

Redistricting Panelists Consider Gerrymandering at Loudoun LWV Forum

by Lois Page, LWV-VA Voter Coordinator

Greg Lucyk, President of OneVirginia2021, says that gerrymandering is “corruption.” “It is the deliberate manipulation of boundaries to disadvantage another group. This is no different from using funds illegally.”

Lucyk was speaking at a recent forum on redistricting sponsored by OneVirginia2021 and the League of Women Voters of Loudoun County. Panelists were welcomed by LWVLC president Priscilla Godfrey. The forum title was “Will Ending Gerrymandering Stop Political Gridlock?” The answer from the forum participants was yes.

Also on the panel were Stephen Farnsworth, author and professor of political science at Mary Washington University and director of leadership and media for OneVirginia. Dr. Farnsworth pointed out that we have turned democracy on its head since the politicians now choose the voters. The only action in an election is in the primaries. The recent House races were over before the election began.

With this growing polarization, no compromise is possible or you will lose in the primary. Sen Warner ran into trouble as a centrist candidate. There was very little ticket splitting in the recent election.

He pointed out the irony of Eric Cantor’s recent primary loss. Apparently in the last redistricting, Congressman Cantor worked to make his district even more “safe” for Republicans. It became so super Republican that he was seen as a moderate.

The policy consequences, he said, affect things like Medicaid expansion. One half of Medicaid recipients in Virginia are in very Republican districts. Yet the party does not have to answer to their needs, just to the 5% that vote in the primaries.

Meg Heubeck, Director, UVA Center for Politics and Youth Leadership, spoke about the need to take the “dis” out of civil discourse. She works extensively with middle and high schools students to teach them about democracy, how to lead others to democracy and how to protect what we have. Key words for her are Discourse, Debate, and Compromise.

The Virginia Standards of Learning, the required subject matter for Virginia students, make a fairly vague reference to redistricting and she feels her role is to fill in the blanks. She and her college students are working on video games and a board game that requires student to work together. It will be available to print out from their website.

Her boss is Larry Sabato, UVA political commentator whose most recent book is “A More Perfect Constitution.”

Lucyk, formerly Chief Staff Attorney of the Virginia Supreme Court, is upbeat about the chances of getting those who have the power to give it up. He is convinced that the only way to achieve non-partisan independent redistricting is to pass a constitutional amendment. The Virginia Supreme Court has traditionally struck down challenges to redistricting based on the current constitution. States that have managed to reform

redistricting have done so via ballot initiative, but Virginians do not have that option. If it is in Constitution, courts will have less latitude to make exceptions.

What OneVirginia is suggesting at this point is that an independent non-partisan commission be required and that specific criteria for the districts be included. Among the criteria being suggested: 1) avoidance of splitting political subdivisions 2) equal population but with some leeway in order to meet other criteria 3) racial and ethnic fairness 4) contiguity in that you don't have to cross another district to get to another part of yours, 4) compactness—there are numerical measures to help define this---no “tendrils or fingers,” 5) and prohibition of the use of political data to draw the lines, except as needed to comply with the Voting Rights Act.

“We think we can do it,” Lucyk said. Among the developments, Sen. John Miller has submitted a bill already seeking a voter referendum on reforming the redistricting process. Six other bills are being submitted for the upcoming session in order to raise awareness. They plan to have videographers at every committee and subcommittee meeting. (The subcommittees are where the previous bills have died by an unrecorded 4 to 2 vote.) They are hoping to make it an election issue.

In the most recent election, Virginia had the lowest turnout rate in the country. Both California and Arizona saw turnout increase greatly once they had established independent commissions. Lucyk says polls show 75% of Virginians want to see the line drawing taken away from the legislators.

The window of opportunity is short. OneVirginia2021 and its many partners hope to, at the very least, raise awareness in the next legislative session. If they can get a bill passed this session, there would have to be an election, then passage in a second session. The next and last chance would be passage in the 2017 session, followed by another election, then passage by a second legislative body. If that fails, it will be 15 years from now before the process can be changed.

The forum took place November 13, 2014.