



CITIZENS UNION OF THE CITY OF NEW YORK
Testimony to the Legislative Task Force on Demographic Research and
Reapportionment (LATFOR)
on the Need for an Independent Redistricting Commission
September 21, 2011

Good morning members of LATFOR. My name is Dick Dadey and I am the Executive Director of Citizens Union of the City of New York, and I am joined by John Avlon, a Co-Chair of ReShapeNY, Citizens Union Board Member, and senior columnist for Newsweek. Citizens Union is an independent, nonpartisan, civic organization of New Yorkers who promote good government and advance political reform in our city and state. Over the past year, Citizens Union has spearheaded a campaign – ReShapeNY – to reform the redistricting process. This coalition consisting of 37 groups including civic and community organizations, unions, and business groups has called for the legislature to return to Albany during a special session this fall to finally end partisan gerrymandering, echoing the growing and continued support among the public for an independent commission.

Just yesterday, a Quinnipiac poll¹ showed that the vast majority of voters support removing some or all of the legislature’s ability to control the redistricting process. Fifty percent of voters support a fully independent commission with no legislative input, and 27 percent support an independent commission with some legislative input – which should be noted is the model provided in legislation introduced by Governor Cuomo. Together, 77 percent of voters believe that the current process of legislators drawing their own lines must end. Further, 48 percent of voters polled stated that they would feel “betrayed” if LATFOR continues its current process and lines are drawn the same old way.

The public should feel betrayed if LATFOR draws the lines. 184 of the 212 members of the legislature either pledged to the voters during campaign season to support an independent commission, or co-sponsored legislation that would reform the redistricting process this past legislative session, including members of this very body.² Yet in spite of this record level of support, the legislature has failed to act to reform the redistricting process.

At hearing after hearing before LATFOR this summer and fall, members of the public have pointed to communities being split apart, minority groups being marginalized, and partisan gerrymandering taking place at the expense of fair representation for voters. Decades of gerrymandering have led to a public that is understandably wary of the maps that will be drawn for 2012. Governor Cuomo also has no confidence that LATFOR can be impartial and draw nonpartisan lines, and has stated that he will veto the lines this body draws.

¹ Quinnipiac University Polling Center. “Storm Surge Takes Cuomo Approval To All-Time High, Quinnipiac University Poll Finds; Voters Want Gov To Speak Up On Redistricting,” September 20, 2011. Available at: <http://www.quinnipiac.edu/x1318.xml?ReleaseID=1647>

² For the list of legislators, see <http://reshapeny.org/index.php/where-does-your-legislator-stand>

Enough is enough. The legislature must return to Albany this fall in a special session to finally address redistricting reform. There are promising discussions taking place among the Assembly, Senate and Governor's office about how to find an alternative and acceptable resolution to this issue. Citizens Union believes that we must find the common ground needed to bring independence and integrity to the redistricting process and is hopeful given the commitments made over the past year and the level of support in the legislature for reform.

Today, I would like to put publicly on the table the framework for the Governor, the State Senate, and the State Assembly to follow in resolving this impasse and implementing the reform needed for all of us to move forward.

1. Adopt legislation that creates a less than ideal reform approach for 2012, but one that is consistent with the principles of the current reform proposals of creating an impartial process led by an independent panel directly appointed by the 4 legislative leaders, but on which no legislators would serve. The panel would inherit the work done to date by LATFOR and be guided by established and agreed upon criteria. The criteria would not be as strong as originally proposed, but sufficiently clear so as not to continue the rigged practice of political manipulation in the drawing of lines for partisan gain. This process and panel would still recommend maps to the legislature, which would have the final say.
2. In accepting this less than ideal approach, Citizens Union and members of ReShapeNY would insist on seeing that this year's "reform-light" legislative approach be tied to first passage of a much stronger constitutional amendment that would bring wholesale change to the redistricting process and create a new impartial and independent process – one promised to the voters in the campaign of 2010.

For Citizens Union and members of ReShapeNY, comprehensive reform is needed – the creation of an independent commission goes hand in hand with strong criteria. They cannot be separated. We strongly believe that regardless of the criteria, whoever holds the pen in drawing district lines controls the process. It is critical that the conflict of self-interest that exists with legislators drawing their own districts be removed in order for New Yorkers' confidence to be restored in the word of their elected representatives. 184 legislators made promises last year and/or cosponsored legislation this year that would reform the redistricting process. New Yorkers are still expecting the legislature to reform this year's process. Don't ask them to wait any longer. Return to Albany. Consider this new approach to resolving this impasse, and pass the promised redistricting reform that you all have said you support.

We are available to answer any questions that you have at this time.