



Redistricting Commissioners Allied With Hogan Don't See Eye-to-Eye on Single-Member Districts

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Members of the Maryland Citizens Redistricting Commission debated whether to include single- or multi-member delegate districts in their legislative maps at a Monday evening meeting, but weren't able to reach a consensus ahead of the start of their final round of public hearings.

The executive order from Gov. Lawrence J. Hogan Jr. (R) that created the commission requires that, to the extent possible, members of the multi-partisan panel use single-member delegate districts in their proposed maps. Maryland's state constitution allows both single-member, two-member and three-member delegate districts for the 141-member House, and the state currently uses a hybrid system with both single- and multi-member districts.

Commission members weighed the issue of single- vs. multi-member districts at their Monday night meeting, and whether Hogan's order truly requires them to use single-member districts statewide. The commission is set to kick off its third round of virtual public hearings Wednesday evening at 6 p.m., and commission members have so far drawn up draft congressional and senatorial maps for public reaction, which are available online.

Democratic members of the commission wanted to keep multi-member districts in their proposed maps. Commission Co-chair Alexander Williams (D) said multi-member districts have led to diverse and reflective representation in Maryland, and said he would like to see a hybrid system maintained in the legislative maps.

“If it’s not broken, why fix it?” Williams said.

Commission member William Thomas (D) said multi-member districts give voters a wider range of representation on different committees, and access to legislators with different skills.

Commission member Jonathan Fusfield (I) said the change would be too drastic for areas that have had multi-member districts for decades.

“Keeping a mix is the most practical thing to do,” Fusfield said.

But Commission Co-chair Walter Olson (R) noted that the governor’s order creating the commission specifies that “to the extent possible and consistent with the commission’s other duties and responsibilities,” use single-member districts in their delegate maps.

“It doesn’t say to the extent we would like,” Olson said.

Commission member Mary Clawson (R) said she felt giving all Marylanders the same number of delegates on their ballots is “the right thing to do.”

Co-chair Kathleen Hetherington (I) supported Olson’s view, and said her interpretation of the governor’s order is that the commission should use multi-member districts when required by the Voting Rights Act.

Williams said he believes the governor’s order gives them more flexibility over using single- or multi-member districts because it specifies “to the extent possible.” He added that he hasn’t made up his mind as to whether the map should be mostly single-member districts or not.

Hetherington suggested the commission put forward a single-member district map for public comment and allow people to testify about whether multi-member districts should be used.

Olson said he wants to hear from the public about what criteria the commission should use when deciding whether or not to use multi-member districts.

“Asking the public for guidance on criteria gets us closer to that point,” Olson said.

Williams said he wants to see a map created with mostly multi-member districts for the public to react to alongside the single-member districts.

“The option should be out there for the public to comment on either,” Williams said.

Williams, a retired United States District Court judge, and Olson, a senior fellow with the CATO institute, both have longstanding ties with Hogan and his push for redistricting reform. Hogan appointed to pair to serve as co-chairs on an emergency commission to redraw the state’s 6th Congressional District after a federal court ordered new district lines drawn, although the U.S. Supreme Court later threw the question of partisan gerrymandering back to the states.

Hogan has said he’s taking a hands-off approach to the commission, which is independent of the governor. “Those are going to be real, fair maps,” Hogan previously said. “I’m going to have no involvement in them.”

Commission members ultimately decided to push off debate until Wednesday after the next public hearing.

Nathaniel Persily, a Stanford Law School professor and national redistricting expert brought on by the panel to help draw up maps, said it’s easy to turn a single-member map into a multi-member map because districts can simply be combined.

Persily warned that shifting lines in delegate districts also affects state Senate maps, since delegate districts must be nested within the 47 senatorial districts in Maryland.

Commission members heard testimony from proponents of both single- and multi-member districts during their first round of region-based virtual public hearings this summer. Some who testified argued that multi-member districts make it easier for women and people of color to get elected, and noted that the Maryland General Assembly outpaces other state legislatures in gender and racial diversity. Proponents of single-member districts said they make it easier for political newcomers to challenge incumbents, and lead to more accessible representation since they cover a smaller area.

The Maryland Citizens Redistricting Commission is tasked with drawing up congressional and legislative maps that Hogan will propose to the General Assembly. The General Assembly, where Democrats hold a veto-proof majority in both the House of Delegates and the Senate, will have the final say over the state's next set of maps.

Legislative leaders created their own redistricting panel, the bipartisan Legislative Redistricting Advisory Commission, which is currently conducting a series of public hearings statewide to gather public input. That commission's next meeting is set for Tuesday at 3 p.m. and will be a virtual statewide hearing.