

House Judiciary Committee
Rhode Island State House
82 Smith St. Providence, RI 02903

Dear Committee Members:

The scandalous redistricting bill H7323 authorizes the state party chair to fire the people freely elected by voters to district committees, and to instead stuff the committees with the chair's own people. I will explain clearly why this is wrong.

1. Changes in district boundaries are a false excuse

The excuse given is that redistricting changes district lines, so that perhaps some of the elected members of district committees will no longer live in the district after redistricting. But this excuse is false. Your bill H7323 does not merely replace those who no longer live in the district, but instead authorizes the state party chair to fire everyone elected to the district committee, whether they live in the district or not. If you were duly elected to the committee by voters, even if you still live in the district after the district lines

2. We already have a fairer law

This provision for firing elected committee members is so embarrassing that no one has ever dared to put it into the permanent code of RI laws. What is in the code of RI general laws, in section 17-12- 12(b), is a fairer and more democratic method that we already have for a situation when a committee member no longer lives in the district, and it allows these vacancies to be filled by the choice of the other elected members of that district committee. This fairer method has remained on the books in our official code of laws, but the General Assembly still overrides what's on the books every 10 years by authorizing the state party chair to fire the people elected by voters. The fact that this measure is so outrageous and undemocratic, I'm sure, is why it was never written into the permanent code of laws, but the General Assembly still passes it every 10 years as a "transition" measure to override the more honest process that's on the books. Letting the party leader fire people the voters elected shouldn't be enacted into law at all – it shouldn't be on the books, and it shouldn't even be passed as a "temporary" measure, since we have a better alternative on the books already.

3. Voters knew what they were doing and this bill's backers are disrespecting that.

Let's look at specifically why these district committee members were elected by voters in 2020. The mission of the committee members elected in 2020 was for the duty of making party endorsements for the 2022 elections. Voters knew that was the mission when they elected committee members in 2020; they voted in 2020 to choose the people who would make party endorsements in the 2022 elections. But state leaders never had any intention of honoring the choice that the voters made in 2020 for these offices. Our state leaders have their own quiet practice, unknown to the RI citizens who voted in 2020, where they simply override the voters'

choice, and they've been doing it every 10 years for a long time. Voters thought they would have a say over who their party backs in 2022; this bill says "Nope, you don't." This sneaky move, this blatant disrespect for voters, is what you want if you want a sham democracy.

4. Do we want to set a precedent for, say, Trump supporters to fire elected officials?

Two years from now, in the 2024 presidential election, if a partisan state legislature decides to fire the electors chosen by its state's voters and replace them by electors for, say, Donald Trump, is that okay? Do our General Assembly leaders want to do their best to create a precedent that can be exploited by undemocratic partisan leaders in another state? Even if General Assembly leaders are eager to keep acting in this undemocratic way, it's wrong and it must be stopped. We just can't afford these attacks on democracy any more. And when our state's General Assembly leaders keep playing this trick of firing everyone the voters elect, it's aiding the disintegration of our democracy. It's time to stop it now.

5. It's a valuable right for voters to have a say on who the party backs, and it's bad to take it away.

One of the victories we've won for democracy in Rhode Island is that the party endorsements listed on the ballot are supposed to be not controlled by party insiders, but by these committee members who are supposed to be elected by voters. Parties should not be dictatorships run by party insiders at their own discretion or in their own self-interest. The voters need to have a strong say about which candidate gets the party's backing. Every time the voters' say is taken away, it pushes the party more in the direction of being a cabal run by insiders for the benefit of themselves and their cronies. I understand why a state party leader would like the power to install their own people on the district committee. When the state party leader puts flunkies on the committee instead of those the voters elected, it means that a party insider has complete control over who gets the party's endorsement. But a healthy process needs to make sure the voters keep the right to make their own decisions on that, even if voters prefer a candidate that the insiders don't like. We have to ensure voters' rights are not taken away like this.

6. Another feasible way to respect voters' right to choose district committees

I've said we have a better process on the books already, where the committee members themselves can vote to fill vacancies if someone is no longer in the district. But if anyone has any real objections to that process that keeps elected committee members in the driver's seat, there's another alternative. Just hold special elections for these committees immediately after the redistricting act passes. That way, each of the new districts will have a fully elected slate of committee members who all live in the district. Because fairer alternatives like this are feasible and practical, there is absolutely no need to give a party chief sole power to replace anyone who's elected. All it does is to give a party insider excessive control for no good reason.

There are other problems with this bill as well. The district maps that form the bill's centerpiece are, as Common Cause pointed out, a clear gerrymander. And this is the kind of result you'd

expect given that the maps were produced by a commission entirely appointed by General Assembly leaders, when we should instead have an independent redistricting commission like many other states do. I am very suspicious, after seeing how the process worked, of the "consultant" who put out the maps, given that he presented final maps just 5 minutes before the commission had its meeting to vote on it, and he hasn't disclosed enough about where these maps came from. When journalist Steve Ahlquist reports that there were private meetings in the sub-basement of the State House about these maps which he's been blocked from accessing, when he points out how suspiciously his public-records requests were denied, it rings true and I believe him. But the outrageous provision that lets the state party chief fire those elected by voters is reason enough to reject the bill. This bill must be stopped.

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