

Open Memo To Interested Parties in Virginia

Sam Wang

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A report from the



**Princeton
Gerrymandering
Project**

DEBUGGING DEMOCRACY

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To: Interested Parties in Virginia
 From: Prof. Sam Wang, Princeton Gerrymandering Project
 Date: October 4, 2021
 Re: Draft state House and Senate maps – October 4 snapshot

The Virginia Redistricting Commission’s deliberations have been contentious, and according to some spectators, a fraught process. But from a distance, things don’t look that bad.

My team acknowledges that most of us are not from your fair state. We evaluate plans by objective metrics such as partisan and racial representation, county splits, and other objective measures. These metrics do not address local interests such as preserving communities or maintaining safe districts for specific incumbents. In short, we evaluate whether voters as a whole are represented in a commensurate fashion.

The Princeton Gerrymandering Project and RepresentUs scores and grades are gathered at <https://bit.ly/PGP-VA-gradebook>, with full report cards at <https://gerrymander.princeton.edu>. In the plans offered so far, both Republicans and Democrats have made major progress compared with 2011. In our analysis, competing maps are not so far apart as they may seem.

House of Delegates Plan A7 provides one route to compromise

House of Delegates	Scores							Grades			
	Safe D	Competitive	Safe R	Compact	County splits	BVAP>30% (D)	AVAP>30%	Overall	Partisan	Competitive	Geographic
Current Map (2019)	45	16	39	0.360	52	18	1				
A3 Draft	48	19	33	0.419	38	17	3	A	A	A	B
A4 Draft	50	16	34	0.405	37	17	3	B	B	C	B
A5 Draft	51	14	35	0.407	37	17	3	B	B	C	B
A6 Draft	51	14	35	0.404	36	17	3	B	B	C	B
A7 Draft	51	15	34	0.404	37	17	3	B	B	C	B
B3 Draft	54	11	35	0.427	48	15	3	A	A	C	C
B4 Draft	54	11	35	0.420	40	16	2	A	A	C	B
B5 Draft	54	10	36	0.422	39	17	2	A	A	C	B
B6 Draft	54	11	35	0.421	42	17	2	A	A	C	B
Chase Tuck HoD Map 2	55	14	31	0.406	49	15	3	A	A	C	C
New Virginia Majority	55	14	31	0.405	47	18	1	A	A	C	C
VA CIR	54	14	32	0.411	50	19	1	B	B	C	C

The table above shows scores for the Commission’s plans, as well as a few public contributions. Unsurprisingly, the Republican plans (A3..A7) have a potential to give a few more seats to Republicans, and the Democratic plans (B3..B6) give a few more seats to Democrats. But a closer look suggests they aren’t that far apart. And there is another important factor at play: **enhanced competition**.

In terms of Democratic/Republican seats, county splits, and Black-oriented (>30% Black voting-age population, or BVAP) districts, Plans A7 and B5 are closest to one another. The Republican plan squeezes

out a few seats on average by building more competition. We emphasize the word **average**. In any given year, the outcome depends on the specifics of what happens in swing seats. That is the offer by Republicans: the natural majority party, in this case Democrats, gets its fair share on average, but Republicans have a shot at winning seats.

The Princeton Gerrymandering Project has simulated 1 million possible maps to evaluate the range of likely partisan outcomes. The A7 plan could be brought closer to the center of the range by shifting the average outcome a little toward Democrats. One could easily imagine shifting a few barely-Republican seats more Democratic, and ending up with an **average** outcome that is between the A7 and B5 plans. In particular, Districts 48 and 51 in the Virginia Beach area or District 23 in Northern Virginia would need to move by as little as 1 percentage point to achieve this balance. And there would still be **15 competitive seats statewide**.

Another reason to start from Plan A7 is that it contains more **Asian-American-oriented districts**. Districts 17, 18, and 26 in the Chantilly area in the north all have more than 30% Asian voting-age population, allowing that community consolidated representation in multiple districts.

Both A7 and B5 plans have 17 districts with at least 30% BVAP, and 11 districts with at least 40% BVAP. Note that two publicly-contributed House maps (New Virginia Majority and VA Coalition for Immigrant Rights) have one or two additional Black-oriented districts but fewer Asian-oriented districts compared with any Commission-drafted plan, and comparable competition to the Republican-drafted plans. However, they are more geographically split than any Commission-drafted plan.

State Senate Plan C2 is more promising than it may first appear

State Senate	Scores							Grades			
	Safe D	Competitive	Safe R	Compact	County splits	BVAP>30% (D)	AVAP>30%	Overall	Partisan	Competitive	Geographic
Current Map (2019)	21	4	15	0.273	45	6	0				
A3 Draft	19	7	14	0.405	21	6	1	F	F	C	C
A4 Draft	20	5	15	0.406	19	6	1	F	F	C	C
A5 Draft	20	6	14	0.411	17	5	1	F	F	C	C
B3 Draft	21	6	13	0.412	29	5	1	A	A	C	C
B4 Draft	21	6	13	0.405	20	6	0	B	B	C	C
C2 Draft	20	7	13	0.413	19	6	0	F	F	C	C
Chase Tuck	23	4	13	0.402	29	7	1	A	A	C	C
New Virginia Majority	23	3	14	0.391	34	7	1	B	B	F	C

Deliberations over state Senate maps hit a snag over the weekend. On the face of it, the scores we have assigned in the above table look bad. Worse yet, the C2 map, which is supposed to be a starting point for compromise, got an F overall. However, the Commission is doing better than this grade indicates.

For purposes of calculating partisan fairness, the Princeton Gerrymandering Project’s grading scheme is based on 1 million computer simulations - but it is not perfect. To evaluate a draft plan, we assigned all of its competitive seats to one party or the other. In the Senate, which has only 40 seats, a change of even one seat can make a noticeable difference.

In this case, the C2 draft has a few barely-Republican districts (District 14, near Fredericksburg, and District 22, in Virginia Beach) that make the statewide map look biased. Shifting either district even a little bit toward Democrats would bring the typical outcome to a passing grade. **There would still be 7 competitive seats, a major plus for both parties.** Another possibility is to change District 25 (35.9% BVAP, barely R) in the south to be Democratic-leaning, though this would involve more substantial changes.

Another weakness of the C2 map is the absence of any district with an Asian population greater than 30%. This could be addressed by adjusting District 7 or 11 in the northern part of the state – again in the Chantilly area. **This would not change the Senate’s partisan balance.**

Several publicly-contributed plans (Chase Tuck and New Virginia Majority) have more Black-oriented districts and an Asian-oriented district, but more county splits and less competition.

Conclusion

Although the Redistricting Commission may be feeling fatigued, they are closer to success than they realize. Adjustments to a Republican-drafted Plan A7 in the House of Delegates, and to joint plan C2 in the Senate, provide possible paths to compromise. Particular attention to the Virginia Beach and Chantilly areas can improve partisan fairness, maintain competition, and provide representation to the growing Asian community in the north. More Black representation is possible in either chamber, but with a tradeoff of greater geographic splitting and, potentially, reduced competition. We hope that this analysis, combined with upcoming public input, will be of use to the Commission as it finishes its important work.