

# The Intelligencer

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Opinion

## **Guest Opinion: A citizens' call to action for an independent redistricting commission**

**By Eileen Walkowiak**

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With stories of exasperating government dysfunction on the rise, it is not surprising that so many citizens feel increasingly anxious that hyper-partisan representatives can no longer work together to solve problems effectively.

With this as a backdrop, advocates of good government across the country have sounded the alarm over a root cause of this dysfunction — the centuries-old practice of gerrymandering that has had an increasingly dramatic effect on many recent elections. This is done with party leaders now using data and mapping technologies to redraw electoral districts to their distinct advantage.

The courts have been asked to weigh in on the issue, but uncertainty remains. The U.S. Supreme Court seems to be searching for a valid measure to determine when gerrymandering is so extreme it warrants court intervention.

A recent Pennsylvania Supreme Court decision ordered the redrawing of the state's congressional district map to ensure greater fairness, but reaction to this decision predictably further exacerbated partisan divisions. Also, the maps will be redrawn again after the 2020 Census. And so the debate will rage on.

A better long-term solution to this vexing problem is reform of the redistricting process itself. A growing grassroots movement has gained traction around the country that aims to take the reins of redistricting away from party leaders and instead place the process in the hands of independent citizens redistricting commissions that are impartial, transparent and accountable. In Pennsylvania, this effort is led by Fair Districts PA, a nonpartisan group of volunteers founded in 2016.

In a short time, Fair Districts PA has flexed impressive grassroots muscle, hosting more than 400 public meetings, collecting more than 27,000 petition signatures and mobilizing local efforts that have resulted in the passage of resolutions in support of redistricting reform in 200 municipalities and 16 counties statewide.

The legislation that would amend the state constitution to make an independent citizens redistricting commission a reality in Pennsylvania has been proposed in both the Senate (SB22) and House (HB722), and each has garnered significant bipartisan support. Senate Bill now has 22 co-sponsors, while House Bill 722 has attracted the support of 110 legislators, more than 50 percent of that body.

Nonetheless, these bills have stalled in committee in both chambers, and passage must be accomplished by this session's end in order for the amendment process to be finalized in time for redistricting after the 2020 Census.

The Senate State Government Committee, after months of inaction, held a public hearing on March 27, signaling some willingness to move forward on the issue. However, the House State Government Committee chairman Daryl Metcalfe, along with Speaker Mike Turzai, have shown no willingness to even open the issue to discussion.

Fair Districts PA Chair Carol Kuniholm gave voice to the frustration of many at the Senate hearing asking, "Does this body believe the state constitution? Does it believe that we the people have the right to alter and reform our government or does this body represent the party leadership who say no?"

Pennsylvania is regularly cited as one of the most gerrymandered states in the country. Isn't it time for us to insist that we be on the forefront of needed reform? As citizens we must urge our state legislators to bring SB22 and HB722 to the floor for debate and a subsequent vote. Amending the state constitution is indeed a heavy lift, but the ability of our legislature to forge the consensus necessary to address the challenges ahead is at stake.

It's time to restore public confidence in Pennsylvania state government by enacting redistricting reform.

*Eileen Walkowiak, Doylestown, is an individual partner with Bucks County Women's Advocacy Coalition.*



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