

*Sara Fitzgerald delivered these remarks of behalf of the League of Women Voters of Falls Church at the April 2 hearing on redistricting plans held by members of the General Assembly's Privileges and Elections Committees at the Fairfax County Government Center. Fitzgerald served on the Redistricting Reform Study Committee of the Virginia League of Women Voters.*

From the vantage point of the Falls Church League, the most important concern in redistricting is to protect the community of interest known as the City of Falls Church. Our 12,000 residents have a strong identity, as well as a strong history of citizen participation. I'm pleased that the redistricting plans I have had a chance to review so far have placed the city in a single district.

There are reasonable arguments that could be made on both sides for putting us into an Arlington-oriented district or into a Fairfax-oriented district. So my hope today is that you will put us into a COMPETITIVE district.

Now, I will acknowledge that that is not always possible. But it's important to remember what can happen when legislators pick their voters instead of the other way around.

In the 2009 legislative races in Virginia, 32 of the 100 members of the House of Delegates faced no opposition, and only 12 races were considered "competitive." (A race is considered competitive when it is decided by a margin of fewer than 10 percentage points, which can still be a pretty one-sided race.)

The same trend could be seen in the 2007 State Senate races. In 17 of the 40 races, the incumbent faced no opposition, and only nine races turned out to be competitive. That year, more than half of the House of Delegates candidates faced no opposition at all!

Falls Church City has a well-educated population and traditionally one of the highest voter turnout rates in the state. But in 2007, with no hotly contested statewide race on the ballot, and incumbents virtually assured of re-election, voter turnout plummeted to below 25 percent.

We face the same crisis in Congress, with too many “safe districts” for one party or the other, contributing to a polarized political environment. In 2001, the General Assembly tried to pack as many Democratic voters as possible into our own 8<sup>th</sup> Congressional District. It’s an embarrassment to all of us that its mirror image ended up bearing an uncanny resemblance to the Massachusetts district that first gave the gerrymander its name.

This protection of incumbents has many consequences. It fosters apathy, cynicism and increased polarization as elected officials are forced to play to the extremes of their parties rather than to a more moderate middle. It makes it more difficult for newcomers to break into politics, and for legislative bodies to reflect the increased diversity of the population they serve.

It’s time for Virginia to take a stand for good government. We get to go first among all the states, and wouldn’t it be refreshing for the Cradle of Democracy to set an example for the rest of the country? We commend the governor for creating a bipartisan redistricting commission, but only wish that the General Assembly was required to accept its recommendations. We commend the students who worked so hard to create new redistricting plans, and those who supported them and their competition. What better statement to send to the next generation of politicians and activists than to decide to endorse one of these plans, rather than those that are designed to preserve the status quo in the General Assembly!

Unfortunately, redistricting reform is not a sexy issue that can fit easily on a bumper sticker or a sign at a protest. But it is critical to

the prospects for good government in the Commonwealth over the next decade. We urge you, when you draw the lines, not to focus on what's best for you or your party. Think about what's best for all of us, the citizens of Virginia.