



Don't wait for the courts, reform redistricting now

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Among the most challenging national issues of our time is the scourge of partisan gerrymandering. All supporters of responsible and good government are bracing themselves for the forthcoming decision by the United States Supreme Court in Wisconsin's redistricting case, *Gill v. Whitford*, which is expected to address the constitutionality of partisan gerrymandering. Maryland will be directly impacted by this decision as the court heard oral arguments this week in a companion case, *Benisek v. Lamone*, brought by Maryland plaintiffs challenging the lines drawn in the 6th Congressional District in Western Maryland on several grounds, including the First Amendment's Freedom of Speech. Rulings in both cases are expected this summer.

Maryland, of course, did not have to be at the mercy of the high court to fix this egregious problem. For three years in a row, Gov. Larry Hogan has had the foresight to propose nonpartisan redistricting reform here in Maryland — long before it became the hot-button issue it is today. During his first year in office, Governor Hogan issued an executive order creating the Maryland Redistricting Reform Commission, which I co-chaired with Walter Olson. The commission held hearings in every corner of the state to solicit the opinions of a diverse range of citizens and issued a report based on that input in November 2015. The findings in our report echoed the calls of countless Marylanders for reforms that would create a new, fair and consistent approach to creating election districts

In the seven hearings our commission held across Maryland, voters echoed the same sentiments again and again. They called out gerrymandering for fueling voter apathy and increasing partisanship. They were angry at the disenfranchisement caused by partisan redistricting, and even more angered at what one attendee described as “bizarrely shaped” congressional districts. Finally, many thanked Governor Hogan for giving Maryland the chance to lead on this important issue.

That's why Maryland's creation of an independent redistricting commission is so vital. Predicting the outcome of a pending landmark case is not an easy task. While the Supreme Court could strike down or invalidate our maps, Maryland cannot afford to wait. By creating a nonpartisan commission, Maryland would ensure that we have a fair and transparent solution to redistricting, notwithstanding what the courts decide. As someone who has spent the last three

years working on this issue, I am calling on all of the stakeholders in our state — from public officials to citizens, educators and community leaders — to ensure that we take this opportunity to finally remove politics from the drawing congressional and state legislative lines.

In past years, many in the Maryland General Assembly have declined to seriously consider the governor's proposal, despite significant bipartisan support. They should not do that again this year. With the United States Supreme Court now taking up this issue, it's time for Maryland to stop waiting for others to act and start displaying the kind of leadership our state has always prided itself on when it comes to doing the right thing.

Maryland is a very progressive state, blessed with many superb, dedicated, and responsible legislators on the federal, state and local levels. Marylanders of all political persuasions agree that the process of redistricting should be fair, transparent and inclusive. Now is the time to create an independent redistricting commission; fundamental fairness and democracy demand nothing less. When we take the politics out of this process, I am absolutely convinced that the citizens and voters of Maryland will have an even greater incentive to engage with our electoral system and elect the legislative representatives of their choice.