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## Hogan vetoes Democrats' solution to gerrymandering, vows further efforts at reform

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Gov. Larry Hogan vetoed a six-state congressional redistricting bill on Monday that he called “a smoke screen” to real reform.

“Free and fair elections are perhaps the most basic right that those in power can offer to citizens,” Hogan said at a State House news conference, moments before signing a veto to the bill presented to him by legislative leaders.

Dubbed the Mid-Atlantic Compact, the bill would require six states — Maryland, New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Virginia and North Carolina — to each vote and move together to a nonpartisan congressional districting process. If all six states pass similar legislation, each state would have a nonpartisan independent commission draw congressional lines.

It passed the Maryland House of Delegates and Senate with a veto-proof majority last session, which means lawmakers could take up an override vote next year.

Hogan said he hoped the chambers would not take that route, but instead consider legislation he put forward that would move Maryland to nonpartisan districting standards on its own.

“We’ll take a look at what else we can do to knock some sense into some of these folks, but it’s going to take more pressure from their voters,” Hogan said of the majority Democratic lawmakers who have not supported redistricting reform outside of multi-state agreements. “And if they don’t get it next year ... in November, [voters] might have something they have to say about it.”

Hogan noted that the wishes of voters of all parties are on his side on this issue.

A Goucher College poll in February found that 75 percent of Maryland voters support an independent commission to draw district lines, compared with 19 percent supporting elected officials making those decisions.

“Sadly, legislative leaders continued to simply ignore the overwhelming majority of people in Maryland. Instead of choosing fairness and real nonpartisan reform, they pushed through a phony bill, masquerading as redistricting reform that was nothing more than a political ploy designed with one purpose in mind. And that was to ensure that real redistricting reform would never actually happen in Maryland,” Hogan said.

But legislative leaders shot back on Monday afternoon. In a joint statement, House Speaker Michael Busch (D) and Senate President Thomas V. Mike Miller Jr. (D) said it was “disappointing” that Hogan chose to veto the bill “that could help fix a broken Congress.

“Today’s veto reveals that, instead of supporting a true, non-partisan solution that could restore accountability and cooperation to Washington, Governor Hogan prefers his plan to simply elect more Republicans to Congress,” the statement said.

During floor debates last session, Democrats said the bill would ensure a party balance in the U.S. House as states moved toward more compact and contiguous district boundaries.

Republicans — who would stand to gain a member among Maryland’s congressional delegation — say the six-state compact is unlikely to happen and that Maryland should act on its own.

Frederick County’s lawmakers voted last session along party lines, with all Democrats in favor of the bill and Republicans against.

Frederick County resident Walter Olson, who is also co-chairman of Hogan’s redistricting reform commission and a senior fellow at the Cato Institute’s Center for Constitutional Studies, was on hand for Monday’s veto announcement. He agreed with the governor’s decision.

“I think it sends the right message because it is not a bill that should be taken seriously. It is a bill that is meant to change the subject away from what is workable and what citizens want,” Olson said. “And the governor doesn’t want to change the subject.”

He said there’s an important political calculation that has to be made by Democrats. While they could lose a seat in Congress and perhaps a few delegate seats through nonpartisan congressional and legislative redistricting, they could gain stature in the eyes of voters.

“Voters remember when you were in a position of power and you acted for the public interest rather than for partisan interest. ... The time to act magnanimously is when you are on top. And that’s where Democrats are now in the Legislature,” Olson said. “And I tell Republicans exactly the same thing, by the way, in the many states where they are blocking reform.”

The push for reform comes as a legal challenge to the state’s current congressional district map remains in federal court.

While the lawsuit has survived several attempts to have it dismissed, the focus has narrowed to whether the dilution of Republican votes in the 6th District — which includes part of Frederick County — violates the First Amendment right to free speech and association.

The case is expected to go to trial this summer.