

Guest commentary: Help end gerrymandering, help get redistricting reform on the 2010 ballot

By SANDY PARKER / President, League of Women Voters of Collier County

Saturday, August 1, 2009

Every 10 years following the national census, the Florida Constitution requires the state Legislature to redraw congressional and state legislative district lines to reflect changes in population, a process called redistricting.

In reality, whichever party is in control of the Legislature at the time does its level best to redraw districts in its own favor, virtually assuring that majority party incumbents will be re-elected, new party candidates will be elected from "safe" districts, and the minority party will be left without any real political power. With sophisticated tracking systems, politicians can now choose their constituents rather than voters choosing their representatives.

This process is called gerrymandering and results in district maps that look like a jigsaw puzzle, often dividing counties, cities and neighborhoods.

For example, Florida House District 101, currently represented by Matt Hudson, begins in eastern Collier County, crosses the Everglades and includes parts of Broward County. House District 112, currently represented by David Rivera, includes parts of Collier, Broward and Miami-Dade counties.

Florida Senate District 27, currently represented by Dave Aronberg, covers parts of Palm Beach, Lee, Charlotte, Hendry and Glades counties.

Florida Senate District 39, currently represented by Larcenia Bullard, covers Monroe and parts of Broward, Collier, Hendry, Miami-Dade and Palm Beach counties.

None of these incumbents held state legislative office at the time of the last redistricting.

This is not a Republican or Democratic issue, but a good government issue. These gerrymandered districts make no sense.

A coalition of organizations including AARP, the League of Women Voters, Common Cause and others are working with Fair Districts Florida for a nonpartisan, equitable and open redistricting process. It has not been easy. Similar efforts in the past have failed, because they require amending the Florida Constitution.

All the state constitution requires now is that the Legislature draws districts that are contiguous and fairly equal in population.

The constitutional amendments we support would prohibit drawing districts to favor an incumbent or a party and would ensure that districts are compact, contiguous and make use of existing city, county and geographical boundaries where possible. They would also require that districts be drawn so as not to deny a minority group an equal opportunity to elect representatives of their choice.

There are two different amendments: one concerning congressional redistricting and one concerning redistricting for the state Legislature. Placing this important matter on the 2010 ballot so voters can decide requires that 676,811 signatures for each petition be collected and validated.

Please help us get this initiative on the ballot. Go to www.lwvcolliercounty.org and click on "Act Now — Sign Fair Districts Petitions." Print and sign both petitions and mail them to the address on the bottom of the forms.

If you would like us to mail you the petitions, please call (239) 263-4656 and leave your name and address on the answering machine. If you would like a speaker from the League of Women voters to come to your organization to explain redistricting reform, answer questions and bring petitions for your members to sign, please contact us at (239) 263-4656 or lwvcc@lwvcolliercounty.org.

Help us bring fairness to redistricting and give voters a real voice in choosing their representatives.



© 2009 Scripps Newspaper Group — Online