

Florida's Legislative Redistricting
Rosemary Hays-Thomas, Ph.D.
Co-President, Pensacola League of Women Voters
Psychology Professor, UWF

The League of Women Voters has been following Florida's redistricting process since information was released on reapportionment of seats due to population shifts following the 2010 Census. Every ten years, there is a flurry of activity nationwide as Congressional seats are reapportioned and state and local governing bodies redraw district boundaries. This initially objective process quickly becomes highly politicized as legislators try to draw boundaries to their own advantage through the process informally called "gerrymandering." Florida is no exception, even though our voters have given clear direction to our Legislature that boundaries should be drawn based on population and geography, not partisan or incumbent advantage. An excellent nonpartisan film, "Gerrymandering," shows how the effectiveness of your vote is diluted by this process. The documentary is available online free of charge through November 15 at http://www.indiewire.com/article/jeff_reichert_on_gerrymandering_watch_it_now_free/.

The League of Women Voters is a nonpartisan organization committed to the education of voters and to advocacy for issues that we have studied and on which we have adopted positions. We work to "promote an open government that is responsive to the people of the State." Florida's voters have spoken their views about redistricting in their approval by a 63% majority of Amendments 5 and 6 to the Florida Constitution, dealing with apportionment of seats in the U.S. Congress and the state Legislature, respectively. Since last summer, our State's elected officials have spent their time and our money in ways that appear to obstruct the clear mandate from the people on how district boundaries should be drawn.

These amendments, adopted in 2010, require that redistricting plans must meet three criteria. First, they shall not be drawn "with the intent to favor or disfavor a political party or an incumbent." Second, they shall not impair the "equal opportunity of racial or language minorities to participate in the political process or ... their ability to elect representatives of their choice." And third, districts shall include "contiguous territory." Three other factors are to be considered: districts should be approximately equal in population, compact, and use "existing political and geographic boundaries."

We are very concerned about the manner in which our Legislature has approached the redistricting process. First, the legislative timeline for approving new boundaries leaves very

little time for citizen input on the Legislature's maps and for required reviews by courts and the U.S. Department of Justice. Anyone considering a run for office may find it difficult to qualify and campaign because of uncertainty about district boundaries.

Second, our Legislature has tried to obstruct implementation of Amendments 5 and 6 in numerous ways at great cost to Florida's taxpayers – at the same time that other state funds are being cut drastically. At this time, Speaker of the House Dean Cannon is spending taxpayer money to appeal the latest court ruling in favor of the Amendments. In this legal action, Florida's citizens are paying both to sue and to defend the suit over implementation!

We urge our Legislature to do two things: first, move up the timeline for preparing and approving maps as much as legally possible so that citizens will have maximum opportunity to examine and have input on these maps. Second, drop legal action against implementation of the Fair Districts Amendments 5 and 6 that Florida's citizens voted so strongly to support in an attempt to reduce the impact of gerrymandering.

We also urge voters to contact your legislators and urge them to produce maps as early as possible and to drop their fight against Amendment 6. More information on this issue is available on the Florida League's website at www.TheFloridaVoter.org.