

LWVO Spotlight On...Redistricting

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The League of Women Voters of Ohio has long been involved with the issue of redistricting. Why the importance? Because representatives should be responsive to voters and redistricting can create an unnatural number of “safe seats” – where a candidate of a given party is virtually assured of winning the general election. Redistricting can also create representatives who, in the aggregate, do not reflect the political will of the voters. In 2006, for example, 53% of the total vote in Ohio went to Democratic Congressional candidates. However, the Ohio delegation to Congress consists of 7 Democrats and 11 Republicans – or 39% Democratic. While there is rarely a perfect match between the total number of votes cast for Congressional candidates of one party and that party’s percentage of the Ohio delegation, Ohio has the distinction of having the largest mismatch in the nation. There is a similar mismatch at the state level with Republicans holding large majorities in both the Ohio House and Senate despite voters’ clear choice of Democratic candidates in virtually all statewide contests. Twenty years ago, when the Democrats were in charge of drawing the lines, similar mismatches existed, only at that time they benefited the Democrats. No matter which party draws the lines, they end up unnaturally favoring one party – not favoring the voters.

Under the Ohio Constitution, the Ohio Apportionment Board (the Governor, Secretary of State, State Auditor, one Republican appointed by the legislature, and one Democrat appointed by the legislature) draws the district lines for the Ohio house and Senate seats. The General Assembly, subject to the veto of the Governor, draws the lines for the Congressional districts.

House Joint Resolution 1. Rep. DeWine has introduced HJR 1 this session, which is virtually identical to Am. HJR 13 voted on last session. The vote on Am. HJR 13 in the House was along party lines, and did not achieve the 60% passage rate required to place a constitutional amendment on the ballot.

HJR 1 would place on the ballot an amendment to create an independent Apportionment Board to draw the lines for Congressional districts, and Ohio House and Senate districts. The legislature would appoint two Democrats and two Republicans, and those four people would appoint three other members. Plans can be submitted to the Board and are judged on their ability to keep political subdivision intact. The Board is also to consider maximizing the number of competitive districts when selecting a plan.

Last year, the League supported the general structure of the independent Apportionment Board. The League recommended some improvements, such as more public input and more transparency to the process. It also recommended more safeguards to make sure the Board didn’t draw “safe seats” for each party. As the debate continues, the League is advocating for the Eight Points for Redistricting Reform, found at www.lwvohio.org.

In summary, the League supports a process of redistricting that does not favor one party over the other and favors districts in which candidates of either party have a fair opportunity of winning.