

Testimony of John Hartwell
Democracy for America – Fairfield County
Before the Reapportionment Committee
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My name is John Hartwell, from Westport, and I've been directly involved in Connecticut politics since 2003 as a candidate for public office, grass roots organizer, and staff on both federal and state campaigns. Thank you for this opportunity to talk about one of the most important building blocks of our democratic culture – fair and equitable political districts which promote citizen participation.

I would like to address three issues that I see as crucial as you look at redistricting:

- Incumbent protection
- Cohesive districts
- Artificial counts

It's no secret that the redistricting process is biased toward protecting incumbents of both parties. The bi-partisan nature of the commission, coupled with the super majority needed to pass the final agreement, gives both parties a guaranteed seat at the table. Neither side can disenfranchise the other.

Normally this would be a good thing, and I'm certainly not advocating one party rule, but the incentive for each side then becomes simply protecting what you already have. In the back office both parties have staffers at work putting various scenarios through geo-coded software, looking for small improvements at the margins.

What is good for the parties is not necessarily good for our democracy, which works best when ideas (and the people behind them) are tested again and again at the polls. "Safe" districts avoid this competition, returning the same people year after year whose only fight was years ago in a party caucus or a (god forbid) a primary. In far too many districts the major party nomination is tantamount to election. The result is that when people get to Hartford they don't know how to work with the other side and have little incentive to do so, and the electorate as a whole sees the charade and simply switches the channel.

We need competitive districts, not safe seats.

My second issue is the crazy patchwork that many districts represent. Government is a process of building consensus around choices, often difficult choices, and this is best done in a social setting where people who know each other, who have lived and worked together, actually sit down and talk things through.

But many of the districts ignore natural political lines, cutting towns into multiple pieces. Take New Canaan, for instance. A town of fewer than 20,000 has two

different state senators and two different state representatives, and because of different overlaps, each of the three voting districts has a unique combination of senator and rep. How is the average voter supposed to keep this straight? Who represents the town?

There are many examples of this in Fairfield County. Most of Weston is in the 28th state senate district, but a tiny sliver is in the 26th. Wilton shares one rep with New Canaan and another with Norwalk, when the town is perfectly sized for one rep who would serve the entire town. Redding shares a school district with Easton, but also shares a state rep with Bethel.

As a side note, I'm very concerned that splitting up towns will become more prevalent, rather than less, as an unintended consequence of the Citizens Election Program, which I enthusiastically support and for which I qualified in both 2008 and 2010. As you know, one of the criteria for public funding is the number of contributors from the towns in your district. Give a politician a small slice of a town enables him or her to fundraise from the entire town to meet the goal, making it much easier to qualify. The incentive then is to break towns up rather than hold them together, to make political representation more confusing and splintered.

We need districts that make sense, that follow natural geographic and political boundaries that people can relate to.

Finally, there's the issue of artificial counts. The U.S. census counts prisoners where they are incarcerated, not where they lived before going to jail. By definition, no one in jail is living there because they want to, and few if any will stay in that town once released. They are temporarily away from their communities, but their legitimate political interests reside with their family and friends. Our current system disenfranchises not only the convict but also the community they come from, and artificially boosts the political power of the town that hosts the prison.

For redistricting purposes prisoners in state prison should be counted where they came from, not where they're locked up.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak about these concerns. You're doing important work that will set the framework for the next ten years, and I wish that more people were paying attention.