

PUBLIC TESTIMONY ON CONGRESSIONAL REDISTRICTING
BEFORE THE STATE GOVERNMENT AND ELECTION SUB-COMMITTEE ON
REDISTRICTING

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Good afternoon, my name is Susan Hesselgesser, Executive Director of the League of Women Voters, Greater Dayton Area. Thank you for the opportunity to discuss the important issue of redistricting. The opportunity to speak to this panel on this key issue is a bright spot in a dim, confusing and painful time for Ohioans.

I wanted to speak to you today because I have the privilege of working every day for the League of Women Voters. In this role we listen daily to the frustration of a public that is weary of the economy, fearful for their future and distrusting of their government. Voters call our office because they want to reach their representatives, local state and federal, and they want to be heard.

Especially in the current political climate, we know that citizens understand that Democracy is a complex and challenging form of government but they also make it clear they want to believe in our government, as defined by Abraham Lincoln, as one "of the people, by the people and for the people" and one, in which the constitution guarantees basic personal and political rights that include fair and free elections.

We can all agree, a way to begin to restore the faith in our democratic system is to work together to ensure the sanctity of the voting booth, the one place where the ground is level and every citizen is equal.

I am pleased Secretary of State Husted realizes the current districts are skewed in a way that separate neighbors and undermine fair community representation. Husted has said, "Ohio has used a hyper-partisan process of drawing districts for far too long, the time is now for Ohio to adopt a proposal to end the partisan gerrymandering that serves political parties over the public." (9/24/09 *Columbus Government Examiner*)

I am no scholar on redistricting. Though, through the research I have done on the ins and outs of the redistricting process, I can readily understand public wariness. The importance of geographic compactness and the avoidance of splitting counties and municipalities are key to proper and fair community representation. The opportunity to gerrymander and crack a community into several districts, to favor one party over another, is tempting for the party in charge of the process, though that obvious political strategy is deeply flawed when the process breeds distrust among the people.

Montgomery County, the central home of our Greater Dayton League, is a key example. There is no reason why it could not have remained the once compact district it was in 1990. Instead, today, the county map resembles a donut hole the with center being the downtown area of Dayton and the

remainder of the country being stretched and divided into other districts creating strongholds for one party over another. The current districts leave some voters feeling they have no hope of ever electing someone they feel best represents their interests and their community. This unfair gerrymandering discourages citizens from voting, which is a threat to our state and our nation's democratic process.

I am encouraged by news of the 6 member legislative task force, announced in June by House Speaker William Bachelder that includes both Republican House Speaker John Boehner and Cleveland Democrat Dennis Kucinich. (*DDN June 17, 2011*). This task force will be charged with providing demographics and research help for the state apportionment board, in charge of redrawing state legislative districts. (By October 1.)

This same information may also be utilized by the League of Women Voters, in partnership with Ohio Citizen Action, who will, once again, sponsor a community contest engaging, and encouraging independent citizens and community groups to propose fair legislative districts.

The last contest, sponsored by the League in 2009, netted 14 plans submitted by the public generating three winners that met the criteria of fairness, compactness, competitiveness and best community interest.

The findings from that contest noted that "even the worst scoring plan submitted in the competition was quantitatively fairer than the actual 2000 redistricting plan." We hope each of you here today will encourage the task force to seriously consider the winning public offerings that are sure to be generated by this citizen contest. (*New districts need to be in place by the 2012 primary*)

Because of the current climate in Washington and Ohio's struggling economy, today's citizen is more engaged and informed. They want to be heard and they want to be fairly involved in an election process where their vote counts. This is good news as interest and energy is vital to maintaining the strong democracy that was our founding father's grand experiment and is ours to preserve for our nation's future.

Thank you again for the opportunity to address this panel. We look forward to the process ahead.