



The League of Women Voters of Virginia

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**Delivered by Pres. Olga Hernandez, October 5, 2010 to the HofD P&E Committee RD hearing
Mason Hall at George Mason University**

Good Evening, Chairman and members of the House Privileges & Elections Committee, and attending guest. My name is Olga Hernandez, I'm president of the League of Women Voters of Virginia. Kudos to you for scheduling hearings at various locations across the state early in the process. We are great supporters of transparency in government thus we hope they are being taped and broadcast or at least posted on the web so those who cannot attend physically can still participate. By hearing citizen input about the fairness of the redistricting process, prior to the lines being drawn, we hope, will encourage you to consider what you hear before a final plan is voted on.

As many of you recall I have often testified before your subcommittee and full committee in the early morning hours in Richmond on the need to make the process more equitable. The League believes that the voters should choose their representatives and not the other way around. Thus the practice of incumbent protection should be done at the ballot box and not by drawing boundaries so safe that it favors one party or the other. Commitment to the rules of the State constitution of contiguous boundaries, compactness of the district, and representation in proportion to the population need to be adhered to. Consideration of communities of interest need to be carefully observed.

Make no mistake we are aware that both major parties have been guilty of partisan protection in the past. That is why we think there is a better way to serve the citizens of the Commonwealth and get more effective governance.

The League of Women Voters has a long history of fighting against attacks on the basic constitutional right to fair and equal representation guaranteed to all citizens by the Constitution. Leagues have worked vigorously in the Commonwealth and across the country to secure representative redistricting plans in their

states after each census and are seeking reforms to assure that the redistricting process is nonpartisan, equitable and open. These are core rights for citizens of a free and democratic nation.

We understand that the current sharing of political power in the General Assembly provides the best opportunity for enactment of redistricting reform that we have had in recent decades – or may have in the future. But it troubles us to hear the rumors that a back room agreement has been reached between the chambers to accept each others plans, thus protecting incumbents and perpetrating more polarization of our government. During his campaign the governor also voiced support for a more equitable process but he has not fulfilled that pledge so far.

The current system in Virginia only encourages partisan gerrymandering, which creates seats so politically skewed that the opposition has little chance of unseating the incumbent. This subverts the democratic system because it allows politicians to choose their voters, rather than vice versa. It limits the vetting of new people with new ideas and solution to public policy issues.

Partisan gerrymandering has severely reduced the number of competitive seats in Virginia. In the 2007 Virginia Senate races, incumbents in 17 of the 40 races had no opposition and only nine races were “competitive.” In the 100 House of Delegates races, 57 incumbents had no opposition and only 12 races were “competitive.” In the 2009 legislative elections, 32 of the 100 members of the General Assembly faced no opposition, and only 12 races were considered “competitive.” Voters feel that their representative of an opposing party has no reason to listen to them as constituents. Prior years statistics are now better.

The lack of contested and competitive districts has contributed to a decreasing voter turnout in Virginia. The voter turnout for statewide and House of Delegates elections in 1997 was 49.5 percent; in 2001, it was 46 percent. In 2005, only 45 percent of Virginia’s registered voters participated in the statewide and House of Delegates elections, continuing a pattern of slow decline. The turnout in the 2003 House of Delegates elections, when there were no statewide races, was 31 percent. The 52.7 percent turnout in the 2006 heavily contested U.S. senatorial election was a marked contrast to the 39 percent turnout in 2002 when an incumbent U.S. Senator was contested by only two little-known candidates.

Voter turnout for 2009 General election showed a similar trend. In contrast to the 74.5 percent turnout for the 2008 presidential election, the turnout for the 2009 Virginia legislative elections was 40.4 percent, which was an improvement of the 30.2 percent turnout for the 2007 elections – the lowest reported by the State Board of Elections in its list going back to 1976.

*One of most significant effects of partisan gerrymandering – in Virginia as elsewhere in the country -- is its contribution to the increasing polarization in legislative bodies. As quoted in the LWV-VA study, *Does Your Vote Really Count*, “with little reason to fear voters, representatives increasingly cater to party insiders and donors rather than to the political center. . .; bipartisan compromise around moderate policies has taken a backseat to party loyalty, resulting in historic levels of polarization.” This is certainly true of the Virginia General Assembly in recent years. The gerrymandered districts established in the 2001 redistricting have resulted in the election of candidates who are unwilling to compromise on legislation, the budget and-- especially important for this region-- transportation issues and funding.*

We are encouraged that you are listening early before you get the revealing Census numbers. We ask that you work with the Senate in good faith and a transparent way as you work through the process. Input should and can be taken via the web and maps should be posted so the public can see and participate in the process. More hearings should be scheduled once the legislation is drafted and maps are proposed.

Virginia is the cradle of democracy in the United States. Lets again be a beacon of good governance and show the nation that by having a better system we can and will have better government for and by the people when they truly have a voice.

Thank you for listening.