



# *Franklin Area Citizens Association*

## Gerrymandering



### What is Gerrymandering?

Gerrymandering is the term given to the process by which politicians select the boundaries of their districts in a manner which optimizes their chances for re-election. In Virginia, it is the General Assembly that is responsible for redistricting every 10 years following the U.S. census. By law, every state must redraw all federal and state legislative district boundaries to accommodate population shifts in a manner that ensures equal representation. Beyond that one constraint, legislatures have a wide latitude in drawing the boundaries of the legislative districts. What happens in Virginia (and several other states) is that incumbent legislators examine the voting patterns in the last state general election of precincts in and around their districts and redraw the boundaries so as to include precincts in which they won the election and exclude precincts in which their opponent won the election. All they have to do is to ensure that all districts have about the same number of voters. Gerrymandering tilts the playing field in favor of the incumbent party by substantially increasing the odds of winning the district in the next election.

### How did it start?

Gerrymandering is nearly as old as the nation itself. The term gerrymandering originated in the Boston Gazette in 1812 as a result of the Massachusetts Senate redrawing of state senate districts which essentially guaranteed that the Democratic-Republican Party would win elections. The bill that legalized the redrawn districts was signed by Governor Elbridge Gerry. On the map, the South Essex Senatorial District resembled a salamander and the editors gave it the name Gerry-mander. The name stuck and has been used ever since to describe the process of manipulating legislative districts to favor one political party over others.



### How does it affect me?

By ensuring that the incumbent party nearly always wins, gerrymandering makes it difficult to

defeat politicians who are corrupt, and/or unresponsive to the needs of the community. Additionally, gerrymandering makes it nearly impossible to defeat well heeled political machines especially those with deep pocketed donors who are currently unfettered by campaign spending limitations. Gerrymandering also makes people feel helpless and discourages them from voting – hence low voter turnout. Between gerrymandering and unlimited campaign financing, the end result is that politicians can cater strictly to their sponsors and ignore constituents. The end result is that public policy will be enacted to favor those deep pocketed donors at the expense of everyone else.

### **Is this really legal?**

Technically, gerrymandering is illegal, but the problem is enforcing it. What appears to be gerrymandering to many people historically has been insufficient to prove in the courts, and very few court challenges to redistricting have been upheld by the higher courts.

### **What can we do about it?**

Some states have already taken action to stop gerrymandering in their state. An effective way to halt gerrymandering by legislators is to establish an independent, bi-partisan or non-political commission with the responsibility for redistricting after each national census. This removes the conflict of interest with the legislature. Another method enacted in Washington and California establishes a “Top Two Primary” process in which anyone can vote for anyone and the top two vote getters go to the general election regardless of party. (It doesn't matter if the top two are in the same party or one is independent or in a third party.) This process substantially reduces the control that political parties have over the elections and levels the playing field for third party and independent candidates. It has also proven to increase voter turnout in primary elections. Bills to amend the state constitution to reform redistricting by both methods have been introduced in the Virginia Assembly. Bills to establish an independent commission for redistricting have passed the Virginia Senate but have been blocked in the House of Delegates. No action has been taken on the bill to establish a “Top Two Primary” process.

There are several organizations that are that are actively engaged in fighting gerrymandering here in Virginia including OneVirginia2021, the League of Women Voters of Virginia, Common Cause Virginia, AARP Virginia, Future of Hampton Roads, Greater Norfolk Corporation, Greater Richmond Chamber Of Commerce, Richmond First Club, Virginia21, Virginia Business Council, the Virginia Interfaith Center for Public Policy and others. We can support these organizations and we can call, write or email our state legislators and demand they support redistricting reform. And most important, we can spread the word – to our families, neighbors, friends and co-workers and convince them that redistricting reform is essential to good government and the freedom to choose those who govern.

### **Points of Contact for Franklin Park Residents**

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