

# VIRGINIA

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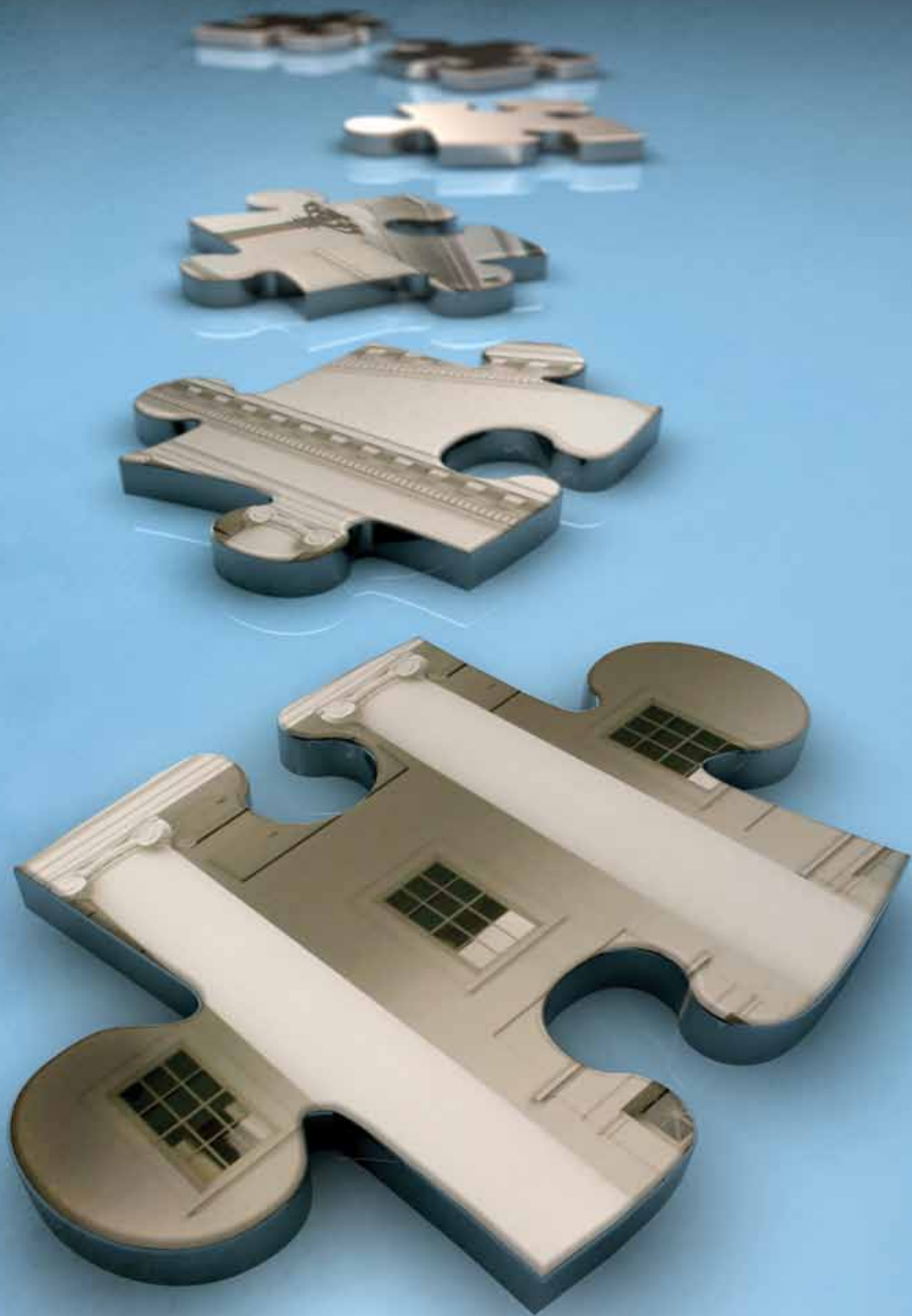
The magazine of the Virginia Municipal League

# Redistricting

In search of a better solution

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Harrisonburg embraces  
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# Redistricting

## In search of a better solution

**G**ERRYMANDERING IS A form of political hardball as old as the Republic in states such as Virginia, where it is still used effectively. This redistricting tool allows majority-party legislators to draw enough uncompetitive districts and pick enough of their own voters to keep lopsided partisan majorities.

Massachusetts Gov. Elbridge Gerry may get the credit for being the first to use political maps as a tool to influence elections, but “gerrymandering,” as the method has been coined, is believed to have originated in our Commonwealth much earlier. Scholars point to Patrick Henry as the first example of political redistricting in the United States. In the 1780s as governor of Virginia, he attempted to fix an election by creating a district to force Federalist James Madison to face anti-federalist James Monroe; the election results were not what Henry had planned. The practice of gerrymandering has not changed much over the past 228 years of our country’s history. What has changed is the technology used to draw the lines more ruthlessly and effectively and the large amounts of money behind this subtle practice.

Redistricting has evolved from Patrick Henry and political vendettas to incorporate vast amounts of personal data and computers that give majority parties the ability to draw maps down to an individual house. The drawing of political maps is arguably the most important factor in determining the political make-up of our state and country.

Political parties, corporations and special interests allocate vast amounts of resources into gaining the legislative majority for the next census and the power to fix the lines. The major parties of Virginia are equally at fault over the

past four decades with Democrats drawing in their favor in the years of their majorities and the Republicans in their years of majority control. Incumbents sitting in majority numbers are willing to trade away constitutional rights and our representative democracy in order to secure their seats and personal agendas for at least a few years.

Virginia is ranked as one of the most gerrymandered states in the country both on the congressional and state levels based on lack of compactness and contiguity of its districts. Throughout the Commonwealth, counties and cities

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are being broken in half or into multiple pieces to create heavily favored partisan districts, with 46 localities split in the Virginia Senate district maps and 59 localities divided in the House of Delegates’ maps. In 2013, 56 candidates in the House of Delegates faced no real competition in the general election, with 22 Democrats and 34 Republicans facing no major-party challenger. Of the remaining 44 races, only 19 were considered competitive to some degree. With no real ability of the electorate to choose otherwise in safe districts, politicians are free to pursue their own personal ideologies and ignore the voters who cannot hold them accountable in a competitive race.

Future demographic trends project that after the 2020 census, Virginia will

gain a 12th congressional seat due to population growth in Northern Virginia. If current patterns hold, it will be easy to draw the lines so that the vast majority of congressional districts will remain uncompetitive in November elections. Redistricting reform is not an issue we can set aside and bring up when convenient. Without action before the 2020 census the next chance we have for reform is 2031. To be fair to voters, Virginia needs change within six years.

The American Bar Association says that American citizens’ right to vote can be diminished by politically drawn legislative districts that threaten to predetermine an election’s outcome. The ABA this year went on record to urge governments to assign the redistricting process for legislative districts to independent commissions with full citizen participation. The ABA is one of a large number of groups expressing growing concern about gerrymandering across the nation and around Virginia.

Politics in Virginia is changing, and it is changing more rapidly than at any time in recent decades. One of the reasons for this is the fast changing media. Perhaps a bigger reason is the rapidly changing demographics of Virginia. The trend toward more and more highly partisan-leaning districts and fewer competitive elections in November is leading to legislative gridlock and an inability or unwillingness to engage in bipartisan compromise.

Thanks to the rapid demographic changes, including in-migration of people so that more than half of all Virginians were born outside the Commonwealth and more than one in 10 born in another country, the former one-party state of Virginia most closely mirrors the nation’s partisan political divide. We are the most purple state, a political consultant’s dream state.

## Redistricting

Some of the unhealthiest changes in politics during the past three decades are related to the super-partisan redistricting that follows each federal census. The aisles separating Democrats and Republicans in the legislature are growing wider and more hazardous for members to cross. Areas where compromise and cooperation could be reached are harder to find. Many a legislator today may be more worried about a June party nominating primary with its narrow party base than a November general election. Legislators are given more incentives to play to the base and not to a more moderate general electorate. Spring primaries, with their low turnouts, now offer the best chance to defeat incumbents in super-partisan districts.

Here are nine good reasons to support reform of redistricting in Virginia:

- Reform will result in fewer “safe” seats and encourage candidates to appeal to all voters, not just their partisan “base” voters.
- Reform will reduce the number of localities split among multiple congressional, House of Delegates and state Senate districts.
- Reform will make legislators more responsive to all of their constituents.
- Reform will encourage legislators to seek real solutions, not just talking points for the next campaign.
- Reform will increase the number of competitive districts and thus give voters more of a choice than they have today.
- Reform will diminish the clout of partisan special interests.
- Reform will make the redistricting process transparent.
- Reform will empower all Virginians to have a voice in the redistricting process.
- Reform will put Virginia on the map as a model of good government and encourage other states to follow our lead.

Until partisan line-drawing is reformed, Virginia will have screwy-looking districts that often make no sense to voters, many of whom do not know which districts they live in or who represents them. With reduced levels

of competition, voter participation also plummets.

A new bipartisan grassroots effort was launched this year in Virginia to take redistricting out of the proverbial smoke-filled rooms where super-partisanship governs the redrawing of legislative districts.

The group calls itself OneVirginia2021: Virginians for Fair Redistricting. It made its public debut Feb. 18 and heard Charlottesville’s Leigh Middleitch, Lynchburg’s Shannon Valentine and Richmond’s Jim Ukrop as they outlined the group’s goal. The tall task is convincing the General Assembly and a majority of Virginians to adopt a constitutional amendment to create compact districts with more competition. At the launching of the group, Sen. Bryce Reeves, R-Spotsylvania, read a statement of support from fellow Republican and former Lt. Gov. Bill Bolling.

“Unfortunately, Virginia legislative districts have too often been drawn for the express purpose of reducing competition,” Bolling noted. “This tends to empower the most extreme voices in both political parties, and that is not good for the legislative process.” He added his hope that the General Assembly “will pass meaningful redistricting reform and ensure that future legislative districts are drawn to promote neutral principles such as compactness, contiguity and common interests without regard to political advantage.”

The group has a simple mission guided by the principle that “Virginia’s state and congressional districts belong to its citizens and not to any legislator, interest group or political party. Districts should be drawn with citizens’ interests in mind, encouraging healthy debate and public participation in the process.” It advocates non-partisan redistricting, which a few places such as Iowa have done but which some people say is impossible. Removing partisanship as the primary driver of redistricting is hard, but not impossible. The effort will be worth it to restore trust, compromise and fair competition to politics.

Anyone interested in eliminating the divisiveness of gerrymandering can visit the new group’s website at [OneVirginia2021.org](http://OneVirginia2021.org). The effort to reform redistricting may take four to six years

to change Virginia’s Constitution, but it may be as healthy to politics as banning smoking in restaurants has been for people’s lungs. Already the small town of Glade Spring in Southwest Virginia has demonstrated that localities can join the movement for reform.

Led by Mayor Lee Coburn, the town passed a resolution urging Virginians to join and support the effort to reform redistricting. On March 12, the town council unanimously adopted the following resolution, which reads in part:


WHEREAS the organization OneVirginia2021 supports the belief that Virginia’s historical practice of redistricting by the majority party in each legislative chamber is an outdated practice that stifles political competition, discourages compromise and ensures continued control by the party in power; and,

WHEREAS OneVirginia2021 believes that Virginia’s state and congressional districts belong to its citizens and not to any legislator, interest group or political party; and,

WHEREAS OneVirginia2021 believes the redistricting process should not be a tool used by those in power to protect and bolster their power, but should be designed with the best interest of Virginia’s democracy and its citizens; and,

WHEREAS, the need is critical to restore trust, compromise and fair competition to Virginia politics;

NOW, THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED, that the Town Council of Glade Spring, Virginia, fully supports the goals of OneVirginia2021: Virginians for Fair Redistricting to depoliticize the redrawing of legislative district lines with an approach that advocates for fairness, transparency and accountability and keeps the citizens’ interests in mind, encourages healthy debate and participation by the public in the process.

Anyone can join the effort. 

### About the authors

*Bob Gibson is executive director of the Sorenson Institute at the University of Virginia. Matt Scoble is executive director of OneVirginia2021.*