



January 27, 2022

Sent via email

City Council Minority Leader Joseph Borelli
City Hall
New York, NY 10007

Dear Council Member Borelli,

Citizens Union congratulates you on becoming the Minority Leader of the New York City Council. One of the first items the City Charter places on your agenda is the appointment of three commissioners to the New York City Districting Commission. Due to recent changes to the Charter-mandated timeline, those appointments must be made by February 7.

The task of drawing the City Council's 51 districts is complex, and will require attention to many competing goals and interests. The members of the decennial Districting Commission must have the needed background, experience, and independence to fulfill this important responsibility.

As a good government organization focused on making democracy work for all New Yorkers, we wanted to bring to your attention several recommendations on this topic. We believe those would help ensure council districts are drawn to provide fair representation for all of New York's communities.

1. Appoint a commission that is diverse and representative of New York City, beyond the narrow requirements of the City Charter

Section 50 of the City Charter requires the Commission to be representative of minority groups protected by the 1965 Voting Rights Act; to have at least one resident from each borough, and that registered voters of one party will not be a majority of commissioners. Important factors like gender, age, and geographical representation are not considered, nor is membership in minor parties

The last Districting Commission consisted of nine men and six women. Women currently hold the majority of seats on the City Council, and the Commission that draws the boundaries of the next Council should reflect a similar commitment to gender equality.

The Charter does not assure geographic representation on the 15-person Commission beyond the minimum of one member from each borough. The last Commission had five members from Manhattan, the most of any other borough, and only from the most populous borough, Brooklyn. The 2002 Commission included seven residents of Manhattan.

Citizens Union believes the people of New York would be better served by a Commission whose membership accurately represents the city's population. Charter Section §50(b)(2) gives the mayor

the authority to “convene one or more meetings” with the Council Speaker and Minority Leader to establish a screening and selection process that ensures fair representation. We recommend using this process to seek a broad representation of New York’s diversity.

2. Refrain from appointing people who served in an elected office in the past five years to the Districting Commission

The City Charter forbids office holders, city employees, and registered lobbyists from serving on the Districting Commission, but it does not ban former elected officials. Yet, former elected officials typically keep a close relationship with current incumbents or future candidates who would be affected by the redrawing of maps, and involving them in map-making weakens the perceived independence of the Commission.

To minimize partisan bias and favoritism in the redistricting process, people who served in an elected office in the past five years should be excluded from serving on the Districting Commission.

3. Seek commissioners who would prioritize maximum transparency and public participation

It is imperative that the Commission actively seek public input, including by providing increased language and disability access. It should maintain its proceedings open to allow the public to follow the impactful process. Citizens Union’s full recommendations for the Districting Commission include several measures that would create an open, fair, and independent redistricting process. Citizens Union urges you to appoint commissioners who would prioritize such issues.

You can read Citizens Union’s full list of recommendations here: <https://citizensunion.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/City-Council-Redistricting-2022-Citizens-Union-Recommendations.pdf>

We plan to issue a comprehensive report on City Council redistricting, which will include an overview of the current and previous redistricting cycles, population changes that could impact map-drawing, and the above-mentioned recommendations.

Citizens Union has closely monitored all last three redistricting cycles and plans to do the same in 2022. We will also provide New Yorkers with public education on engaging in the process and providing community input to the Districting Commission.

Please do not hesitate to contact me or Ben Weinberg, Citizens Union’s Director of Public Policy, at or bwainberg@citizensunion.org or 347-291-4199 with any questions.

Sincerely,



Betsy Gotbaum
Executive Director, Citizens Union