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Governor's commission proposed fair maps to end gerrymandering

Walter Olson

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Last week Gov. Larry Hogan's Maryland Citizens Redistricting Commission presented to the governor its proposed maps for U.S. House and state legislative districts for the next decade. (By law, each state must redraw district lines every 10 years following the collection of new Census numbers.) The governor says he will submit them unchanged to the General Assembly as his own recommendations. Meanwhile, the Legislature's advisory commission came out with four proposed congressional maps Nov. 9. It has not yet published draft state senate and delegate maps.

As a Frederick County resident and one of the three chairs of the governor's citizen commission, I have a few observations about how our maps were developed and what they would mean for our part of the state if enacted into law.

Our commission was composed of nine members from many walks of life and from across the state, including three registered Democrats, three Republicans, and three independents. In his executive order creating the commission, the governor instructed us to draw lines without regard to the interests of any party or candidate. In fact, we were told not to take into account political data, such as figures on voter registration by party or past election results, in our deliberations. Nor could we take into account the place of residence of any incumbent legislator or other person. Those are strong rules. And I believe the results are strong too.

The commission's proposed congressional map would once again restore to Western Maryland a single coherent district in the U.S. House of Representatives, which it has not had for the past 10 years. It would keep fully intact Frederick and Carroll counties, both of which are split under the current gerrymander, and combine them with the three westernmost counties of Garrett, Allegany, and Washington. To bring the district up to its full needed population of 771,926, the district would also take in a portion of northernmost Montgomery County with population 82,086, including such communities as Damascus, Clarksburg, Laytonsville, and Poolesville. The commission viewed these areas as having some commonality of interest with nearby Frederick County communities.

Changes in the local senate map would be relatively modest. The population of Frederick County has risen rapidly in the past decade, while the counties to our west have seen less rapid growth, or even population decline. Because of these shifts, principles of equal population require that some portion of Frederick County be reassigned to the Washington County-based Senate District 2. The commission settled on Brunswick, Burkittsville, and the areas west and south of Middletown as the most suitable areas to join District 2. (While current practice has tolerated population variations of as much as plus or minus 5 percent among legislative districts, our commission made a point of insisting on lower variances, less than 2 percent for senate districts and 3 percent for delegates, in order to better accord with the principle of one person, one vote.)

At the eastern end of the county, the commission faced a difficult problem in Mount Airy, parts of which fall in both Frederick and Carroll counties. We had to choose between keeping each county whole in the senate map at the cost of a break between the town's two halves, and keeping the town whole at the cost of an extra county break. After being briefed on both sides of the question, the commission decided to draw its line along the Frederick-Carroll boundary, even though this meant leaving each side of Mount Airy with its own state senator.

Turning to the House of Delegates, Maryland is unusual among states in having retained extensive use of multi-member districts in this chamber. (Three delegate districts “nest” within each senate district.) Frederick County is presently divided among a three-member, a two-member, and a single-member district, a confusing layout at best. Under the commission’s proposal, all Frederick County delegate districts, as well as those in nearby areas, would become single-member.

As a result, what is now a three-member delegate district wrapping around suburban parts of Frederick County would be divided into three single-member districts, roughly corresponding to west, north, and east county areas. Two other single-member districts would be dominated by Frederick city, while a third delegate seat within the same senate district would include Urbana, Spring Ridge, and Ballenger Creek. (This would represent an eastward shift from the equivalent district today, which runs south from the city through Adamstown to Point of Rocks.)

One of the new Frederick delegate districts, in the downtown, Golden Mile, and East Frederick areas, would have the distinction of being the county’s first majority-minority district. That would reflect the continued demographic changes we have seen in recent years in the direction of a more diverse Frederick County.

Because the legislative commission has resisted requests that it share draft legislative maps, the only direct comparisons possible for now are on the congressional maps. All four of the Legislature’s drafts would continue to split Frederick County, combining each portion of the county with large stretches of Montgomery County extending down to D.C. suburbs like Potomac, as does the current map.

Compare these maps, and decide for yourself which is the fairer and more reasonable way to draw lines in our part of the state and across Maryland. Let your neighbors and especially your elected leaders know what you think.

If the lines are bad, we could be stuck with them for the next 10 years.

Walter Olson is a senior fellow at the Cato Institute's Robert A. Levy Center for Constitutional Studies and is known for his writing on law, public policy, and regulation.