



Maryland Citizens Redistricting Commission Remains Split On Single- Vs. Multi-Member Districts

Bennett Leckrone

October 6th, 2021

Members of the Maryland Citizens Redistricting Commission remained split over the issue of single- vs. multi-member districts as their final round of public hearings kicked off Wednesday evening.

Gov. Lawrence J. Hogan Jr. (R) required the commission to draw up legislative maps with single-member state delegate districts “to the extent possible” in his executive order creating the panel, but commission members haven’t been able to decide whether to include multi-member districts in their eventual maps.

Maryland currently uses a mix of single- and multi-member delegate districts.

The commission was able to approve draft congressional and state Senate maps for public comment at work sessions before the final round of public hearings, but testimony on Wednesday centered around single-member districts.

Del. Susan W. Krebs (R-Carroll County) said she largely supports the current congressional and state senate maps proposed by the commission, and also spoke in support of single-member delegate districts “contained to the extent possible within a single county.”

“Single member districts support the basic premise of one-person, one-vote,” Krebs said.

She also criticized the state’s current hybrid system of single- and multi-member districts, and said single-member districts make it easier for political newcomers to challenge incumbents.

Zalee Harris, a member of the Charles County Republican Central Committee, said she supports single-member districts in her jurisdiction. Stephen Mattingly, also a Charles County resident, called the current hybrid system “ineffective” and said that single-member districts would allow for more specialized local representation in rural areas.

Lee Havis, a Prince George’s County resident, told commission members he supports the use of single-member districts statewide. Havis, who unsuccessfully ran as a Republican against Sen. James C. Rosapepe (D-Prince George’s) in 2018, said single-member districts would create more “competitive elections” in the county.

“If we’re looking for help with better government and more citizen accountability, I really hope you will embrace the concept of single-member House districts,” Havis said.

Former state Sen. Shirley Nathan-Pulliam (D-Baltimore City) said she opposes shifting to only single-member districts statewide, and argued that multi-member districts give voters access to broader representation and legislators with different areas of expertise.

“Think about the amount of resources that you bring when you have three members on that team,” Nathan-Pulliam said.

After the public hearing portion of their meeting, the commission pushed off debate on setting criteria for using multi-member districts.

Commission Co-Chair Walter Olson (R) proposed criteria that would allow multi-member districts in areas with high population density. Olson said he’s a proponent of single-member districts, but came up with the potential criteria after commission members weren’t able to reach a consensus on what district configuration to use last week.

Commission Co-Chair Alexander Williams Jr. (D) said population density should be just one of the criteria used by the commission when deciding whether to use single- or multi-member districts. Williams said he's in favor of maintaining a hybrid model to some extent across the state.

Proponents of multi-member districts who testified at previous Maryland Citizens Redistricting Commission public hearings said the system makes it easier women and people of color to get elected. Williams noted that the Maryland General Assembly outpaces other states in terms of gender and racial diversity.

“The multi-member districts that have been in place, many of them have worked,” Williams said. “They’ve worked and they’ve resulted in fair representation by minorities.”

Co-Chair Kathleen Hetherington (I) said it's important that the commission use clear criteria when deciding when and if to use multi-member districts so that their eventual legislative maps are legally sound.

The commission is set to discuss the multi-member district criteria at another working session after their next public hearing, which is scheduled for 6 p.m. on Oct. 13.

The Maryland Citizens Redistricting Commission includes three Republicans, three Democrats and three unaffiliated voters and is tasked with drawing up draft congressional and legislative maps that Hogan will submit 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 panel, the bipartisan Legislative Redistricting Advisory Commission, to conduct hearings and draw up its own set of maps.

That panel's next meeting is set for 6 p.m. Tuesday at the Earl G. Graves School of Business Management in Baltimore City.