



The League of Women Voters of Virginia

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Statement of Therese Martin, League of Women Voters of Virginia, to the Virginia Independent Bipartisan Advisory Commission on Redistricting George Mason University, March 15, 2011

Good evening Chairman Holsworth and members of the Commission. I am Therese Martin, a Reston resident and member of the Board of Directors of the League of Women Voters of Virginia. I am speaking for the League tonight. I will try not to repeat what you have heard from our members at other hearings.

I was a member of the study committee that prepared the League's studies on redistricting in 2005-07, which provided the background for the League in adopting its positions on redistricting, including the criteria we believe should be followed in adopting redistricting plans. These are: the constitutional and legal requirements for equal population, compact and contiguous territory, and Voting Rights Act protection of minority voting strength; respect for jurisdictional and geographical boundaries and communities of interest; and competitiveness. They are not that different from those set forth by Governor McDonnell in the Executive Order establishing the Commission.

A couple of comments about competitiveness are in order. We realize that this is sometimes very difficult to achieve because it might conflict with respect for other criteria. But sometimes is not all the time. It is usually quite easy to discern when districts designed to respect communities of interest might not be that competitive, as compared to those that are designed purely to enable one party to have an unfair advantage at the polls – if the election is contested at all in a general election. I mentioned that I live in Reston. Our delegate district pretty much adheres to our “new town” boundaries, respecting our strong community, and is not always competitive when you look at the voting statistics, in spite of some spirited elections. Our congressional district is also relatively non-competitive. However, when you look at its lines, which include a narrow corridor connecting Reston with “inside the beltway” communities, it is quite obvious that the lines were drawn to provide partisan political advantage rather than reflect a community of interest. I am sure that you know of many other examples.

One criterion not mentioned in either the Governor's Executive Order or the League's position is “incumbency.” Here again, there is a difference between respecting incumbency so that incumbents are not placed in the same district as a means of eliminating the seat of a political opponent, and designing districts that weave around to pick up an incumbent's home to preserve his or her seat, regardless of any community of interest. The League would prefer a requirement such as that followed in Iowa where that state's Legislative Services Agency cannot consider the address of incumbents, party affiliation or previous election results when it draws the district lines. This is quite different from what has happened in Virginia in its previous redistricting; we hope that the appointment of the Commission and the criteria that you follow will mean a break from the past for Virginia.

In addition to making your own recommendations and reviewing the plans of others, including those produced by the student redistricting competition, we encourage you to review and make comparisons with or recommendations on the plans proposed by the General Assembly. This, plus the availability of a variety of plans, will be a welcome change and could well result in a fair and open process this year and make your work and the citizens' involvement meaningful.

I have lived in Virginia for 43 years and paid some attention to the state's redistricting process and results over this time; it has not been a pretty picture. It has resulted in a lack of competition at the polls, low voter turnout, extreme polarization, and legislative gridlock – and the often-heard comment about the legislators choosing their constituents rather than the other way around. The League of Women Voters of Virginia hopes that this year will mark a change because, to quote League President Olga Hernandez, “the people of Virginia deserve better. They deserve fair, sensible, impartially drawn political districts that don't undermine voters by gerrymandering the state into uncompetitive districts in which the results are deliberately tilted to one party or the other.”

We thank the Governor for appointing the Commission, and you for holding these hearings and listening to us and the other citizens of Virginia.

Therese Martin
March 15, 2011