

The League and the Effort to Eliminate Gerrymandering

Is gerrymandering undermining democracy? Former US Congressman William Clinger (R-PA, 1979-1997) believes it is and he is lecturing wherever he can to try to explain the situation and why he believes democracy is so threatened. With the Congressional disapproval rating at about 74%, mostly for inaction, democracy is not healthy. (This is by no means the only sign of a weakened democracy.)

I recently heard Mr. Clinger speak at a forum at the Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Greater Naples, Florida. While gerrymandering has been around for a long time, Mr. Clinger said, two things make the situation more dire. First, the Supreme Court decision which ruled that gerrymandering was not unconstitutional as long as certain criteria were met. This now means that if gerrymandering is to be eliminated or minimized it will have to be done state by state, a process that will take a long time.

The second significant change is that sophisticated computer technology has now enabled controlling party state legislators a way to redraw district maps so that they meet the criteria of the Supreme Court. With these redrawn lines by the dominant party the victory of incumbents is almost ensured.

What's wrong with this? We've all probably heard Republicans in blue Massachusetts comment "why should I vote? My vote won't count." In many states this opinion is common leading to non-voting because the results are geared to be very one-sided. In addition moderates tend to lose in primaries where typically voter turnout is low, leaving voting to those on both sides who desire the more "radical" candidate. Congress therefore tends to represent those on the fringes who care very much about primaries. Moderate incumbents often tend to side with their party's more extreme positions because they don't want to be "primary-ed" and risk losing their jobs.

Gerrymandering happens in all but 7 states, those states where population size means there is only one representative in the state to the US Congress. But a few other states are taking a different approach, often Mr. Clinger said, because of the pressure and advocacy of such groups as the **League of Women Voters**. Mr. Clinger mentioned the League several times in his talk, always with praise and noting in one case a lawsuit in which the League with other groups won in court. [see note at the end of this article for more on the League its work on the issue.]

How did this get to be the crisis it is today? Clinger traces it back to 2008 when the GOP undertook a massive effort to focus on governorships and state legislatures. The result was that by 2011 many more states were Republican.

Drawing district lines doesn't have to be this way. Mr. Clinger pointed to California where, when Arnold Schwarzenegger was governor (2003-2011), a non-partisan commission

was appointed to redistrict the state's 53 districts. A few other states (6) are or have moved toward independent commissions to do their redistricting.

Clinger believes there will be changes in his former state of PA where he noted the **League** has done a great job. He therefore urges affiliation and support of the **League** throughout the country. He also urges support of lawsuits that are pending in 35 states. He, himself, is part of a Reformer's Caucus which has identified about a handful of states to focus on at the 2020 census and redistricting approaches. As a trustee of the Chautauqua Institution in southwest NYS, Clinger said there will be a gathering of Leaguers and other interested persons in late spring to be part of a conference and training.

Finally, Mr. Clinger was honest enough to say that he would not be advocating his current position if he was still an office holder. I felt this comment was a testimony to the extreme pressure Congresspeople are under to tow the party line and to hold on to their seats.

To read more about the issue and in particular about the League and this issue, please go to <https://www.lwv.org/voting-rights/redistricting>. A click here will give you more information including the LWVUS program "People Powered Fair Maps."

Judy Thomas

At-large Board Member