

The Roadmap for Fair Maps in 2030

A Summary of the 2023 National Citizen Redistricting Commissioners Conference





#FAIRMAPS2030

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December 11 & 12, 2023
Los Angeles, CA

OVERVIEW

Common Cause has led the fight against gerrymandering nationwide. We work closely with national and in-state allies to make redistricting transparent, nonpartisan, and responsive to community needs. To achieve these goals, democracy activists have successfully pushed for the creation of independent redistricting commissions through ballot initiatives and legislation. The key components of these commissions include:

- Strong conflict of interest provisions that prohibit current and recent elected officials, candidates, or other political insiders from becoming commissioners;
- Nonpartisan redistricting criteria focused on community input that prohibits drawing districts to advantage or disadvantage a candidate or political party.
- Transparency requirements ensuring that discussions about redistricting happen in public meetings.

This reform takes the power to draw districts from legislators and gives it to ordinary Americans who will not benefit personally from the outcome. Important details between jurisdictions differ and some mandate more independence from elected officials than others. Some are entirely made up of people who are not political insiders or appointed by political insiders, while others reserve only a limited number of spots for those individuals. IRC jurisdictions can be local – school district, city, county – or state-wide.

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In December 2023, Common Cause convened the first national conference of citizen redistricting commissioners. Attendees came from 14 redistricting commissions in 10 states: Alaska, California (California's state commission, City of Long Beach, County of Los Angeles, City of Los Angeles, County of San Diego), Colorado, Indiana, Michigan, New Jersey, New Mexico, Ohio, Texas (City of

Austin), and Utah. In addition, advocates of independent redistricting from Arizona, Massachusetts, Minnesota, Nebraska, New York, Nevada, and Oregon also participated.

We all came together as experts and learners. The conversations were rich. We all acknowledged that this was just the beginning of the Road to Fair Maps & Representation in 2030. Though advocates, academics, and others were invited to participate, this report is drafted from the perspective of the redistricting commissioners in attendance.

Thank you to the sponsors of this Common Cause conference:



First-ever Convening of Redistricting Commissioners: Why Now?

More states are adopting a commission process as an alternative to the bare-knuckled, partisan political redistricting process led by legislatures. These include (a) independent citizen-led commissions - California and Michigan; (b) political/partisan citizen commissions chosen partially or wholly by elected officials - Alaska, Arizona, Colorado, Idaho, Washington, and Montana; (c) advisory commissions - Maine, Maryland, New Mexico, New York, Rhode Island, and Utah; (d) hybrid politician/citizen commissions - Virginia; and (e) political commissions - Ohio, Connecticut, Hawaii, Missouri, and Pennsylvania. Reform advocates also organized model commissions in Indiana and Ohio to demonstrate how an alternative process based on community input and transparency can work. Members of all forms of commissions were invited to the conference to allow for more cross-pollination in learning. However, we only extended an invitation to commissioners who were not elected officials.

Reducing Barriers for Commissioners' Conference Participation

Common Cause is committed to reducing the barriers to participation for national commissioners. Redistricting commissions are bound by public transparency laws. Though these public engagement rules are unique, we addressed some of the more common traits by:

- Opening registration to the public;
- Making accessible to the public via virtual technology all presentations in the general session in real-time (the recordings can be found [here](#));
- Inviting only non-commissioners to be presenters; and
- Creating agreements that no more than two members of the same commission would participate in the same breakout groups.

None of the commissioners who attended the conference were compensated for their time by their commission or Common Cause. The convening was hosted in Los Angeles, California because most commissions are in California. When appropriate, Common Cause provided travel stipends for commissioners traveling from outside of California. This effort to reduce barriers resulted in representation from 14 commissions in 10 states.

A REDISTRICTING COMMISSION'S RECIPE FOR SUCCESS

Unsurprisingly, all those who attended the conference believed in the possibilities of fair and representative maps and that independent redistricting commissions were the best strategy to achieve this goal. The participants also agreed that there was no one-size-fits-all model. Instead, each jurisdiction should adopt the best practices and lessons learned to their reality. Additional areas of consensus that were discussed throughout the day included:

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- The Voting Rights Act is critical for drawing fair maps, and thus, it needs to be preserved in the pursuit of fair maps. This includes the reestablishment of Section 5 preclearance to ensure that jurisdictions with a history of racial discrimination must have their maps approved by the United States Department of Justice or a federal court. It also includes protection of Section 2, which delineates when map drawers must draw districts that ensure communities of color can elect their candidates of choice.
- Commissioners should be fairly compensated with stipends/salary and benefits for their time.
- The redistricting process and encouraging residents to apply to serve on commissions should be part of Census efforts.
- The redistricting process should begin as early as is feasible, allowing more time to recruit and select commissioners who reflect the jurisdiction they will serve, train and team-build commissioners, and educate, prepare, and engage community-based organizations and the public.
- Efforts must be made to ensure that commissions reflect the diversity of the jurisdiction.
- Community-based organizations and community leaders are critical to building trust, engaging all voices, and informing and holding commissions accountable throughout the process.

The specific practices and policies that commissioners believed resulted in fair maps in 2020 fell under three categories:

1. Independence & Transparency
2. Reflection & Engagement of the Jurisdiction's Diversity
3. Accessibility

Independence & Transparency

Commissioners agreed that commissions must be independent of politicians and political parties, meaning:

- Legislatures do not appoint commissioners and do not have a role in the mapping process.
- Commissions have sufficient and independent budgets for the entire redistricting process (from recruitment to the defense of challenged maps).
- Full transparency, as a guiding principle and requirement throughout the entire process, including public access to all commissioner candidate applications, accepting public input about communities of interest and in response to map drafts, as well as requiring that all conversations about maps with outside stakeholders take place in public meetings.
- Commission decisions on maps should be final, except for judicial review, with no approval from elected officials required.

Reflect & Engage the Diversity of the Jurisdiction: All participants agreed that commissions must reflect the diversity of their constituents with lived and/or learned experience. Though it is important to have partisan representation, many shared that it was more critical that commissions reflect the intersections of the geographical, socio-economic, ethnic, racial, and cultural diversity of the jurisdictions they will serve.

Commissions must “marry demographics, ethnic/racial representation, and political party diversity.”

For this reason, there were discussions about the barriers to participation that need to be addressed. Attendees agreed that commissioners should be fairly compensated for their time and allowed to participate virtually, especially during non-mapping phases. Participants did not agree on a precise number of commissioners but did agree that the number should depend on the population size and the region’s diversity. Regardless of the number of members, all participants agreed that the number of commissioners or voting requirements must protect against deadlock.

Accessibility: There was also agreement that if all voices were to be heard in the redistricting process, then a commission had to create a culture of belonging, including being:

- Intentional with language, by ensuring that commissions communicated using clear, non-academic English, as well as translating and interpreting information for non-English speakers and those with disabilities;
- Flexible by hosting meetings and public hearings at different times and days, allowing people with various work and family schedules to participate;
- Innovative in their use of technology and other tools (including phone, video, and paper) to ensure that language, physical ability, educational level, access to the internet, culture, and technology are not barriers; and
- Clear on the rules and norms of participation.

BUILDING TOWARD FAIR MAPS 2030

Several strategies were discussed to increase fair representation in 2030. These included:

1. Support Redistricting Efforts

State	Status of Effort (as of April 25, 2024)	Contact
Arizona	The Arizona State Legislature is considering referral of an unconstitutional and discriminatory measure to the 2024 ballot that would create a state-funded census that would run at the same time as the federal census and count how many U.S. citizens live in the state and make that number the population basis for state legislative districts. Join our effort to oppose this measure.	Jenny Guzman, jguzman@commoncause.org
Minnesota	A coalition of organizations representing communities of color are attempting to place a constitutional amendment on the 2024 ballot to empower an independent redistricting commission to draw congressional and state legislative districts.	Annastacia Belladonna-Carrera, abelladonna@commoncause.org
Nebraska	Reformers are beginning to discuss an effort to put a citizen-initiated constitutional amendment on the 2026 ballot to create an independent redistricting commission.	Gavin Geis, ggeis@commoncause.org
New Mexico	In early February 2023, a joint resolution was introduced in the state legislature to increase the independence of their citizen redistricting commission.	Molly Swank, mswank@commoncause.org
Ohio	The Citizens Not Politicians coalition is collecting signatures for a constitutional amendment to establish a fully independent redistricting commission for the November 2024 ballot.	Catherine Turcer, cturcer@commoncause.org
Oregon	The People Not Politicians coalition is currently examining options for a 2026 ballot initiative to implement an independent redistricting commission.	Kate Titus, ktitus@commoncause.org
Pennsylvania	In April 2024, bipartisan state legislators introduced a bill to amend the state's constitution and establish an independent redistricting commission.	Philip Hensley-Robin, phensleyrobin@commoncause.org

State	Status of Effort (as of April 25, 2024)	Contact
Wisconsin	New state legislative maps passed following a Wisconsin Supreme Court decision striking down the previous gerrymander are breathing new life into an effort to reform how redistricting is conducted.	Jay Heck, jheck@commoncause.org
City of Los Angeles	In November 2023, the Los Angeles City Council approved a plan to put an independent redistricting commission on the ballot in November 2024.	Russia Chavis Cardenas, rchavis@commoncause.org
City of San Francisco	A coalition group is currently working to put forward a charter amendment to create an independent redistricting commission for the city's supervisorial districts.	Russia Chavis Cardenas, rchavis@commoncause.org

2. Improving Data

Commissions use different sources and types of data for drawing maps, including:

- **Reapportionment** numbers mandating the number of U.S. House districts each state will receive;
- **Census** data, which was released about five months late this cycle because of the pandemic;
- **Voter participation** data to determine Voting Rights Act districts;
- **Communities of Interest** and **public input**, which are collected throughout the process; and
- **Other public data sources**

Census: Commissioners agreed that all states should have a centralized, trusted, and safe source for Census and voter data. Other recommendations included:

- Improving the collection of Census data by hiring trusted leaders and community-based organizations to encourage participation;
- Disaggregating data to identify patterns among population subgroups, including Middle Eastern, African, Asian and Pacific Islander communities, LGBTQ+, and other groups.
- Weaving messaging about redistricting into census outreach.

Voter Participation Data: The *Gingles* test, created by the United States Supreme Court in a 1986 opinion, determines when commissioners and other map drawers are required to draw a district in which one or more communities of color can elect their candidate of choice. The *Gingles* prongs require (1) a demonstration that a community is sufficiently populous and geographically compact to constitute a majority of a reasonably configured district's population, (2) that the community tends to vote similarly, and (3) that the majority population tends to vote in a bloc to defeat the minority community's preferred candidates. Other historical, social, and political analyses that

encompass the totality of the circumstances must be conducted as well, but these requirements must be met first.

Determining whether a community meets these threshold requirements demands accurate data. One obvious challenge is the secret ballot in which race and ethnicity cannot be matched to individual votes. As a result, map drawers rely on experts who build statistical models. These models use demographic data from the Census Bureau and election data, showing results and turnout to infer likely election outcomes in a hypothetical district. Because data quality on elections can vary widely, commissioners discussed ways to ensure models are as accurate as possible. They identified the following approaches to obtaining accurate data:

- Encouraging social science innovation to develop emerging data analysis techniques such as Bayesian Improved Surname Geocoding and others to improve data on race and ethnicity;
- Reallocating mail votes to precincts; and
- Encouraging election officials to provide election data that includes underlying shape files for each election and that corresponds to census data.

Public Input: The delay in the Census this cycle created time to focus on hearing directly from the public about how they defined their communities. The public input from this pre-Census phase, often called Communities of Interest (COIs), tend to be nonpartisan. For this reason, commissions are encouraged to begin this pre-Census COI collection phase before the line-drawing period.

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Commissioners stated that commissions should continue to be innovative in reaching and engaging the public. For instance, because of the pandemic, many hearings could be conducted online. This saved money, allowed more direct public participation, and lowered the participation barrier for commissioners. Conference participants encouraged this hybrid practice to continue in some form in 2030.

In 2020, “Commissioners throughout the US were creative about how to overcome winter freeze and COVID restrictions.”

Other Public Data Sources: It is important to note that communities self-identify in broader terms than the data that the Census Bureau collects and thus, other public data sources could be helpful in creating fair maps. Though COIs and other public input provide some of this information,

many communities are under-represented politically and under-counted by the Census, which oftentimes leads them to not participate in redistricting. In addition, IRCs receive conflicting and overlapping information from the public. **Examples of data that can help inform IRC’s understanding of the diversity of the communities in their jurisdiction can include data from state departments of education, corrections, labor, housing, and others.**

Technology as a Tool

Participants agreed that technology is and will continue to be an essential tool for drawing fair maps efficiently and that technology cannot replace human decisionmaking. Because drawing fair maps is an art and not a science, it is critical that diverse individuals listen to the public and assess all the data to connect faces and stories to the numbers.

The tools for mapping were significantly improved in 2020 compared to 2010. The pandemic sparked public engagement and transparency innovations during 2020’s redistricting cycle. Unfortunately, many commissions needed to build the plane as they flew, meaning they had to identify and create tools, including data platforms, while learning their new roles.

The predominant focus for many 2020 commissions was collecting public input. The incredible amount of diverse public input throughout the redistricting process was a blessing and a challenge. The challenge for commissioners was how to use this data to “listen” to the public. More specifically, commissioners had to determine how to store the data so they could efficiently and effectively analyze, summarize, and find patterns amid competing communities of interest.

In 2030, technology will be able to help commissions translate and interpret in real-time, build better aggregate models, help visualize public input, and identify the voices that have not yet been heard. It can also assist commissions in distinguishing authentic community voices from those that have been artificially generated for partisan purposes. For example, some jurisdictions used heat maps showing where on a jurisdiction-wide map residents used certain terms more frequently to describe their communities. This is just one way to aggregate community testimony in a visual that is easy to understand.

Keep technology simple – the audience or users are the public, not academics or advocates.

Participants acknowledged that technology, especially artificial intelligence (AI), poses a threat *and* presents opportunities for fair maps in 2030. Commissions will need to build guardrails to mediate the threats of AI-generated input such as fake written testimony or maps generated by partisan actors but made to look community-focused. Though AI can generate data, its strength is analyzing data. Thus, creating tools that will assist commissions in using AI to analyze public input and other data much more efficiently and effectively while drawing fair maps will be essential.

Technology is a tool to simplify processes, thus enabling more of the public to participate in redistricting as commissioners, advocates, and communities of interest.

ROAD MAP TO FAIR MAPS 2030

Though 2020 redistricting is closer in our rear-view mirrors than 2030 redistricting is ahead of us, it is not too soon to begin preparing for Fair Maps 2030. For this reason, Common Cause recommends engaging redistricting commissioners and others who participated in the 2020 redistricting in our journey toward fair maps 2030. These opportunities include but are not limited to:

Support New IRC Efforts. The grid above highlights some of the efforts to support fair, transparent, nonpartisan, and equitable efforts. These efforts welcome technical assistance, funding, and communication with local media, legislators, and organizations representing impacted communities. Commissioners play an invaluable role in demystifying how commissions function and reassuring a cynical public that conflict of interest restrictions can generate a commission populated by good faith actors trying to fairly balance many community interests. Commissioners were almost uniformly enthusiastic about advocacy in support of reform across the country.

Improve Census Outreach and Engagement. Substantial public and private investments and efforts were allocated to ensure an accurate Census count in many states. Because Census outreach efforts are significant, participants strongly advocate that messaging regarding the significance of redistricting be included in these campaigns. In addition, because Census data is critical for drawing fair maps, it is vital to implement necessary changes to the Census to ensure that the data collected in 2030 reflects how population subgroups self-identify. With more detailed Census data, IRCs will be able to make more informed decisions.

Design Artificial Intelligence & Other Technology Redistricting Tools. Technology innovators need incentives to focus on the potential of artificial intelligence (AI) and other technology to do the public good and not just to make money. Commissions will need tools for every phase of redistricting. Before the 2030 redistricting cycle begins, tools must be designed to allow the public to contribute to fair maps and allow commissions to collect, store, identify patterns, and analyze the data to ensure that they better “listen” to the public.

To combat efforts to disrupt this democratic process, commissions must ensure that public engagement is authentic. The creation of AI guardrails must be carefully constructed now with advocates to ensure they do not unintentionally become barriers to civic participation.

Mapping technology will need to improve to process diverse data overlays quickly, including communities of interest, to assess the trade-offs in various mapping options and capture and share prior decisions made during the line-drawing process. It will be critical that public mapping tools be easy to use and mobile device friendly and that public input be shareable among the different redistricting jurisdictions in the same state.

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Create 2030 Redistricting Training. Redistricting only happens once every ten years. In a decade, a lot of expertise can be lost. For this reason, we recommend creating virtual trainings involving those with 2020 experience that can be used in 2030. Participants specifically recommended creating training before the mapping phase for commissioners on how to assess data, including how to:

- Weigh public input from organizations, groups, and individuals;
- Assess the quality of the data and how to include data from a variety of sources;
- Authenticate where and who data is coming from;
- “Wade through” political and partisan input; and
- Include input from throughout the process to ensure that the last input or loudest voices do not get priority.

Advocate for Accessible State Data. Data critical for drawing fair maps includes, but is not limited to, a state’s Census, election, precinct, voter files, municipal boundaries, or voter turnout data by demographics. All states should make this data public and easily accessible.

Build Consensus on Additional Data Sources. There needs to be agreement from commissions, advocates, government, and others on the additional data sources that can be used along with Census, public input/communities of interest, and voter data. The collection and preparation of the data must take place before the arrival of Census data to allow enough time to create map overlays that can be used during the drawing of the maps.

For this reason, it is critical for 2030 fair maps to build consensus with advocates and practitioners on what credible, public, vetted data sources can be used to inform IRCs. Examples of data that could be helpful include but are not limited to:

- Socio-economic;
- Labor & economic engines;
- Rural populations;
- Internet access;
- Geographic;
- Transportation routes;
- Educational success and attainment; and
- Incarcerated individuals in federal and state facilities and their last known home addresses.

Build the Talent Pipeline. As more states and localities adopt redistricting commissions, building and diversifying the pipeline of individuals with redistricting expertise is critical to support the commissioners’ work. More specifically, there is a need for additional experts and consultants to assist commissions with the nuances of redistricting, including on federal and state law, the application of specific mapping criteria, and litigation; outreach; line drawing; and data intake, storage, and analysis. For instance, a commissioner noted that we need “VRA lawyers who have

experience affirmatively drawing maps, not just doing remedial cases.” Finally, there was agreement by participants that it would be helpful if future experts were local and understood the communities the commissions serve. Limiting redistricting expertise to a small number of people risks professionalizing mapping and moving away from the citizen-led process that advocates intended to create through commissions.

CONCLUSION

The first-ever national gathering of citizen redistricting commissioners facilitated a fascinating exchange of ideas and renewed commitment to the implementation of citizen-led independent redistricting across the country. Drawing voting districts that balance the interests of many different communities in a transparent and nonpartisan way requires hard work and commitment but is essential to a properly functioning democracy. It has proven to be one of the most effective government reforms in the country’s history.

Redistricting Commissions Represented:

Austin Independent Redistricting Commission (Texas)

California:

California Citizen Redistricting Commission

City of Los Angeles Redistricting Commission

Long Beach Independent Redistricting Commission

Los Angeles County Independent Redistricting Commission

San Diego County Independent Redistricting Commission

Colorado Independent Redistricting Commission

Indiana Citizens Redistricting Commission

Michigan Independent Citizens Redistricting Commission

New Jersey Redistricting Commission

New Mexico Citizens Redistricting Committee

Ohio Citizens Redistricting Commission

Utah Independent Redistricting Commission

We appreciate the expertise our conference speakers and facilitators shared:

Sarah Andre, Common Cause

Will Brodt, Common Cause

Daniel Candia, Volunteer, Common Cause

Russia Chavis Cardenas, California Common Cause

Kate Donovan, Redistricting Hub

Andrew Drechsler, Haystaq DNA

Moon Duchin, MGGG Redistricting Lab

Jon Eguia, Michigan State University

Kathay Feng, Common Cause

Lloyd Feng, Coalition of Asian American Children & Families (New York)

Ariana Marmolejo, Common Cause

Sandra Mitrovich, National Congress of American Indians

Alejandra Ponce de Leon, Catalyst California
Katie Scally, Common Cause
Patricia Sinay, Fellow, Common Cause
Andrew Strong, Office Equity & Racial Justice, County of San Diego
Gabriel, Sundaramoorthy, Volunteer, Common Cause
Alvin Valverde, Common Cause
Dan Vicuña, Common Cause
Alton Wang, Common Cause
Katie Wright, Better Boundaries Utah

Thank you to the conference sponsors:



This report is dedicated to the memory of Kenneth Campbell, a gifted filmmaker who interviewed commissioners about their experiences as part of our conference. The entire Common Cause family will sorely miss him and his commitment to telling the story of our democracy.



**Common
Cause**

805 15th Street, NW, Suite 800
Washington, DC 20005
202.833.1200
commoncause.org