



March 5, 2020

Testimony on SB 967
Legislative and Congressional Districts – Criteria and Open Hearing Process (Fair Maps Act)
Education, Health, and Environmental affairs

Position: Favorable

Common Cause Maryland supports SB 967, a constitutional amendment that would require redistricting standards for Maryland’s congressional districts. This legislation would reform our broken redistricting process.

Maryland draws new congressional and legislative districts every ten years, to update the maps for population changes. The Decennial census will be taking place this year and the next set of district lines will be redrawn in 2021. District maps are supposed to reflect the ideal of “one person, one vote.” But Maryland ranks worst in the nation when it comes to the compactness of its new Congressional districts. Four of our eight districts are among the most gerrymandered in the country. The current lines divide communities, especially minority communities, reducing those communities’ influence with their elected officials and causing voters to feel manipulated by the process.

Redistricting is more than just a partisan concern. When legislative and congressional districts cut through our counties, neighborhoods, and communities, the voice of those communities is fractured too. And the accountability between our elected officials and their constituents is equally fragmented. Voters feel the elections are rigged – that elected officials are choosing their voters, not the other way around.

When politicians gerrymander, it means communities of interest (an area with recognized similarities of interest that could be racial, ethnic, economic, social, cultural, geographic, or historic identities) are divided. Additionally, voters often have little choice in who to vote for because certain parts of the community that might vote against the interest of those drawing the lines are carved out of the district. The big concern is that when we allow partisan gerrymandering to stand, that can leave room open for other types of gerrymandering to occur as well, under the guise of partisan gerrymandering.

Voting Rights Act & Protecting Communities of Interest

SB 967 would reinforce Voting Rights Act protections, and protections for communities of interest for both legislative districts and congressional districts. It would require district lines be redrawn in compliance with the U.S. Constitution and the Federal Voting Rights Act of 1965 (VRA). The VRA was initially passed to overcome legal barriers at the state and local levels that prevented Black people from exercising their right to vote under the Fifteenth Amendment of the Constitution. Since then, this Civil Rights Legislation is used as a protection

against discriminatory voting and elections policies that impact racial and language minorities. Under the SB 967, if a proposed redistricting map violates the VRA, the lines must be redrawn regardless of whether they are compact or contiguous. Although all redistricting maps already have to comply with the VRA, adding this language to the state constitution would ensure Maryland is continuing to protecting vulnerable communities.

Conclusion

It is critical that election districts conform to standards that are both politically neutral and respectful of communities of voters, rather than subdividing neighborhoods to form oddly-shaped districts. The standards proposed in SB 967 satisfy these criteria and would enact an essential piece of a comprehensive reform of Maryland's Congressional redistricting process.

Maryland is considered a leader on democracy reforms and should continue to lead by taking a meaningful step toward fixing our broken redistricting process. Passage of SB 967 would demonstrate to all Maryland citizens that their representatives respect their right to have an equal voice in our democratic process, and that they are proactive about protecting that right.

We urge a favorable report.

