to the governor.

Hogan vowed that the new commission, when completed, will hold livestreamed sessions and meetings will be open to the public.

Damon Effingham, director of the Common Cause Maryland nonprofit, praised Hogan's executive order to create a commission but said enduring redistricting changes were needed.

"There are limits to the commission, as without a decision from the Supreme Court or legislation from the General Assembly, Marylanders aren't guaranteed to continue having an open, non-partisan process under future governors," Effingham said.