

**Written Testimony for PA House State Government Committee
Southwest Regional Public Hearing, August 26, 2021, Uniontown, PA**

My name's Karen Calhoun, and I've lived 26 years of my life in different parts of Pennsylvania. I went to college and started my family in rural central PA; worked and went to graduate school in Philadelphia; and I spent the last part of my career as an academic librarian at the University of Pittsburgh, while living in suburban Westmoreland County. I'm now a retired grandmother, living with my husband on Laurel Mountain in Somerset County. We vote in congressional district 13, PA Senate district 32, and PA House district 59.

I decided to testify because I want to speak up for a rebirth of bipartisanship. I want bipartisanship to come back to our government, and I want to see it working every day in our capital buildings, especially as the ten-year redistricting process unfolds. It's time to put solutions to Pennsylvanians' needs over the politics of staying in power.

Bipartisanship is key to a legislature's ability to do what it's there for—like supporting state citizens through infrastructure and education and promoting a healthy state economy, for starters. One report comparing government productivity indicates some aren't very productive [1]. This means that lots of bills never get a vote—even ones with broad bipartisan support. Another report found that a key factor discouraging bipartisanship is a high level of majority party control over the legislative agenda [2]. That's where deliberate gerrymandering—manipulating voting districts for partisan gain—comes in.

When voting districts are gerrymandered to make it likely that one party stays in power, representative democracy suffers and accountability declines. When many seats are "safe," bipartisanship becomes an unnecessary frill. I see this in Harrisburg: few legislators working across the aisle; some legislators who are deaf to at least some if not many who live in their districts; and some legislators who put what their caucus dictates before the needs of those they represent. This must end.

A big fight over the congressional maps drawn in 2011 resulted in their being struck down in court and replaced in 2018 [3]. From my perspective, the new congressional maps make more sense. First, since 2018, PA's delegation to the US House of Representatives has been tied, with each party holding 9 seats [4]—a result that better reflects the proportional statewide popular vote. Second, my former congressional district (the former 12th), meandered through rural southwestern PA all the way to the Ohio line, combining a lot of unrelated communities with disparate needs for representation in Congress. My current district (the 13th) does a better job gathering like communities together.

Given all that has happened, and all the debate that continues, I have still, so far, found no one who is in favor of repeating PA's 2011 congressional redistricting process and ending up having the next ten years' congressional maps drawn by the courts again. It's time for a new start.

I offer the rest of my testimony as one citizen's suggestion for a congressional redistricting process for the part of PA where I now live, rural southwestern PA, in particular, Somerset County. I suggest a process centered on citizens' common interests and needs, using the example of sorely needed workforce and economic development in my part of the state. This time, let's make the drawing of the lines all about organizing and coordinating partnerships across district communities with common interests, enabling them to find resources and act, and increasing rural southwestern PA's chances to thrive in the next ten years.

- lower-than-needed levels of educational attainment
- a less diverse business base
- fewer new industries
- lack of adequate internet service

Looking at the Southern Alleghenies' data and conclusions alongside other readily-available data sources (for example, the US Census' American Community Survey and the Center for Rural PA), my picture of top priorities to address in the region around Somerset County emerges: jobs and job creation, poverty and healthcare, education and infrastructure.

Is it the General Assembly's job to take action on priorities like these? Yes—clearly, among the reasons that state governments exist and collect our tax dollars are supporting state citizens through public infrastructure and education and promoting a healthy state economy. And, in PA, like it or not, it's also the General Assembly's job to draw congressional district lines. So, here's what I'm asking of those who draw the next congressional maps that include Somerset County and the surrounding rural area:

DON'T start with the 2011 maps or the 2018 maps. Start over with a blank map of PA and draw 17 (not 18) new congressional districts (see **Notes 1 and 2** and references).

DON'T repeat the last decade's mistakes. *Avoid beginning with a primarily partisan lens* for drawing the new maps, with the goal of sustaining one party's edge in elections. To be crystal clear, I am NOT suggesting keeping southwestern PA's rural counties together for partisan reasons. I am suggesting keeping them together for the purpose of more effectively coordinating collective efforts to help the people who live here.

DO ensure that you understand what citizens' needs are, and put them first. Begin with analyses that reveal *common, shared citizens' needs* in Somerset, the other Southern Allegheny counties, and other nearby rural southwestern PA counties. As you draw the lines, focus NOT on clustering enough partisan votes to reliably win elections in that district; instead optimize how the districts are drawn with an eye toward facilitating, organizing, and coordinating progress on shared citizen priorities (see also **Note 3**).

DO engage in bipartisan collaboration at many levels. Talk with citizens and those who represent them, including groups like local workforce development boards (LWDBs) and planning commissions. Avoid secrecy and backroom dealing. Communicate and explain your approach and the choices you end up making when you draw the maps. Work across the aisle in committee work (especially the two PA House and Senate State Government Committees), on setting up and running public hearings, on reviewing data, and on drafting and passing the 2021 redistricting plan. In that process, be sure to provide plenty of opportunity and time for citizens to review and comment on proposed maps.

The 2021 redistricting cycle is an opportunity for drawing maps that will gather communities together, focusing on solving common problems. Voters like me are counting on you to give us districts that—over the next ten years—facilitate, not impede, returning our once-thriving Somerset County and the surrounding region to economic health. Thanks for the opportunity to provide testimony.

NOTES

Note 1: One reason to start anew is to take a *defensible, nonpartisan* approach to accommodating PA's loss of a congressional seat (from 18 to 17), due to comparatively slower population growth than other states. The 2020 Census data makes it clear that all but three western and all northern tier counties lost residents, while southeastern and southcentral Pennsylvania gained them. While I don't like the idea of losing a seat in favor of a different part of the state, it is logical that more people should translate to more representation in Congress, and vice versa.

Note 2: Starting from a blank map is a way to avoid repeating the mistake of 2011, when PA went from 19 to 18 seats. The reduction in the number of PA congressional districts took the form of redrawing the then-12th district (my district at that time) to pit two Democratic incumbents against one another in the 2012 primary. The winner of that race then lost to the Republican candidate in the general election [8]. Looking ahead, an article published August 13 reports speculation that those drawing the new maps may target the seat of Democrat Conor Lamb (district 17, representing Butler, Allegheny, and Beaver Counties) [9]. It's notable that as a group, these three counties did NOT lose population, but gained 2.2% since 2010 [10]—so it wouldn't be logical to reduce that district's representation in Congress. Since rural district 15 lost the most population between 2010 and 2020 (over 90,000 people), it might more sense to explore options for district 15's counties [11].

Note 3: Interviews with local government and community groups might also help explore how funding from the American Rescue Plan and infrastructure legislation might be used to boost local economies.

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