

Testimony to PA Legislative Reapportionment Commission
7/31/2021

Hello, my name is Janice Eastbourn-Bloom. I live on a farm about 3 miles north of Ebensburg in Cambria County in Pa. house district #72, senate district #35 and U.S. congressional district #15. I have lived and voted here for about 30 years.

I am co-chair of the Cambria County group of Fair Districts, PA. Some years ago, during a presentation, sponsored by AAUW, I learned that the problem of gerrymandering, which I had read about in 7th grade, was not only continuing to be a problem but has grown exponentially as a result of computer algorithms that mine voter data. And that it continues to create a climate of politics first with the needs of the people way down the line.

Free and fair elections are the basis of democracy, it seems that fair elections are not happening now and this what we at Fair Districts are dedicated to and will not give up on.

In 2016 our US congressional house district (the original district 12 in Figure 1 in my written testimony) stretched from Cambria County the whole way to the Ohio border. Many of us felt that our congressional representative was more concerned about issues in his home area just north of Pittsburgh than in our rural area. In 2018, that district became more compact only after action by the PA Supreme Court.

Congressional districts – the original 2011 districts

The legislature's original 2011 Congressional districts were thrown out in 2018 by the PA Supreme Court as unconstitutional.

There were 4 originally districts in SW PA:

District 3 – Armstrong, Butler, Mercer (whole) + parts of Clarion, Crawford, Erie, Lawrence

District 9 – Bedford, Blair, Fayette, Franklin, Fulton, Indiana (whole) + Parts of Cambria, Greene, Huntingdon, Somerset, Washington, and Westmoreland

District 12 – Beaver (whole) + parts of Allegheny, Cambria, Lawrence, Somerset, and Westmoreland

District 18 – Parts of Allegheny, Greene, Washington, and Westmoreland

There were 11 split counties in SW PA alone.

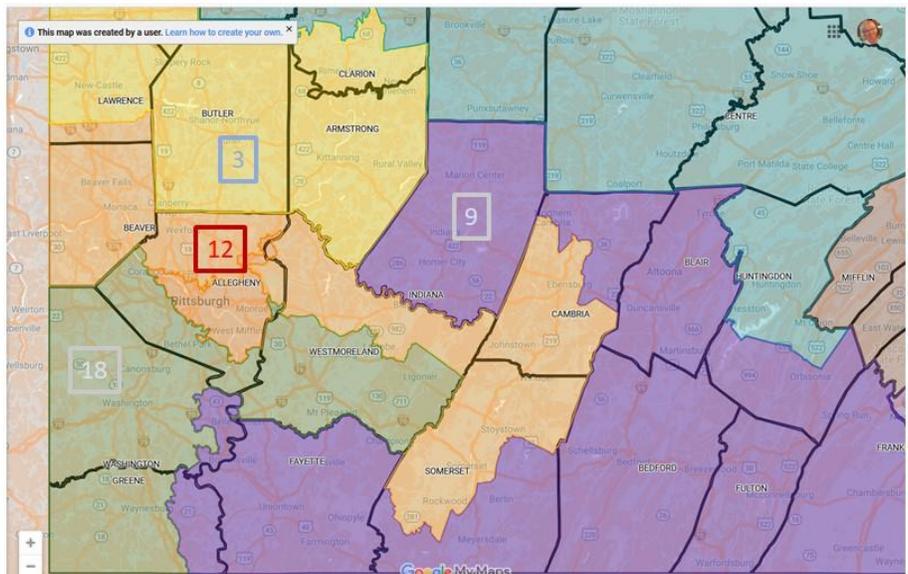


Figure 1. The original congressional districts in and around Cambria County.

But court ordered redistricting only applied to congressional districts. Our state house and senate districts remain, and these were drawn with winding twisty lines. most likely meant to isolate political groups instead of encompassing populations with common identities or values such as farming communities or urban population centers. If you look at Figure 2 in my written testimony, you'll see what I mean.

PA State House District 72's Winding Twisty Lines

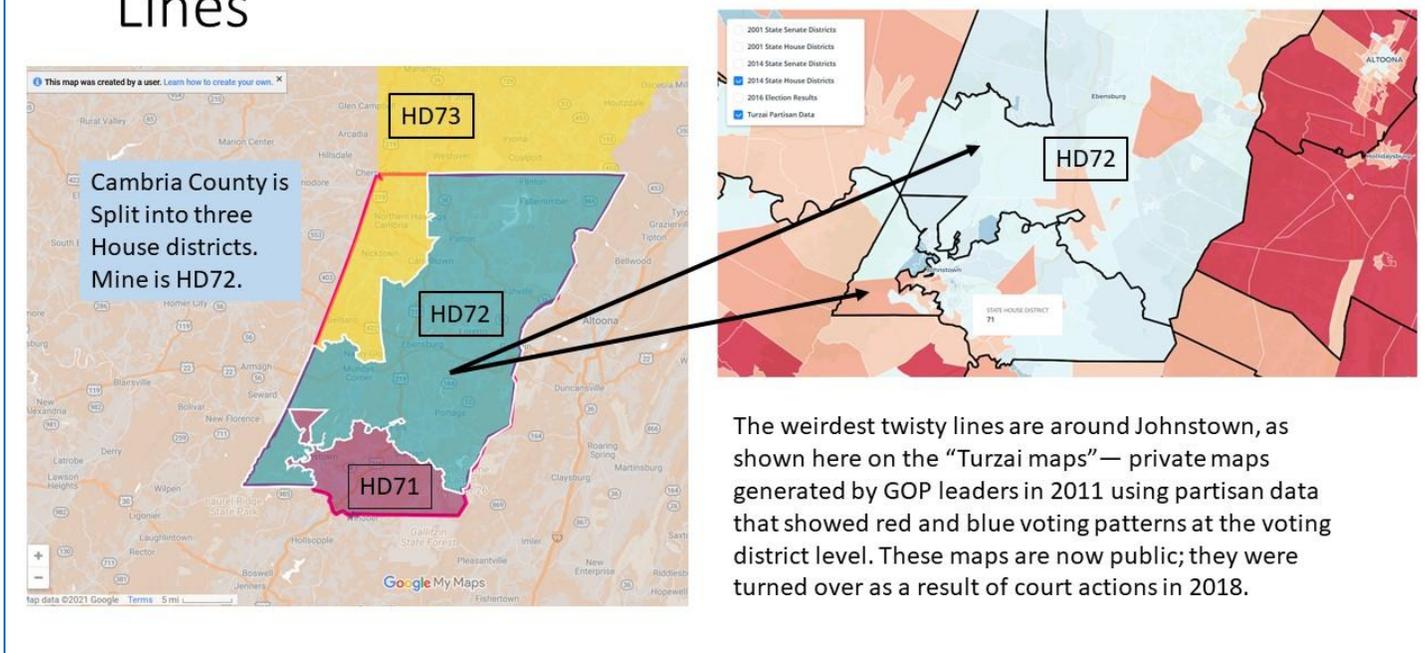


Figure 2. PA House District 72's Winding Twisty Lines and the “Turzai Maps”

We live in a changing world where our governments, both national and state, need to address climate change, education, health care, jobs, and a variety of other issues. These need to be addressed using science, data, and shared values; not according to some ideological purity test designed to get reelected.

What I want is for our elected representatives to act, not as Democrats or Republicans, but as Americans and Pennsylvanians; to allow our state voting districts to be drawn in a fair manner that reflects our communities, interests and shared values.

A very important concern in our farming area is extreme weather patterns. Farmers who have been in the business for forty to fifty years have told me that they had not seen a wet year like 2019 or a dry one like 2020 in all the decades that they had farmed. It would help if our government could get behind farmers and support the installation of solar panels on the roofs of agricultural buildings or on unused land, as proposed in the widely-cosponsored, bipartisan bill, Community Solar Legislation (SB472/HB1555).¹ This bill, which is still sitting in committee, would provide farmers the opportunity to lease roofs or unused land to community solar cooperatives. This extra income would help stabilize farm income in this increasingly erratic climate. Other legislation (like SB501/HB1080 which would increase the Alternative Energy Portfolio Standards)² would create incentives for farmers and other landowners to install their own solar arrays which would help them lower their energy bills, generate some extra income by selling SRECs and help decrease the threat of our extreme weather patterns. Our elected officials have to pull together to make this kind of infrastructure a reality and that is very difficult to do with hyper-partisan government. Unfair voting districts reduce the need for compromise across the aisle, leaving even strongly supported bills like these to often die in committee.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today. I applaud your efforts to make this process transparent and fair.

¹Described here: <https://www.solarpowerworldonline.com/2021/03/pennsylvania-senate-considers-bipartisan-community-solar-legislation/>

²Described here: <https://technical.ly/philly/2021/04/15/pennsylvania-solar-jobs/>