

FAIR DISTRICTS--THE “GAME CHANGER” WE NEED

In January of this year, veteran Republican campaign strategist **Bill Pascoe** wrote, *“Once every decade--in years that end in zero--true political junkies get to spend an entire year basking in the glow of the national campaign over redistricting. For them, it's like the Super Bowl, March Madness, the World Series, and the Daytona 500 all wrapped up in one, but spread out over dozens of key states. In anticipation of the constitutionally-mandated redistricting that takes place the following year, Republicans and Democrats go to war over key governors' mansions and targeted state legislative seats, working both offense and defense to shut out their opponents where possible, and grab a seat at the table where necessary. From command bunkers in Washington, DC and in the state capitals, campaign resources (money, manpower, and media) are directed in highly targeted fashion, all with a view to gaining an edge here or a foothold there.”*

In raw terms, this is how political parties have traditionally drawn legislative and congressional districts in most states. In polite terms, it is called redistricting or reapportionment, but it is also known as “*gerrymandering*.” And while this “*game*” is catnip for political junkies and party operatives, is this how we----the CITIZENS---want to be represented? Aren't we supposed to pick our representatives, and not the other way around? Is this why partisan rancor is at fever pitch and why Washington and many state capitols seem paralyzed?

The New York Times' **John Harwood** wrote on February 21, “...*Yet rising fervor in each party's ideological base limits the ability of Congressional leaders to bargain even when they want to. Former Representative Tom Davis of Virginia, a past chairman of the Republicans' House campaign committee, said the most important step in restoring their flexibility was moving toward a less partisan redistricting process that, instead of giving most members districts packed with partisan allies, produced more balanced districts that made candidates fight for votes in the center.*”

Earlier in January, the Wall Street Journal's **Jesse Bravin** quoted Supreme Court Justice **John Paul Stevens** repeated concern, “*The gerrymandering practice is very, very harmful to the community at large and I think it tends to accentuate the differences, the very strong differences between the political parties.*”

And although many politicians continue to defend this “tradition,” an increasing number---Democrat, Republican, Independent, unaffiliated alike---see gerrymandering as a deep, systemic problem that can no longer be dismissed.

Having been an elected official, I know the pressures exerted by populists, partisans and special interests. I know the political consequences and isolation that come from not bending to those pressures. But I also know that the majority of voters, however silent or unorganized they may be, want statesmanship, consensus and common sense. They want ethical behavior. They want honest and transparent communication. They want problems solved. And while my experience can be framed in more of a local

context, I now painfully watch those state legislators and members of Congress who are trying to rise above populist emotion, politics as usual and special interest agendas, but find no oxygen in the room or place at the table for them.

Obviously, some fundamental change is needed. Two answers: Redistricting reform and solution-oriented candidates. To enable the second, we need the first. To bring oxygen into the room and a place at the table for candidates who can elevate the dialogue and be more effective in reaching consensus and finding solutions, we need to reform the way districts are drawn. They need to be drawn through a process that is both fair and standards-based. The positive, measurable benefits from redistricting reform in states like Arizona and Iowa speak for themselves. States like Indiana and Virginia are moving forward with redistricting reform bills and, through political leadership or public pressure, or both, are attracting bipartisan support.

Floridians will soon have their chance to enact redistricting reform. The League of Women Voters strongly supports two amendments that will be on the November 2010 ballot. We were instrumental in gathering signatures and will be focused on voter education until election day. We should start now to get the word out to our families, neighbors, friends and colleagues about the amendments' benefits. There is substantial opposition from incumbents in the Florida Legislature and some partisan-oriented organizations. We need to be armed with facts and solid arguments as opponents ramp up their efforts. Let's all memorize the language of the two amendments, and be prepared to defend what is a fundamental "game changer" for the health of our state and nation.

Amendment 5 (Legislative Districts) & Amendment 6 (Congressional Districts)---

(Legislative)(Congressional) Districts or districting plans may not be drawn to favor or disfavor an incumbent or political party. Districts shall not be drawn to deny racial or language minorities the equal opportunity to participate in the political process and elect representatives of their choice. Districts must be contiguous. Unless otherwise required, districts must be compact, as equal in population as feasible, and where feasible must make use of existing city, county and geographical boundaries.

<http://www.fairdistrictsflorida.org/home.php>

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