

Opinions

An independent panel for redistricting

By Nancy Soreng and Dianne Blais January 29

Nancy Soreng is co-president of the League of Women Voters of Maryland. Dianne Blais is co-president of the League of Women Voters of Virginia.

As the legislatures of our respective states begin their 2016 sessions, the League of Women Voters of Virginia and the League of Women Voters of Maryland are joining forces to urge lawmakers to adopt meaningful reforms of the redistricting process. More specifically, we urge them to turn the process over to independent commissions.

The process through which congressional and legislative districts are drawn must be a fair and nonpartisan one. In both of our states, the process has been hijacked for partisan purposes. In Maryland, the blame lies with the Democrats who control the Maryland General Assembly. In Virginia, the blame lies with the Republicans who control the Virginia General Assembly.

This sorry state of affairs has, not surprisingly, caused parts of both states' 2010 redistricting plans to wind up in court. In Virginia, a federal [judicial panel ordered the redrawing of congressional districts](#) after finding that the last plan approved by that state's General Assembly sought to pack as many African Americans as possible into the 3rd Congressional District, represented by Rep. Robert C. "Bobby" Scott (D). A federal district court found that the General Assembly violated the Supreme Court's new mandate requiring that plans be drawn without regard to race.

Meanwhile, the [Supreme Court agreed that a lawsuit brought by a voter challenging Maryland's 3rd Congressional District can proceed](#). That district, considered among the most gerrymandered in the nation, has been described by U.S. Circuit Judge Paul V. Niemeyer as a "[broken-winged pterodactyl](#), lying prostrate across the center of the state."

When politicians choose their voters, as opposed to voters choosing their representatives, partisan polarization and voter apathy inevitably increase. As The Post previously noted, in [November's Virginia General Assembly elections](#), the vast majority of voters had no choice at all: In only [49 of the state's 140 races for the state Senate and House of Delegates](#) did both of the major parties bother to even field a candidate. Even when a Republican and a Democrat faced off, the

margin of victory averaged nearly 20 percentage points. It is no wonder that voter turnout dropped to the lowest level since Virginia began keeping records in the 1970s. The situation is [equally egregious in Maryland](#). In 17 of the 47 races for state senator in 2014, only one major party fielded a candidate. In the races that were contested, the margin of victory in the general election averaged 32.4 percentage points.

We commend the steps that Maryland Gov. Larry Hogan (R) and Virginia Gov. Terry McAuliffe (D) have taken to promote turning this important process over to independent commissions that would be protected from partisan interference. Last year, the Supreme Court affirmed that states could make use of independent commissions to prepare redistricting plans, as a number of states already do.

The 2020 Census, after which the next round of redistricting will occur, is only four years away. Now is the time for our legislators to promote a healthy democracy instead of merely preserving their political futures.

Read more about this issue:

[The Post's View: A carnival of cakewalks in November's elections in Virginia](#)

[The Post's View: The gerrymandering jig should be up](#)

[The Post's View: Virginia's powerless voters](#)

[Todd Eberly: A model redistricting plan from the Maryland GOP](#)



The Post Recommends

Study supports practicing yoga in late pregnancy

Even some previously contraindicated poses

HEALTHBEAT: Complex issue of when to stop mammograms

Lost in the arguing over whether women should begin mammograms at age 40 or 50 or somewhere in between is the issue they'll all eventually face: when to stop.

Another potential 'First Guy' on the 2016 trail: Meet Frank

There's another man out on the presidential campaign trail this year looking to become America's first gentleman.
