



**LEAGUE OF WOMEN VOTERS[®]
OF VIRGINIA**

P.O. Box 621, Centreville, VA 20122
(703) 831-8595, www-lwv-va.org

The following information will help you to understand the arguments in support of the LWV-VA position. Remember that if you will be testifying or commenting, you do so as an individual, not as a representative of the Virginia League.

Current LWV-VA Position on Reapportionment/Redistricting

The League of Women Voters of Virginia supports the establishment, in law, of a politically balanced and independent Reapportionment Commission for each decennial redistricting to prepare, with the Virginia Department of Legislative Services, a plan for submission to the legislature as specified by the Virginia Constitution. The Commission should be bi-partisan and be composed of individuals who are not elected officials; they should represent the geographical distribution and demographic diversity of the state, and consist of an uneven number of members.

In addition to the Virginia constitutional requirement of equal population, contiguous and compact districts and the Voting Rights Act requirements for protecting the voting strength of minority groups, the League supports the following considerations in redistricting:

- Natural geographic boundaries;
- Jurisdictional boundaries;
- Communities of interest; and
- Competitiveness

The Virginia constitution should be amended to provide that redistricting will occur on a decennial basis only. (2007)

Some Talking Points about the Need for Redistricting Reform

- 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 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. They are core rights for the citizens of Virginia.

- The League of Women Voters and other organizations believe 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. This session could be one of the last opportunities to change the redistricting process before it is called upon to redraw Virginia’s legislative district lines for the 2011 elections.
- The current system of redistricting in Virginia 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. This turns representative government upside-down.
- As has been the case nationwide, partisan gerrymandering has severely reduced the number of competitive seats in Virginia. When legislators redistrict to protect incumbents, then challengers are reluctant to invest their time and money in a nearly impossible challenge. In 2003, the number of competitive seats in Virginia was four of 40 in the Senate and nine of 100 in the House of Delegates. Sixty-nine Delegates had no major party opponent. This means that more than two-thirds of the Delegates did not face any major party opposition in 2003. The numbers in 2005 showed only a slight improvement. More than half of the candidates (51) for the House of Delegates ran unopposed and in an additional nine seats, there was only minor-party opposition. Thus, three-fifths of the Delegates did not face any major party opponent. Only twelve of the races for the 100 Delegate seats turned out to be competitive (races won with 55 percent of the vote or less).

Recent history is not pretty either. 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.”

- In the 2004 and 2006 congressional races in Virginia, only one of eleven seats was competitive. In 2008, incumbents had no opposition in two of Virginia’s 11 congressional districts, and only three of the races were decided by a margin of fewer than 10 percentage points.
- 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.

Recent voter turnout for November elections has shown a similar trend. In contrast to the 74.5 percent turnout for the 2008 presidential election, the turnout for the 2009 Virginia legislative elections in 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 takes 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 transportation issues and funding.

Virginia Interfaith Center for Public Policy Talking Points: Gerrymandering and Redistricting Reform

Virginia’s General Assembly convenes once a decade to redraw the lines of their electoral districts. While intended to balance out population shifts in the Commonwealth, the process has always been highly partisan. In 2011, a new round of redistricting will occur.

1. Partisan gerrymandering puts political considerations ahead of community interests.
2. Bipartisan redistricting increases governmental legitimacy in the eyes of the public.
3. Partisan gerrymandering results in legislative gridlock.
4. Bipartisan redistricting results in a more efficient government.

Partisan gerrymandering puts political considerations ahead of community interests.

- Gerrymandering allows politicians to choose their constituents rather than the other way around.
- Governments should encourage community cohesion, rather than division. Gerrymandering sometimes splits communities, which then lose one dedicated supporter for their issues and gain numerous representatives who can afford to ignore them politically. (Some notable examples are Joe Morrissey’s 74th House district, Chris Jones’ 76th House district, and Creigh Deed’s 25th Senatorial district.)
- Gerrymandering creates “safe” districts which results in uncontested elections and reduced voter turnout.

Bipartisan redistricting increases governmental legitimacy.

- Placing the power to draw district lines in an independent commission eliminates or reduces problems such as deadlock in drawing district lines that then requires Court intervention.

- Politicians have a conflict of interest between creating fair districts and increasing their party's political power and their own political safety.
- Partisan redistricting allows a small majority to dominate one or both chambers of the General Assembly, marginalizing a significant bloc of voters statewide.

Partisan gerrymandering results in legislative gridlock.

- Creation of gerrymandered "safe" districts usually results in the election of candidates who are at the extreme edges of their party and unwilling to compromise to enact legislation that is controversial in any way or not favored by political party leaders.
- Due to the increase in "safe" seats, legislators have less of a need to compromise. By lowering the number of "safe" seats, bipartisan redistricting lessens both the likelihood of gridlock and partisan bias in decision-making.

A redistricting commission results in a more efficient government.

- Statistically, maps crafted by bipartisan commissions result in less litigation, freeing up court dockets and saving taxpayers' money in court operation.
- By shifting redistricting responsibility to a commission, legislators have more time to tend to the people's business, like passing a state budget or reaching a solution on transportation funding, during the normal session.
- Legislators elected from competitive, non-gerrymandered districts are more likely to enact legislation based on its merits and the good of the Commonwealth rather than on party-line directives.