

Ohio Redistricting Commission passes new legislative maps with bipartisan support

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COLUMBUS, Ohio—The Ohio Redistricting Commission on Tuesday night gave final, bipartisan approval to new state legislative district maps that could be in place for as long as eight years.

The new redistricting plan, unveiled after lengthy closed-door negotiations between Republican and Democratic commission members, gives Republicans an advantage in [61 of 99 Ohio House districts](#) and [23 of 33 state Senate districts](#), according to State Auditor Keith Faber, the commission's Republican co-chair.

That's more favorable to Republicans than the maps that were used in last year's legislative elections, which the Ohio Supreme Court found to be unconstitutionally gerrymandered in favor of Republicans. Those maps, which gave the Republicans an on-paper edge in 56 House seats and 18 Senate seats, resulted in the GOP winning 67 House seats and 26 Senate seats last November -- the largest majorities that either party has held since the Ohio legislature went to one-member districts in the 1960s.

Only 11 of 99 House districts, and just four of 33 Senate districts, are competitive "tossup" seats under the new maps, according to Faber.

The two Democrats on the seven-member redistricting commission [previously said](#) they would not vote for any redistricting plan that maintained or expanded Republican advantages compared to the current map.

But "that has proved to be extremely difficult in the current environment," said House Minority Leader Allison Russo, a Democratic commission member from suburban Columbus. She said the Republicans who control the redistricting commission "waited until the last minute" to pass maps, and she called the state's current redistricting process a "sham" and "rigged."

Senate Minority Leader Nickie Antonio of Lakewood, the commission's Democratic co-chair, said the maps that the commission passed were "more fair" and would create more competitive races than the GOP-authored proposal that the commission had been considering up until now. That plan [would have created 62 GOP-leaning House and 23 Senate districts](#), as well as fewer competitive districts than Ohio had last year.

“We worked hard to find a compromise, and it’s illustrated by the amended maps that we have before us today,” Antonio said.

Republicans on the commission offered more praise to Antonio and Russo for negotiating “in good faith” than they did for the maps themselves.

“There are certainly things in this map that I don’t like, and if I had my way, I would have changed, and have made suggestions to change,” Faber said. “But in the end, I think this map meets the constitutional test. It allows people to be represented by people who share their views and values, and it keeps communities together, certainly, where possible.”

“Tonight we proved that good-faith negotiations with our colleagues from both sides of the aisle guided by the process approved by the voters to draw legislative districts can work exactly the way it was intended to work, when not undermined by out-of-state special interest groups,” said Senate Majority Floor Leader Rob McColley, a Republican commission member from Northwest Ohio, in a statement, in an apparent reference to national Democrats who sued over GOP-backed legislative maps passed during the last redistricting cycle.

“From the very beginning, we sought stability with achieving an 8-year map,” said state Rep. Jeff LaRe, a Republican commission member from Fairfield County, in a statement. “We’re proud of the efforts and look forward to continuing to serve the people of Ohio.”

The Ohio Redistricting Commission only voted on new state legislative maps. Ohio’s current congressional map will be used again next year after Democrats and good government groups [dropped their legal challenges to it](#) earlier this month.

The newly passed redistricting plan could still be challenged in court, just as last year’s maps were. Lawyers for the American Civil Liberties Union of Ohio and the National Democratic Redistricting Committee, led by ex-U.S. Attorney General Eric Holder, have already asked the Ohio Supreme Court to review any new state legislative maps before they go into effect for next year’s elections. McColley and LaRe filed a reply brief Tuesday agreeing that a court review of any new map is needed for the “credibility” of any new redistricting plan.

However, the Ohio Supreme Court is expected to be more sympathetic to GOP-passed redistricting efforts than it was last year. Republican Maureen O’Connor, a crucial swing vote against the last round of redistricting plans, retired as chief justice earlier this year; her successor as chief justice, Republican Sharon Kennedy, repeatedly voted to uphold last year’s redistricting plans. The newest member of the court, Republican Joe Deters, was appointed to the court last year by Gov. Mike DeWine, a Republican who voted for Monday’s redistricting maps.

Another legal question that hasn’t yet been definitively settled is how long the new maps will remain in place. Faber said Tuesday afternoon some people believe that a

bipartisan map would last for eight years, until after the 2030 census. Others, he said, say the redistricting plan will only last for two years, no matter who votes for it.

“That’s an open constitutional question,” Faber said. He added Tuesday night that it will likely be up to the courts to determine the answer.

O’Connor and a coalition of left-leaning good-government groups is attempting to [hold a statewide vote in 2024 on a proposed constitutional amendment](#) that would put redistricting in the hands of a 15-member commission divided equally among Republicans, Democrats and independents. If it passes, new maps would have to be drawn in 2025, making a moot point out of whether the redistricting commission passes a two-year-long map or one lasting eight years.

Antonio was asked Tuesday night whether, when deciding to vote for the redistricting plan, she factored in the potential effect that it might have on the proposed amendment’s chances of passing.

“Look, I’m a pragmatist,” she replied. “And I also try to be present right now, doing the work that I’m doing right now. I feel a responsibility to the people and to my job right now. And so my focus was on what’s the best work that we can do with the responsibility that we have for the people of the state.”

Russo added: “I think that the way that this process has played out, to me, I don’t think that will deter citizens at all from [supporting] the [proposed] citizen-led commission.”

Republicans on the commission previously emphasized that they strove to meet a number of requirements laid out in the Ohio Constitution, including that the districts be compact, that counties and cities be split into different districts a limited number of times, and that state senators who were elected to four-year terms in 2022 continue to serve in the Senate until their terms are up in 2026.

Faber said last week that instead of trying to hit some “magical mystery ratio,” it’s important to try to ensure that communities are represented by someone who shares their interests, especially as Ohioans with the same political bent increasingly cluster together geographically.

The Ohio Redistricting Commission held four public-comment hearings on the initial GOP redistricting plan, though it offered no chance for public input on the maps that it passed.

Most of the 70-plus people who testified at those four meetings spoke in opposition to the initial redistricting proposal, [which was unveiled just last week](#).

“This is really, in my mind and in the public’s mind, a sham of a bipartisan commission,” said Mike Halaiko, a retired public school administrator from Perry County.

One person who testified to defend the new maps on Tuesday was former state Sen. Jeff Jacobson, a Dayton Republican who helped negotiate the 2015 state constitutional amendment that created the Ohio Redistricting Commission. He pushed back on accusations that Republicans were passing a map even more gerrymandered than the current one.

Jacobson said it was “ridiculousness” to argue – as the Ohio Supreme Court ruled last year – the maps should be drawn to ensure that Democrats win a certain number of seats. The only way to increase the number of Democratic-favored seats to the level that critics want, he said, would be to gerrymander the map in a way that would deprive some conservative Ohioans of such a voice.

“You can’t gerrymander in the way that (proponents of) proportionality would like. The constitution says that you can’t violate line-drawing rules (and) you can’t cross county boundaries as many times as you want. You can’t stick little pieces of an urban county with little pieces of a rural county three counties away,” Jacobson said.

Faber was asked earlier on Tuesday why redistricting commission members weren’t negotiating with each other in public.

“I think the legislative process works when you have people able to have candid conversations and candid assessments,” Faber replied. He added that the negotiations take time because every proposed change to the draft maps has to be evaluated to see how it would affect other districts.

“There is rarely, in drawing maps, a simple ‘yes’ or ‘no’ answer,” he said.