

**Statement to the Montgomery County Delegation for the November 12, 2020
Joint House and Senate Delegations Priorities Hearing**

To: Members of the Montgomery County State Legislative Delegation

From: Diane Hibino and Kathy McGuire, Co-Presidents, LWVMC

The League of Women Voters of Montgomery County (LWVMC) prioritizes three critical areas of legislation: redistricting reform, mail-in voting and ranked-choice voting. Along with our State League legislative priorities we support legislation that protects a citizen's right to vote.

LWVMC supports redistricting reform

In 2018, more than 80% of the voters of Montgomery County voted in favor of the amendment to the county charter to reduce the influence of party politics on the redistricting process for councilmanic districts.

- Polls have demonstrated that a similar majority of Maryland voters would prefer a non-partisan process for drawing congressional and legislative districts.
- Our southern neighbors in Virginia have just surpassed us by take a substantial step towards reform by placing the People at the table for the redistricting process.
- Voters in other states have voted in recent years to enact redistricting reforms in Colorado, Michigan, Missouri, Utah and Ohio -- states for which the combined congressional delegation is several times that of Maryland. The district maps created by the independent commission in California led to increased voter turnout and confidence.
- In Pennsylvania, litigation brought by the League of Women Voters and others resulted in the overturning of unfair congressional districts by the Pennsylvania Supreme Court.

The U.S. Supreme Court ruled in 2019 that it is up to the states to end the practice of political gerrymandering. The excuse that Maryland should not reform its redistricting process because it would amount to “unilateral disarmament” is no longer valid if it ever was. Far from being a defense against the effects of gerrymandering in other states, Maryland’s distorted maps are being cited by opponents of reform in Republican-dominated states.

Furthermore, gerrymandering in Maryland has undermined public confidence in our electoral system as voters perceive that professional politicians have manipulated the process to their own advantage.

Redistricting reforms bills should be introduced this session that the League of Women Voters of Montgomery County can support. These bills should:

- First and foremost, ensure transparency of the redistricting process for this decade and those to come;
- Provide ample opportunities for meaningful public input;

- Include independent citizens in the process – the preferred method being via creation of an independent redistricting commission far removed from partisan political considerations;
- Strengthen the standards for drawing election districts in a way that ensure the diverse voices of Marylanders are protected over party or incumbent preferences.

We urge the Montgomery County delegation to take the lead in pressing for passage of redistricting reform legislation during this session of the General Assembly.

LWVMC supports a study of mail-in voting

LWVMD supports studying the use of vote-by-mail for all elections in Maryland.

SB408/HB426 were introduced in 2020 (also SB476 in 2019) to study implementation of voting by mail, but all failed in committee. The elections in 2020 show that the time has come for Maryland to consider using vote-by-mail for all elections in the state so that all qualified voters automatically receive a ballot in the mail without having to request one in advance (in contrast to mail-in voting). It is the standard form of voting in Oregon, Colorado and other states. Conducting elections this way has been shown to help increase voter turnout and reduce costs over time. We continue to believe that the time to study this issue is now. Let the citizens across Maryland know their vote matters!

LWVMC supports ranked-choice voting

The League was founded on the belief that voters should play a critical role in democracy. Ranked-choice voting (RCV) maximizes that ability because it ensures that winning candidates have support from a majority of voters.

- RCV empowers voters because it allows them to vote for their true first-choice candidate without feeling like they might be “wasting” their vote.
- RCV empowers elected officials because they will have a stronger mandate and more accountability when they know they are supported by a majority (at least 50%) of voters.
- RCV encourages more civilized, less negative campaigns because candidates will need to appeal to their opponents’ supporters for their second-choice votes.

In 2018, LWVMC provided testimony in support of HB 624, a bill that would have given Montgomery County the ability to use RCV in local races. That bill did not pass. In January 2020, our state League testified in support of SB89 Certification of Voting Systems - Standards, a bill that would add new voting methods to the State Board of Elections standards for voting systems. The passage of SB 89 would have put in place the voting systems required to institute ranked choice voting. This bill was left in committee due to the pandemic.

RCV would have been very useful to Montgomery County voters in 2018 as they tried to determine which four of 33 candidates for County Council to vote for. Since we can expect a large number of candidates for County Council in 2022 and beyond, all parties would be better served by ranked-choice voting. We urge reintroduction of the standards legislation and enabling legislation to permit Montgomery County to use RCV in local races.