

# LACRA & COMMUNITIES OF INTEREST

## Summary

The Pennsylvania General Assembly has refused to transfer its redistricting power to an independent commission. Therefore, a legislative contingency plan containing line-drawing criteria and increasing public input and transparency has been introduced the Legislative and Congressional Redistricting Act (“LACRA”). This bill (HB22/SB222), would ensure that communities of interest are protected in whatever maps the Legislative Reapportionment Commission and congressional redistricting committees produce in 2021.

## What is a community of interest?

Generally, a community of interest (COI) is a group of Pennsylvanians who share similar interests that might be the subject of legislation. Specifically, LACRA would define a COI as “a neighborhood or geographically confined area of persons who share similar social, cultural and economic interests or other shared interests that may be subject to legislative action. A community’s shared interest does not include a shared relationship with a political party, incumbent or political candidate.” This language is common among recent reform laws and proposals in places like [Colorado](#), [Michigan](#), [Nevada](#), [North Dakota](#), [Oklahoma](#), [Oregon](#), and [Virginia](#).

## But can’t public input about COI be used to game the system?

Examples from other states have shown instances where public input has been used by partisan actors. However, LACRA’s clear definition of what is and isn’t a COI will mitigate concerns about potential misuse while ensuring that districts are more representative of the people of the Commonwealth. Not only that, but other redistricting criteria in the bill will ensure that potential sabotage is prevented by a number of competing considerations.

In addition, LACRA’s public input provisions will play a large role in the success of the COI criterion. As stated by [Michael Li and Yuriy Rudensky](#) from the Brennan Center for Justice at NYU, “[t]o ascertain whether a community of interest exists, public input is essential.” LACRA’s public input requirements that allow for both in-person and virtual input will allow members of the public to challenge and reject false testimony about COIs. This type of robust public involvement can also be strengthened by the submission of community of interest maps through software like [Representable](#) and [Districtr](#). In particular, Representable’s ability to show aggregate community data will help show where COIs exist, as proven by broad public consensus.

## What does COI add to LACRA?

The COI provision provides a manner for certain communities to be recognized that might not otherwise get proper representation. Although Pennsylvanians strongly identify with their particular town or county, people don’t always live neatly within the boundaries of subdivision lines, so relying upon these subdivisions can still split communities. While subdivisions can often overlap with communities, [former Speaker Mike Turzai](#) has noted that “consideration and preservation of communities of interest ensures that implicit communities are not destroyed by explicit, but invisible and sometimes outdated, municipal boundaries.” The Supreme Court of Pennsylvania came to a similar conclusion in [a 2012 case](#). Lastly, [a large coalition of national civil rights and reform organizations](#) have also spoken about the importance of COI, writing that “[c]onsideration of communities of interest is essential to successful redistricting.”

## What are examples of COI that may not be represented well within municipal boundaries?

Certain communities can be cut by municipal lines. For example, it is likely that Native American or Amish communities do not neatly follow county boundaries. Some economic communities cross these boundaries too. In fact, a 2012 alternative plan [split apart coal mining operations](#) due to a focus on maintaining political subdivision boundaries, even though this economic COI would likely benefit from shared representation. Additionally, even school districts, an easy proxy for a neighborhood COI, may be affected by a heavy focus municipal boundaries.

Further, [Common Cause PA](#) has noted that a COI provision can be critical in ensuring that smaller communities of color are adequately represented (e.g. smaller Latinx communities in Allentown, Philadelphia, and Reading). Admittedly, rules limiting municipal splits protect these communities to an extent by striving to keep their cities whole as much as possible. But if a city split is needed to comply with population requirements, a COI provision would ensure that the required split does not harm communities.



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