



**CITIZENS UNION OF THE CITY OF NEW YORK  
Testimony to the New York City Districting Commission 2022-23  
Queens Public Hearing**

Museum of the Moving Image, Queens

August 16<sup>th</sup>, 2022

Good afternoon, members of the New York City Districting Commission. My name is Dan Kaminsky, and I am the Policy Manager at Citizens Union. Citizens Union is an independent, nonpartisan good government group dedicated to making democracy work for all New Yorkers. We thank you for the opportunity to testify today.

Citizens Union has been monitoring the redistricting process to ensure it is conducted in a fair, transparent, and independent manner. We also run a community education program that has worked with over a thousand New Yorkers to prepare them to engage in the process.

We commend the Commission on its initial work to improve public input by conducting five preliminary hearings, scheduling hearings after work hours to allow working people to engage in the process, providing language interpreters at hearings, and announcing the August hearing schedule well in advance.

As the Commission moves into the next stages of the mapmaking process, Citizens Union makes the following comments and recommendations:

**Explain the reasoning behind line drawing decisions**

The draft redistricting plan made some substantial changes, yet the Commission did not provide meaningful oral or written explanation to elucidate the justifications for new lines. This process left New Yorkers struggling to understand why their lines were drawn the way they were.

Most notably, the proposed plan kept three whole Council districts on Staten Island. This decision exceeded the Commission's own analysis of district population limits without clarifying these changes to the public. By using most of the legally allowed population deviation on Staten Island – 4.29% out of 5% - the commission left the other 48 districts in the city with much less room to accommodate population changes or comments from communities of interest. Under the proposed map, Staten Island averages 165,481 people per district, while the rest of the city averages 173,342 people per district. While technically legal, this may undermine the principles of one-person one-vote and equal apportionment. Citizens Union finds the absence of clear, public justifications for this decision, and others, to be concerning.

The urgency of providing a public justification for the lines chosen has taken on added significance this redistricting cycle, as this will be the first cycle where the Districting Commission is not required to submit a preclearance report to the U.S. Department of Justice to prove new maps comply with the Voting Rights Act.

### **Conduct mapping deliberations in public**

The public was not exposed to negotiations the Commission had about drawing the preliminary Council lines. There is no reason for discussions over the final configuration of the plan to be kept out of the public's eye.

As we detailed in a letter submitted to the Commission on August 10<sup>th</sup>, 2022, we are particularly concerned by recent reports about possible backroom deals between appointing authorities, and their influence over mapping decisions. Making such crucial decisions ahead of public meetings in private conversations erodes public trust in the process, which has already weakened following the state redistricting process.

While we understand the Commission's need to work in small subcommittees, key mapping issues should be brought for a discussion before the Commission as a whole. We urge you to hold mapping deliberations as part of an open public meeting.

Open meetings on mapping deliberations are not an uncommon practice for commission-led redistricting processes. In fact, the 2012-2013 NYC Districting Commission held multiple public meetings on maps, including district-by-district presentations on the reasoning behind every proposed line and the public's

concerns about each area. These public meetings offered commissioners a chance to make specific comments on proposed maps, reach a consensus, and vote on recommended changes - all in public

The many New Yorkers that have made their voices heard on redistricting deserve to see how those comments are being synthesized and debated by the Commission. Holding mapping deliberations in public clarifies mapmakers' intentions, prompts healthy dialogue between commissioners, and reduces the potential power of outside influence on the process.

### **Disclose meetings with elected officials**

All meetings and other conversations with Council Members, other elected officials, or their representatives related to redistricting must be disclosed to strengthen the public's trust in the independence of the process.

The Districting Commission has proven vulnerable to politicization in the past. In 2012, political intervention slowed down the process and caused confusion for the public. The 2002 lines were essentially decided by a deal between the Council Speaker and the Minority leader, who together "controlled" a majority of votes on the Commission.

The local redistricting process is still exposed to such politicization. Now that the maps are out, elected officials and others may try to put pressure on commissioners behind closed doors. To keep the mapmaking process transparent, commissioners or staff members who discuss maps with individuals who are not affiliated with the commission should file a disclosure form.

We thank you for this opportunity to testify. For more information, please contact Ben Weinberg, Citizens Unions Director of Public Policy at [bweinberg@citizensunion.org](mailto:bweinberg@citizensunion.org)