

# Why Ohio Democrats joined Republicans to support legislative redistricting plan

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COLUMBUS, Ohio—During Ohio's last redistricting cycle in 2021 and 2022, Democrats on the Ohio Redistricting Commission repeatedly refused to vote for state legislative maps passed by the Republican majority, saying they were too gerrymandered to support.

On Wednesday, the commission's two Democratic members again had to decide whether to accept maps they believe unfairly help Republicans. But this time, they cut a deal with Republicans and voted to pass a redistricting plan that, while tweaked to help Democrats compared to an initial GOP proposal, could preserve the GOP's Statehouse supermajorities for the next eight years.

Why did the two Democrats, Senate Minority Leader Nickie Antonio of Lakewood and House Minority Leader Allison Russo of suburban Columbus, make that decision, even though they believe the maps they voted for are gerrymandered? Why were Republicans willing to make concessions to Democrats instead of pressing their advantage on a commission they controlled? And what happens now?

The Plain Dealer and cleveland.com spoke with several individuals involved with the redistricting process as negotiations played out behind closed doors.

## **What did Democrats get**

When the Ohio Redistricting Commission convened earlier this month, Antonio and Russo repeated statements they previously made that neither of them would vote for any redistricting plan that either maintained or expanded GOP advantages compared to the current map.

In the end, they voted for a redistricting plan that gives Republicans an advantage of [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.

However, the final maps contained several Democratic-friendly tweaks compared to the initial plan introduced by Republicans earlier this month, which [would have created 62 GOP-leaning districts in the House and 23 in the Senate](#).

Specifically, three Senate districts, all in urban and suburban areas, were modified to benefit Democrats. They are District 6, where Republican incumbent Niraj Antani of suburban Dayton suddenly finds himself in a district with a significant Democratic majority; District 16, where Republican Stephanie Kunze of suburban Columbus is term-limited; and District 24, a suburban Cuyahoga County district held by term-limited Republican Sen. Matt Dolan of Chagrin Falls.

The new Senate map includes only four competitive “tossup” districts. Antonio said Tuesday that if Democrats can win those seats, they would have 13 members – enough to break the Republican supermajority in the Senate.

Several House districts were also changed to become more friendly to Democrats, either compared to the legislative map used last year or the initial draft map from Republicans this year. The changes, among other things, help Democrats in Cuyahoga and Lucas counties

Russo, in an interview, said the negotiations weren’t focused as much on how many seats each party would be likely to get overall as they were about altering specific districts in specific areas of the state.

“The Republican members of this commission have wanted just to focus regionally and not look at the map in its totality,” she said.

## **Why Democrats made a deal**

During and after Tuesday night’s redistricting commission meeting to approve the maps, Antonio and Russo laid out two reasons for supporting them. Antonio called herself a pragmatist and said the final maps are “more fair” than the initial GOP proposal. In addition, both of them expressed hope that the plan they passed wouldn’t be used beyond 2024, when redistricting reformists hope to pass a new constitutional amendment overhauling the state’s redistricting process entirely.

Russo, in an interview Wednesday, offered additional reasons why she didn’t refuse to strike a deal with Republicans, as she did during the last redistricting process.

One is that the Ohio Supreme Court is expected to be more sympathetic to GOP-passed redistricting efforts now, as Republican Maureen O’Connor, a crucial swing vote against the last round of redistricting plans, retired as chief justice earlier this year.

“The districts are going to continue to get worse and worse every time we do these redraws,” Russo said.

In addition, she said, if Democrats again refused to go along with any redistricting plan, it could result in Ohio having to redraw districts in 2027 for the third time in six years.

“At the end of the day, that has very real consequences for voters,” Russo said. “It has very real consequences in the districts that are represented by members. It has very real consequences when voters don’t know who their elected official or what their lines are going to be from election cycle to election cycle.”

That stability, she said, “gives the space and the time” to pursue redistricting reform.

## **Why Republicans made a deal**

Dan Tierney, a spokesman for Gov. Mike DeWine, a Republican commission member, said a bipartisan deal provides multiple advantages for the GOP, even though the party had to make concessions to get it.

Similar to Russo, DeWine believes passing eight-year maps was preferable to having to go through another round of redistricting in four years, Tierney said. In addition, he said, having Democratic support makes it less likely that the maps will be challenged or overturned in court.

“Hopefully, because of this bipartisan agreement, there won’t be litigation challenging the maps and there will be certainty moving forward,” Tierney said. “I think that’s what everybody wanted.”

Matthew Eiselstein, a spokesman for Faber, agreed that the benefits for Ohio Republicans from a bipartisan deal are the same as they are for everyone else in the state.

“I think any time the parties can come together in agreement, Ohioans and everyone should celebrate that,” he said. “I know everybody didn’t walk away with what they wanted. But at the end of the day, that’s typically how compromise works.”

Several people familiar with the redistricting negotiations said Faber played a prominent role in getting a deal done – an irony, given that Faber only reluctantly became the commission’s co-chair after House Speaker Jason Stephens and Senate President Matt Huffman deadlocked on the issue for a week.

## **Lawsuits?**

Democrats’ decision to join Republicans in passing a redistricting plan brought scorn from many redistricting reform activists, including some from groups that filed lawsuits against past GOP-authored redistricting maps.

“This was a bipartisan sweetheart deal. This is not what the voters wanted,” said Catherine Turcer, executive director of Common Cause Ohio, in an interview. “They wanted transparent mapmaking -- they wanted, you know, communities kept together.

They wanted to participate in meaningful elections. And they wanted you know, to end gerrymandering. ... The whole process was much different, but it doesn't mean that we actually got better maps."

Turcer said her group is still deciding whether to file suit against the redistricting commission – not only to challenge the constitutionality of the new maps, but also to assert that the commission's closed-door negotiations violated state open-meetings law.

Turcer said the main reason for the hesitation is that her group is wondering whether the time and money needed to launch such a legal challenge would be better spent working to get the proposed redistricting reform measure on the ballot next year. In addition, she said, "we don't have faith that if they (the commission) were to go back and do it again, that it would be any different than the six previous times (the commission drew maps)."

Freda Levenson, legal director for the American Civil Liberties Union of Ohio, said her group is also still deciding whether to file suit. She said ACLU of Ohio leaders will likely make a decision by early next week.