



LEAGUE OF WOMEN VOTERS® OF CALIFORNIA

May 3, 2011

Citizens Redistricting Commission
1130 K Street, Suite 101
Sacramento, CA 95814

Re: Commission Goal: Honoring the Spirit of the Voters FIRST Act

Dear Members of the Citizens Redistricting Commission:

The League of Women Voters was born out of a long struggle to gain the vote for women. We knew that not all women could actually exercise that right, even after passage of the Nineteenth Amendment. Certainly, women of color were still blocked from voting: African American and Hispanic women by de facto barriers, Native American and Asian women by law. And poor, uneducated women of all backgrounds faced great difficulties in learning about their right and finding out how to exercise it. So we have always been sensitive to the issue of voters who have rights but face challenges to exercising them. Because of this concern, the League of Women Voters of California has worked for redistricting reform for decades. Advocating for legislative districts that fairly group voters and give them a good opportunity to elect representatives of their choice is a core element of our mission.

As you begin drafting the first set of maps, we would like to share our concern about what kinds of districts will be created for voters, whoever and wherever they are in California. We believe that the Voting Rights Act should be used as a floor, not a ceiling, for creating districts. We strongly believe that the mapping criteria should be used to create as many districts as possible that give ethnic and racial minorities a good chance to elect representatives of their choice. Minorities should be given a good chance to influence who gets elected, even in districts where they are not the majority, so their concerns will be respected and addressed.

However, our concern about fair districts isn't limited to areas where protected minorities are covered by the terms of the Voting Rights Act. Testimony from all over California has graphically revealed how badly cut-up many areas of our state really are. People who don't share common social or economic needs are lumped together into districts where only one group can make its voice heard or in districts where no group is big enough to make its voice heard. In either case, peoples' needs can be safely ignored because whoever is elected will have no need to listen to them, let alone try to address their problems. The statement, "My vote doesn't count," is hard to counter when everybody concerned knows that, in practical fact, it's true.

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The League of Women Voters would also like you to consider a community of special concern to us—high school students who will be able to vote for the first time next year. We work with government classes all over the state; registering them to vote, explaining the democratic process. Many times we hear students say, in all sincerity, “Why bother to register? My vote won’t count.” As we go on to explore why they feel that way, it’s clear that they have seen first-hand the division and marginalization of their neighborhoods and communities. Their belief that “My vote doesn’t count” is hard to deny when they’ve seen the truth of it for themselves.

We urge you to honor the spirit of the Voters FIRST Act and create districts that will inspire and empower voters throughout California. And remember the students—they will be watching. Give them a reason to abandon their cynicism, get involved in the democratic process, and change California for the better.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Janis R. Hirohama". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Janis R. Hirohama

President