

Commentary: Issue 1 is the cure for Ohio's lopsided election districts

*By Former Ohio Governors Bob Taft & Ted Strickland } The Dispatch
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Compromise is critical in a diverse democracy. But because of a highly polarized system fueled by partisan gerrymandering, compromise has become a dirty word to some.

As former Ohio governors, we know how important compromise is, especially in a state with a diverse population and many different perspectives. Throughout our lives of public service, we have both worked across the aisle to do what we believed was right for our great state.

However, in the United States Congress today, there's almost no incentive to compromise. In fact, partisan gerrymandering discourages cooperation and breeds polarization. This is because congressional map drawers can concentrate voters by party affiliation into different districts — conservative voters are drawn into safe Republican districts, and progressive voters into safe Democratic districts. In some cases, it can be a political liability to work across the aisle and compromise. As a result, our politics are becoming bitter and dysfunctional.

Ohio's current congressional districts, which are an example of unhealthy gerrymandering, are a black eye for our state. We must be leaders in fixing this fundamental problem in our democracy. Thanks to the work of some dedicated citizen activists and a bipartisan group of legislative leaders, Ohioans will have a chance to do just that on May 8th.

The redistricting-reform plan, which will be Issue 1 on the May ballot, requires a bipartisan process for drawing congressional maps. It provides lawmakers three different paths to achieve bipartisan maps and includes some important limitations to guard against future gerrymandering. This should prevent, for example, a swing state like Ohio from having an overwhelming majority of its congressional districts drawn for one party. It also prohibits counties from being unduly split, which also greatly limits how a map can be drawn for a partisan advantage.

As a further check on these limitations, the process also includes the opportunity for a governor to veto and for a citizen referendum on the map itself. In a divided government, the veto will be an important safety valve. And in a state government controlled by one party, the citizen referendum provides one final check on the process.

Issue 1 creates strong incentives for the parties to compromise and it guards against unchecked, one-sided partisan gerrymandering. And in doing so, it will fix one of the biggest problems plaguing our politics.

We both give tremendous credit to the citizens' groups in Ohio who formed the Fair Districts = Fair Elections coalition after years of frustration with the current mapmaking process. Their efforts to push for a ballot initiative establishing a bipartisan redistricting commission sparked action among Ohio's elected leaders.

While we are from opposing parties, we are both enthusiastically supporting State Issue 1 this spring. Its passage will mean positive change for our communities, our state and our country. We urge Ohioans to stand with us and vote YES on Issue 1 on May 8th.

Republican Bob Taft was governor of Ohio from 1999 to 2007. Democrat Ted Strickland succeeded Taft and was governor to 2011.