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Regarding: Senate

[REDACTED]

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Wimberley, TX 78676
September 11, 2021

To: The Senate Special Committee on Redistricting and the honorable Chair Joan Huffman and Vice-Chair Juan "Chuy" Hinojosa, and honorable members Carol Alvarado, Paul Bettencourt, Brian Birdwell, Donna Campbell, Kelly Hancock, Bryan Hughes, Eddie Lucio, Jr., Robert Nichols, Angela Paxton, Charles Perry, Royce West, John Whitmire, and Judith Zaffirini

I am Susan McAfee Raybuck. I hoped to be able to give public testimony on redistricting but had pre-existing commitments.

A little about me. I'm a Texan born and raised in Austin and on my mother's side descended from the earliest settlers. Together with my husband Perry, we raised our two sons in Wimberley, Texas where we moved when they were small. I taught elementary school math and reading before retiring and retooling by going back to school. Now I volunteer for a community radio station, the League of Women Voters of Hays County, Braver Angels of Central Texas, as well as my church.

About twenty-five years ago I became aware of a force on our airwaves and cable platforms that was increasingly shrill, hyper-partisan, and angry and became deeply concerned, recognizing that left unchecked it had the potential of leading to estrangement between Americans of differing points of view. I recognized that accusations, smears, and hyper-partisanship was pushing us toward a bitter divorce. My Sunday class and I have been praying for the healing of the deep divisions in our country for almost as long as since I recognized the peril facing us all.

Redistricting is one element of the forces entrenching the divisions between Americans across the political spectrum now. With the precision which computers now allow for the redistricting process, very few districts in Texas have been meaningfully competitive in their elections. When the outcome of an election is pre-ordained because the lines have been sliced and diced to yield that very effect, Texans lose.

They lose the opportunity to have their interests listened to and represented if they are not of the same party for which the district was drawn. Whether of the same or opposite party, they both lose out on the opportunity to discuss and debate and hear other points of view on important issues. That's an important moderating force to help us see one another's point of view, and even if we don't agree, to understand why a reasonable person might hold that point of view.

Their representative loses because he or she caters to those who elected him or her and doesn't have any need for the counsel and opinion of others on the other side of the political spectrum. He or she works more for the party than for America, more for the constituents who put him/her in office than being a public servant able to represent all of his/her constituents. Those one-sided partisan forces do not make for the kinds of conditions that cause one to gain in wisdom and

stature, respected widely across the political spectrum. The partisanship militates against true statesmanship and principled public service intent on the greatest good for the greatest number.

We all lose under this scenario. We lose out on wise, competent role models of public service. We lose role models of working out our differences and compromising to arrive at solutions that benefit all sides – maybe not to the extent either side wanted but in ways that make life better for all. We lose heroes who have the respect of all because they've focused less on their own self-interest for power and prestige and more on being responsive to all constituents.

All lose because they lack moderating forces that push them toward working together through their differences to accomplish common goals. The give and take of dialogue and debate among people with differing ideas lies at the very heart of democracy.

Keeping communities of interest together in the redistricting process keeps intact existing local relationships of people who have been working on issues to help their community for years. They may not agree on everything politically but they have a relationship and mutual respect. These are essential qualities in any community.

In my church we have divisions. The Methodist Church has unresolved issues that the pandemic kept us from moving toward resolution. We have conservatives and liberals, libertarians and moderates. But we are all brothers and sisters in Christ. We need each other, we learn from each other, we help one another. Sometimes we have big disagreements, but we have so much in common. We have history together, we are knit together with bonds of friendship and love.

Staying together, whether it's a church, a married country, or a democratic republic takes a lot of work. It takes living and working together with a diverse group of people, working on common projects to solve problems, kicking back and hanging out and having fun together, getting to know one another's families and caring about each other's problems. Praying for one another, helping one another, caring for the humanity in the other person.

Redistricting is by no means the only force pushing us into entrenched hostility, and it probably isn't the main one. But it is a piece of it.

As January 6 showed, we have been brought to the brink of a second civil war by a number of factors. In a civil war, even if one side is ultimately victorious, both lose so much. Lives, fractured relationships, destroyed homes, businesses, infrastructure and industries, and much of our country lying in ruins. Wealth and prosperity laid waste. World status and power crippled. Mothers and fathers, sisters and brothers, and husbands and wives grieving losses from death and from irreparable rifts.

Are we going to do the hard work of pulling the country back into a cohesive one where our disagreements are handled productively and reasonably, or will we ignore the chasm at our feet and fail to deal with it? It has come to this: a descent into violence or doing everything in our power to change things for the better.

I urge you, if you love this country, to set aside the focus on partisan advantage, make a personal commitment to work towards healing and instead redistrict with a mission to draw the boundary lines for districts so that all Texans, including Texans of color are empowered and feel they have been fairly included in the ability to elect those who will listen to their concerns and work on the behalf of all their constituents.

But please don't stop there, because as helpful as that would be, it is just one element in the divisions that have us on the brink of a second civil war. Partisanship has metastasized and threatens to destroy our democratic republic.

Rhetoric on all sides needs to be dialed way back. The culture of contempt that people on the left and on the right feel toward the other needs to be shaken up and stopped. Imputing of bad motives and ad hominem attacks are out of control. The more our leaders model a better way and insist that our media back off the fanning of contempt and hatred, the more likely we are to pull back from the brink of self-destruction.

Love of country runs very deep in me, and I trust in us all. I have wept, grieved, yearned, and prayed for healing and reconciliation across this bitterly partisan divide for a quarter century. Members of my Sunday school class and close friends can attest to the many, many prayer requests week in and week out, from me for our country.

Braver Angels offers a model to begin to heal, based on work done with couples on the brink of divorce. Recently they have begun working with members of Congress to "bring Americans together to bridge the partisan divide and strengthen our democratic republic."

My prayers are with you all. And always with our country. May the United States of America survive and thrive, and so may we all.

Thank you,

Susan

Susan M. Raybuck

