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### Creating an objective and independent redistricting process

A representative democracy requires voters to select local politicians to serve as their voice in Congress and the state legislature. The process of drawing the geographic boundaries to create electoral districts occurs every ten years in conjunction with the publication of the National Census. The purpose of redrawing district lines is to adjust for population changes. This process is crucial to ensure fair representation in the legislative branches of government.

Oregon's legislature is responsible for redrawing district lines objectively. However, partisanship and incumbency can unduly influence how legislative and congressional districts are reshaped. For instance, if a district is evenly composed of Democratic and Republican voters, the party in power could change the boundaries to tip the scales, creating contorted and illogical district lines that poorly serve constituents. Many states around the country have realized this problem known as gerrymandering. Washington and California have reformed their processes, creating independent commissions to oversee redistricting rather than relying on a partisan legislature and incumbents tethered to their preexisting district boundaries. There's an old saying, "Voters should choose their lawmakers, not the other way around."

Consider these current examples of warped districts: Voters in Medford and Prineville share the same state senator; the Oregon coast and high desert, from Manzanita to Warm Springs, are represented by the same congressman; one lawmaker represents voters in such geographically separated areas as Medford to Enterprise and Hood River to Jordan Valley; one of the most racially concentrated areas of poverty in Oregon, Rockwood, is trisected and fragmented by three different House districts.

The League of Women Voters and the Portland City Club have both voiced concern and have developed reports on redistricting reform. One conclusion from the City Club's report reads, "...an independent, nonpartisan redistricting commission would help mitigate the perception and reality of excessive partisanship and conflict of interest." Another conclusion drawn from the League of Women Voters' report reads, "...incumbent gerrymanders mean that legislators may exercise self-interest to create a plan that unfairly protects incumbents by minimizing competition."

Many of our leaders are concerned and taking action. Both Democratic and Republican Oregon state legislators have drafted redistricting reform bills to be debated in this current legislative session. Since leaving office, President Obama has become involved in progressive redistricting reform efforts in a number of states. My office has engaged with Oregonians from across the political spectrum, all of whom care about fairness and objectivity and want to improve the process with more independence and less partisanship. These conversations were the catalyst behind my convening the Independent Redistricting Task Force. The activities of the Task Force will be fully transparent and accessible to all citizens. The Task Force members are from diverse political affiliations, and I have instituted a standing invitation for all interested groups to become engaged in this effort. The goal of the Task Force is to develop a consensus proposal that we will provide to the legislature for consideration and to interest groups for possible creation of citizen ballot measures.

The Task Force is assembling the best practices of redistricting reforms from across the country. For instances, California's reform gives authority to a 14-member citizens' commission chosen by a lottery system. Washington's reform gives authority to a five-member commission chosen by majority and minority leaders of both legislative chambers who then appoint a fifth independent member. Iowa places responsibility with a professional staff of nonpartisan experts who draw the districts that must then gain legislative approval. Every system has its nuances, merits, and limitations and each commission prioritizes differently boundary-drawing criteria. My office is particularly interested in harnessing a technology-based, data-driven process that could help mitigate conflict of interest concerns intrinsically created by unconscious bias.

The structure and mechanics of redistricting authority is one question. Another question relates to district-drawing criteria. Critical criteria include equal population, protection of minority community representation, existing boundary lines for counties, cities and school districts, and geographic compactness/contiguity. Often criteria includes physical features like rivers and mountain ranges, exemptions that ignore incumbents' residential address, and the degree to which fair competition exists during political campaigns based on the composition of registered voter political party affiliation.

The Independent Redistricting Task Force can be enhanced by critical feedback and participation. That's why this process will be transparent and accessible. The meetings are open to the public, are live video streamed via the Oregon Legislature's website, are audio recorded, and the public is invited to provide their input via digital citizen engagement.

Drafting a reform proposal is a difficult and complex process and while most laws are drafted behind closed doors, this innovative and unique opportunity puts the power in the hands of Oregonians to help restore integrity and transparency in government and to move Oregon forward.

Sincerely,

Dennis Richardson  
Oregon Secretary of State