

Survey of Candidates Finds Support for Nonpartisan Redistricting

A fall 2005 League of Women Voters of Virginia survey of candidates running for the House of Delegates found that candidates supported a nonpartisan, independent approach to redistricting by a margin of two to one.

Currently, the Code of Virginia gives the General Assembly the power to establish electoral districts. At the beginning of each decennial redistricting, the General Assembly puts in place the rules that will govern its process. In practice, this has meant that the political party that controls the General Assembly can set the boundaries of all of the state's election districts.

The survey by local League chapters queried 54 local candidates in 30 of the state's 100 House districts. Candidates responded to direct questions or to questions for publication in the League Voter Guides. Twenty-six candidates said they supported a nonpartisan, independent approach to redistricting and 12 said they did not. In nine other cases, candidates indicated they might support an approach, or their response could not be characterized either in support or opposition. Six candidates did not respond.

The League recently completed a study entitled "Does Your Vote Really Count?" that explored federal case law, redistricting commissions used in other states and Virginia's current legal requirements for redistricting and reapportionment. The League is now undertaking the second phase of the study, which will review the League's current position on reapportionment and redistricting, including criteria that should be considered for redistricting.

The media have noted with concern that for the 100 House of Delegates seats at stake in 2005, more than half—51—of the candidates ran unopposed. For an additional nine seats, candidates faced only minor-party opposition. In the November elections, only 12 of the races for the 100 legislative districts turned out to be "competitive"—that is, decided by a margin of less than 55 to 45 percent. Some observers have pointed to partisan redistricting as one factor that may contribute to this lack of competitiveness in elections.

Candidates' responses to the League's survey divided along partisan lines. Among the Republican respondents, 10 said they opposed a nonpartisan, independent approach to redistricting, while two, both challenging incumbents, supported such an approach. In many of these responses, candidates said the process was best left in the hands of the General Assembly, which is popularly elected. Two Republicans indicated they might support a non-partisan proposal, depending on the details, while four responses could not be characterized and four candidates surveyed did not respond.

Among Democrats, 20 candidates supported a non-partisan approach, one was opposed, and two said they might support such an approach, based on the details.

Among eight third-party candidates and Independents whose views were surveyed, four supported a non-partisan approach, one was opposed, one said it would depend on the specifics and two did not respond.

Incumbent legislators who responded to the survey supported non-partisan redistricting by a margin of 10 to 5, while their challengers supported that approach by a margin of 9 to 5. Among those vying for open seats in the House of Delegates, candidates supported a non-partisan approach by a margin of 7 to 2. Because the survey was limited to areas with local League chapters, the survey had the effect of oversampling districts in more urban areas, relative to their proportion in the state as a whole. The League is planning to conduct a survey of all members of the General Assembly later this year.

Among the six candidates for statewide office, the three Democratic candidates supported a non-partisan approach and two of the Republican candidates were opposed. Jerry Kilgore, the Republican candidate for governor, did not respond to the survey.

Question: Do you support a nonpartisan independent approach to redistricting? Why or why not?

Summary of General Assembly Candidate Responses

	Yes	No	“Maybe” or Position Not Clear	No Response
Republicans	2	10	6	5
Democrats	20	1	2	
Other	4	1	1	2
TOTAL	26	12	9	7

	Yes	No	“Maybe” or Position Unclear	No Response
Incumbents	10	5	4	3
Challengers	9	5	3	4
Open Seats	7	2	2	
TOTAL	26	12	9	7

NOTE: Responses tabulated in fall 2005