

**Op-ed in Union Leader, April 4, 2019, about the need for an independent redistricting commission. NH Voices – Learning From the Past**

by Liz Tentarelli, president League of Women Voters NH

New Hampshire has the opportunity to join twenty-one other states that have non-partisan or bi-partisan independent redistricting commissions. “Why should we?” some legislators ask, “the status quo works just fine.” One good reason: Voters today don’t want the status quo. NH voters demand an end to secretive partisan processes that allow legislators to gerrymander districts to choose their voters rather than letting voters in fairly drawn districts choose their politicians.

Transparency in government processes is protected by many statutes, but redistricting is not one of them. The story of NH redistricting after the 2010 US Census illustrates this absence.

The 2011 redistricting maps were largely drawn behind closed doors by a few key House Republicans, in the majority at that time. The Democrats and even most of the Republicans appointed to the House Special Committee on Redistricting by Speaker Bill O’Brien were not included in these conversations. David Pierce, ranking minority committee member, declared that none of the dozens of plans submitted by the public and outside organizations were ever considered.

In response to the public outcry over the secretive nature of the process, ten public meetings were hastily called in October 2011. I attended a meeting in November in West Lebanon. Astonishingly, the legislators assigned to present the draft maps brought no draft plans, as none had been made publicly available yet. I was embarrassed for the representatives as they were confronted with the frustration and anger of more than one hundred people who came for transparency but were not given even basic information about the new maps.

The maps debuted in mid-December, well after the public had expected to be able to give input. The unveiling was mere days before the House Special Committee on Redistricting’s scheduled hearing on the plan. Nonetheless, on December 20, the committee voted 12-5 to adopt the map of the new House districts.

On January 18, 2012, a full year after the committee was established, the bill was voted on by the full House, where it passed along party lines 205-68. Democrats introduced an alternative plan that was soundly defeated, despite their argument that per the committee’s maps, fifty towns that qualified for their own representatives were not allotted one. As a result, the Republican leadership faced protests from Republican representatives who said they would sustain the expected Governor’s veto.

The new Senate map altered 18 of the 24 Senate districts, and it too was controversial. Senator Sylvia Larsen charged that “the plan was designed in backrooms with clear partisan motivation to promote a future of Republican domination in the State House.” Yet on February 1, it passed on a 19-4 party line vote. The bill advanced to the House on March 7 where it passed 253-91. Governor Lynch approved the Senate map but vetoed the House map.

Maneuvers to override the veto were successful, leading Manchester, Concord, Laconia, and other towns to file a lawsuit challenging the constitutionality of the map. Finally, on June 19, 2012, the NH Supreme Court ruled that the House map was constitutional, while admitting that many districts were too large.

The redistricting mess in 2001 is its own story, which I won’t go into here except to remind readers that it involved a gubernatorial veto that could not be overridden. The NH Supreme Court eventually hired a company to draw redistricting maps that were so bad they had to be redrawn just two years later. That experience led, in 2006, to voters passing a constitutional amendment mandating that towns large enough to have their own representative must be given one, an amendment that was nonetheless ignored in 2011.

In 2021, we start this process all over again. But New Hampshire now has the chance to reject the status quo and establish an independent redistricting commission, with members chosen through a transparent process to serve in a non-partisan advisory role to the legislature. The process of developing fair maps will also be transparent and include input from both the public and lawmakers. Importantly, as our state constitution requires, legislators will be required to approve the new maps before they become law.

New Hampshire legislators must give their voters the transparency and good government reforms they deserve. An independent redistricting commission will do just that.

(This is an adaptation of testimony that League of Women Voters NH provided to the NH House Election Law Committee on January 29, 2019, and to the NH Senate Election Law and Municipal Affairs Committee on February 20, 2019. )