

**Oral Testimony for Public Hearing, PA House State Government Committee
Allegheny Regional Public Hearing, August 25, 2021, Bridgeville, PA**

My name is Connie Hester. I am a longtime Republican. I have lived in Shaler for almost 40 years.

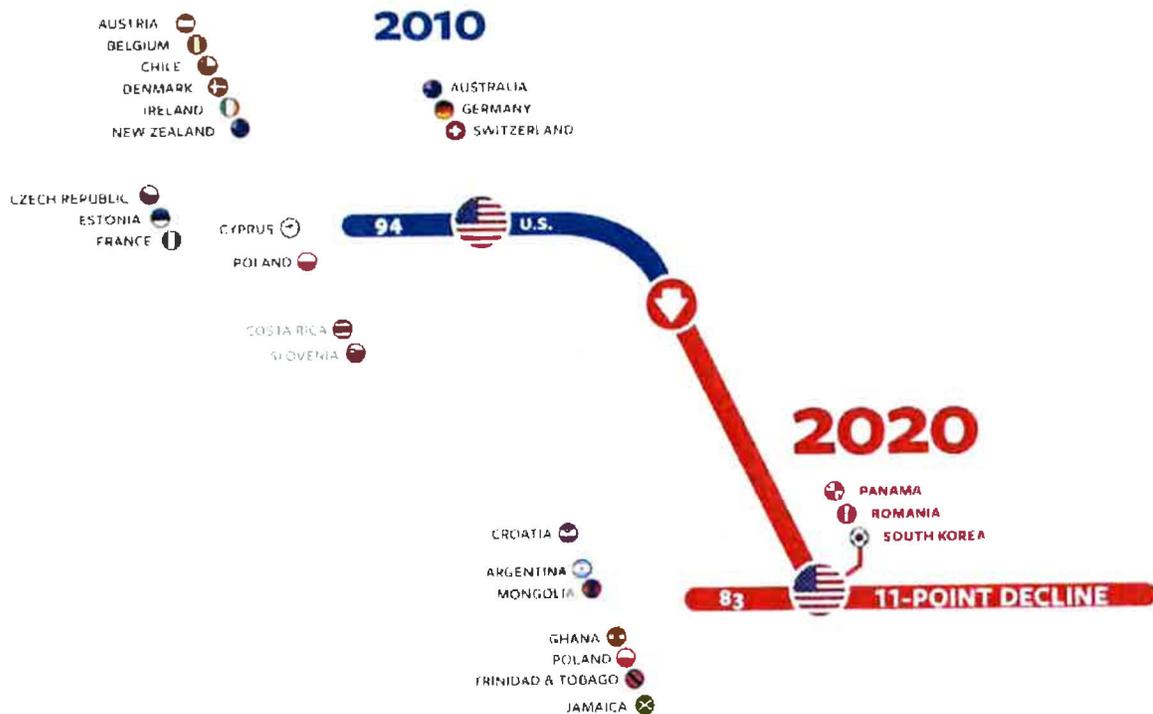
1. I value democracy most. I value freedom, democracy, fiscal responsibility and family. Of all the things my Republican father did in his 90+ years, he was most proud of defending democracy, when it mattered most, in WWII.

2. In 1941, Freedom House formed as a bipartisan organization to monitor democracies around the world. Co-chairs, Republican Wendell Willkie and Democrat Eleanor Roosevelt, combined voices to bring Americans together around democracy, freedom, patriotism and service to our country. Americans sacrificed for the common good. One for all and all for one. We were a tight society then and for decades. Majority and Minority leaders spoke well of each other. They collaborated to create solutions and invest in our country. Our economy grew, everyone benefited. We were a beacon of light. We were the envy of the world.

Freedom House remains a highly respected organization. My heart sank when reading their recent report on America's Political Rights and civil liberties. Our rating plummeted from a top tier rating of 94 in 2010 to just 83 today. Our democracy weakened. Our new peers are Romania and Panama. Like us, Poland slid from the top further to 81. With a short history of democracy, many believe democracy is twilighting in Poland. Is this our future?

The United States' New Peers

After declining by 11 points over the last decade, the US (94 to 83) has lost its top tier status and is now in the middle tier. The US is now in the middle tier, alongside countries like Romania and Panama.



Freedom House is a non-profit organization that promotes democracy and human rights. It is a leading authority on the state of democracy around the world. Freedom House's annual report, 'Freedom in the World', is a key source of information on the state of democracy in over 160 countries.

We all feel this decline. Today, it is not one for all, it is tribe against tribe. Republicans vs. Democrats. We undo and block rather than improve. It is causing stagnation, frustration, increasing anger and increasing violence. We must stop the decline and reverse course. Ending gerrymandering is one of Freedom House's: top 3 recommendations to do that.

Franklin and Marshall regularly polls people across PA and the political spectrum to reveal how we feel. A recent poll on democracy gives me hope we can avoid the fate of Poland.

3. Good News: Asked how much we agree with key ideals of democracy – 7.1 out of 10. Republicans and Democrats, alike, believe in the ideals of democracy.

4. Bad News: Asked how well our democracy is working in practice – 2.4 out of 10. Republicans and Democrats agree again. Our government of, by and for the people is failing to deliver for us.

Another Franklin and Marshall poll reveals 67% of Pennsylvanians want redistricting reform. There seems to be a sweet spot in Pennsylvania, where 60-80% of Republicans and Democrats think alike. A lot more of us think alike than we are led to believe, but it's true.

To both strengthen our democracy and do what Pennsylvanians want, end gerrymandering. Specifically,

1. Our maps today have evolved over centuries, manipulated by both parties and courts. Start over fresh with a blank map.
2. Ensure votes have equal value by
 - Ignoring political data for drafts, only use it to rule out partisan bias
 - Ensuring minority voices have proportional influence by not overly packing or cracking them, and
 - Counting prisoners where they are from.
3. Try to avoid a veto or challenge in court by sharing drafts with the public and giving us a few weeks to comment before the maps are finalized. Let us help you hit the sweet spot.

Ending gerrymandering will ensure democracy flows to legislatures.

Drawing our districts means you are deciding if our children and grandchildren will enjoy political rights and civil liberties or NOT. To me "political rights" means democracy; "civil liberties" means freedom. Deciding if we will enjoy democracy and freedom is a great responsibility. We are counting on you.

Democracy must also flow through our legislatures to make democracy work in practice. We must include the best ideas of both parties to hit that sweet spot consistently with legislation. Amend rules, if needed, to ensure Democracy flows in our state house. The new House PA One Caucus is a spark of light. I hope it catches fire.

A working democracy will make our state thrive, keep our young Pennsylvanians and attract even more. In a decade we will no longer be 49th out of 50 states for growth of population aged 18-25 as the early census shows today.

The burden of redistricting and election reform is great. I want to thank each of you for your service to us. Special thanks to Chairman Grove for his steady leadership in these turbulent times concerning elections. Scheduling hearings, soliciting ideas, and sharing with the public was an excellent information gathering process. A model for committees. I am glad Gov. Wolf has softened his tone. Many items in the election reform bill hit that sweet spot according to yet another Franklin and Marshall poll.

Thank you to our veterans who risk their lives to defend our freedom and democracy. Thank you to all who value them more than any issue or party. Thank you to the more than 70% of Pennsylvanians who hold these ideals in their hearts.

Thank you for this opportunity to share my family values as applied to redistricting.

References:

Freedom House:

- Democracy USA : [From Crisis to Reform: A Call to Strengthen America's Battered Democracy | Freedom House](#);

Franklin and Marshall:

- Democracy PA : [Franklin & Marshall College Poll: Democracy & Party Factions | Revue \(getrevue.co\)](#) ;
- Elections : [Franklin & Marshall Poll Release: June 2021 | Revue \(getrevue.co\)](#)
- Redistricting : [Survey of PA Voter Sentiment September 2019 FINAL \(fairdistrictspa.com\)](#)