

Next round of redistricting drama to begin with new General Assembly in new year

By Robert Higgs
Cleveland.com

COLUMBUS – Ohio’s redistricting fight, like all epic battles, is ready for a sequel.

When the new Ohio General Assembly convenes in January, one task already on legislators’ agendas is to redraw the map for Ohio’s 15 congressional districts.

That’s because the current map didn’t earn bipartisan support. When the courtroom battles and political gamesmanship ended, voters were left casting ballots in districts that now must be redrawn.

Under that map, Republicans hold a 10-5 advantage in the congressional delegation. But three of the five seats Democrats hold are competitive districts.

Could Republicans who still hold the pen after redistricting reform failed again try to press their advantage? They repeatedly flouted court decisions that struck down the maps.

And in November, voters delivered a victory that could further embolden GOP mapmakers.

Voters rejected a constitutional amendment that would have stripped power from self-interested politicians and created a citizen commission to handle the task.

That defeat left redistricting in the hands of those who gerrymandering opponents say are defying Ohio law to protect their political power.

After the new General Assembly is seated in January, the battle begins anew.

The [congressional map used in 2024](#), the same map [used for the 2022 elections](#), was declared unconstitutional by the Ohio Supreme Court. By law, it must be redrawn. When [voters overwhelmingly approved a constitutional amendment on redistricting in 2018](#), the new rules mandated that without bipartisan support for a map, it could only be in effect for four years, rather than the full decade until the next decennial census.

Only Republicans voted in favor of the congressional map.

In the background, meanwhile, is a proposal from Gov. Mike DeWine, who in July said the gerrymandering issue needed to be solved once and for all. DeWine proposes using a system like Iowa, entrusting a non-partisan research arm of the General Assembly to draw the new maps. He promised voters last summer that he would pursue the Iowa plan via ballot initiative if they sided with him and rejected the reform on the November ballot.

“I’m not locked into every word that’s in the Iowa plan. But lord, it’s worked for 40 years,” he recently told statehouse reporters.

The gerrymandering fights began after the 2020 census was completed and the redistricting process commenced. Seven times the Ohio Supreme Court slapped down maps approved by Republicans for state legislative seats and congressional seats as unconstitutional.

Eventually, Democrats on the GOP-dominated Ohio Redistricting Commission joined Republicans to approve Ohio House and Senate maps, which locked state legislative districts in place until after the 2030 census.

The Ohio General Assembly, however, draws the congressional map. Republicans hold massive supermajorities in both chambers that allow them to pass legislation without Democratic support.

The General Assembly’s map for congressional districts was deemed unconstitutional for leaning too heavily in favor of Republicans. The redistricting commission passed a second, similar map [that also was unconstitutional](#).

But [Republicans effectively ran out the clock](#) before the 2022 elections, refusing the court’s order to pass a more Democratic-friendly map and forcing use of the unconstitutional map.

In 2023, litigants – including the National Democratic Redistricting Committee, the League of Women Voters of Ohio, and the A. Philip Randolph Institute of Ohio - [sought the dismissal of their cases](#). They feared Republicans could force an even more GOP-friendly map than the current one, under which Republicans hold 10 seats and Democrats hold five.

The three most competitive districts set by the unconstitutional map were all won in the last two elections by Democrats – Emilia Sykes, Marcy Kaptur and Greg Landsman in both 2022 and 2024.

A spokeswoman for the Ohio House said the process for the General Assembly to take up the new maps hasn't been laid out yet, but she expects the House will take the lead.

Matt Huffman, a Republican from Lima who now is Senate president, will be the new speaker of the Ohio House. As a member of the Ohio Redistricting Commission, Huffman took a lead role in the preparation of maps after the 2020 census.

Huffman has said he is open to ideas. That includes considering DeWine's pitch to overhaul the entire system.

"I'm always willing to sit down at the table," Huffman said recently following a Senate session.

Those pushing for reform haven't given up.

"People want fairness, they want representation," Democrat Nickie Antonio, the Senate minority leader and a member of the Redistricting Commission, said in a recent interview.

"If we have a job to do, we should do our job," she said. "We don't want a court to do our job."

Finding a solution is important, Antonio said, because many Ohioans already have given up on the system, feeling their vote doesn't count for anything because they've been disenfranchised by the gerrymandering.

"A whole bunch of people stayed home," she said of November's voter turnout. "We have a lot of work to do in our core cities."

DeWine was adamant in July that Ohio's redistricting process needed reform, threatening to push for a constitutional amendment if the legislature didn't act. But after voters defeated the ballot measure, he hedged.

"I think we need to, you know, take a deep breath and look to see how we can remove this from politics and do something that the people will have you know a lot of confidence in," he said.

Ohio League of Women Voters Executive Director Jen Miller said the Iowa plan might be a starting point for conversations, in her view, it isn't the answer.

"I hope it continues to work for Iowa," Miller said. "Iowa and Ohio are very different."

Iowa is not as diverse as Ohio, and its population, much smaller than the Buckeye State, is more evenly distributed across the state.

Ohio, though, has concentrations of people in a handful of population centers, with nearly half of its nearly 11.8 million residents living in just eight of 88 counties. About two in every five voters live in either Franklin or Cuyahoga counties.

And in Miller's view, having the legislators involved still is problematic.

"They have a lot of power, still," she said.