

Redistricting Reform: League of Women Voters Pushes for Fair Maps

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With the new Census set to paint a clear picture of North Carolina's demographics in 2020, local officials and activists alike are pushing for a fairer way to draw districts for state and federal representatives.

The League of Women Voters of Henderson County hosted an NC Fair District Reform program Tuesday afternoon at Fletcher Town Hall, the first of two programs on the topic, describing in detail the problem of gerrymandering and looking at ways to make the state's maps fairer, including pending legislation.

The second event is set for 6 p.m. Thursday at the main branch of the Henderson County Public Library in Hendersonville.

Among the attendees was N.C. Rep. Chuck McGrady, who offered some insight into bills he is sponsoring about redistricting and fair maps in the state House, HB 69 and HB140, or the FAIR Act. With looming uncertainty in Raleigh, now may be the best time to accomplish some redistricting reforms, he said.

Gayle Kemp, with the League of Women Voters and a former candidate who ran against McGrady for the state House of Representatives' District 117 seat, started the discussion with background on how the districts were formed and why it's important to make sure they're drawn fairly.

Elections in the U.S. express the will of the people and hold officials accountable, she said. But when it comes to gerrymandered districts, the voters' voice is stifled and their ability to hold leaders accountable stymied.

It's important to act now, Kemp said, because the maps will be redrawn after the upcoming 2020 Census. The new data will be available in 2021, when the districts will be redrawn, and they'll take effect in 2022.

When politicians draw their own districts, voters lose, she said, calling redistricting essential to restoring fair elections.

"We have an opportunity right now to stop rigging districts and have fair elections for the first time in a long time," she said, stressing that both parties have participated in gerrymandering.

It's an American issue about fairness and the representation of voters, not a political party issue, Kemp said. The primary purpose of fair districting is to preserve and protect the democracy.

She said districts get gerrymandered based on the party affiliations of residents, creating safe districts that may often not even see candidates challenging the incumbent, and forming a reliable majority for the party in power.

That causes voters, especially young people to lose confidence in the system and opt out, she said, leading to gridlock in the system.

Sharing results of the 2018 election in the state General Assembly, she showed just how gerrymandered the state is, where most seats simply fell into either a safe Democratic district or a safe Republican district.

Kemp said that both parties do it, but two wrongs don't make a right. It has an impact on the issues voters care about, from jobs and economic opportunity to national security, she said. Representatives in safe districts don't have to listen to voters, knowing they won't face competition and can easily hold onto their seat in the upcoming election.

"The result is we accomplish nothing or one party's agenda is the only agenda," she said. "When politicians draw the lines, voters lose."

She laid out several options to accomplish fair districting, including independent commissions with no legislative input, a combination of legislative and independent commissions, nonpartisan redistricting and computer-drawn maps.

It boils down to five principles of reasonable redistricting, Kemp said: don't let politicians draw their own maps, establish a citizens' commission to draw a consensus map, use standard and simple criteria, rule out the use of other data or criteria, and limit the legislature's ability to alter maps once they're drawn.

The League of Women Voters is encouraging voters to voice their opinion to legislators and let lawmakers know that they support nonpartisan redistricting.

Pending legislation

Caren Kessler, with the League, gave a brief overview of current legislation and efforts and strategies for nonpartisan districting being practiced in other states.

Kessler said there are currently seven bills filed on redistricting, some of which are companion bills, but all of which can be looked up at www.ncleg.gov. This includes the two House Bills, HB 69 and HB 140, and McGrady serves as a primary sponsor for both.

She showed information laying out how the two bills compare on a number of different redistricting principles.

House Bill 69 would establish a nonpartisan redistricting commission which would submit a proposed plan for revising state Senate and House districts as well as U.S. House of Representative Districts. But according to the League's information, the legislature could still draw its own map after nixing two of the commission's maps.

According to the bill, House Bill 140 would set standards for redistricting, including prohibiting consideration of political affiliations of registered voters, previous election results, resident addresses of incumbent or declared candidates, any demographic information other than population except to comply with federal law, or any other data that could identify the voting tendencies of any group.

But that bill, according to information handed out at the meeting, would allow legislative services personnel to draw the first and second map and then the legislature may draw its own map.

Both bills would allow legislative leaders to appoint partisan members to a commission, but wouldn't provide a neutral process for selecting those members, the handout says.

Kessler urged people to stay informed and to encourage officials to move forward with the process, especially local elected officials like McGrady, Sen. Chuck Edwards and Rep. Cody Henson.

McGrady also encouraged people to talk to their legislators, and said the state may be at a critical point where different opinions could come together.

There's a lot of insecurity with lawsuits and the question of who will be in charge of the statehouse in the future, and that insecurity could encourage action on the issue.

He said the House Bill 69 was essentially the way Iowa lays out its maps, yet in several decades the state's legislature hasn't yet drawn the maps.

In the House, McGrady said, a majority of legislators, Republican and Democrat, have signed on to one or more of these bills. HB 69 and HB 140 both have majority support, though it's a mix of different people.

When all the votes are added up, the numbers are there for nonpartisan redistricting, he said, but it's a question of whether leadership will allow it to move forward.

The focus now should be to keep the groups working together and moving forward, McGrady said, and once movement starts to happen, the details can be worked out.