



The League of Women Voters of Virginia
 P.O. Box 621 Centreville, VA 20122-0621 www.LWV-VA.org

Delivered by LWV-VA Pres. Olga Hernandez, December 6, 2010 to the House of Delegates P&E Committee Redistricting hearing at University Hall, of Mary Washington University, Stafford Campus

Good Evening, Chairman and members of the Privileges & Elections Committee. My name is Olga Hernandez, I'm president of the League of Women Voters of Virginia. Thank you for scheduling hearings early in the process. 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 drafted and voted on.

The League, a non partisan political organization, has had a position on redistricting for decades, we are not new to this venture. We come to positions after careful study and with membership input. Our most recent study on the subject can be found on our website. We have also testified before the Senate P & E committee hearings around the state.

We consider redistricting and reapportionment a basic constitutional right to fair and equal representation guaranteed to all citizens by the Constitution. It is a core principle. 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.

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 should to be adhered to. Consideration of communities of interest need to be carefully observed, incumbent protection should not.

We support a bipartisan commission to draw the lines, but absent that possibility we ask you to do your best to have a more equitable process.

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. But it troubles us to hear that an agreement may have been reached between the chambers to accept each other's plans, thus protecting incumbents and perpetrating more polarization of our government. During his campaign in 2009 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 that work for the people and not themselves. That was the idea of having a citizen legislature.

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 2009, it was 40.4 percent according to the SBE. We see a disturbing pattern of turn out decline.

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 common sense solutions 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 primaries have in-fact become the election that matters in many districts.

The gerrymandered districts established in the 2001 redistricting have resulted in the election of candidates who are unwilling to negotiate solutions on 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 House 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. Let’s 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.