

**TESTIMONY BEFORE LEGISLATIVE TASK FORCE ON DEMOGRAPHIC RESEARCH AND
REAPPORTIONMENT**

Buffalo, New York, August 18, 2011

Good morning members of LATFOR. My name is Joan Terri Parks and I am the president of the League of Women Voters of Buffalo/Niagara. The League is a non-partisan organization, which encourages informed and active involvement in government and influences public policy through education and advocacy. We are also members of a statewide coalition dedicated to reforming New York's redistricting process, ReShapeNY, which consists of 35 organizations including civic groups, issue-advocacy groups, unions and business organizations

Let me tell you about our League's experience this year as our county legislature was reapportioned. Our League members attended every meeting and hearing to monitor and evaluate the reapportionment process for Erie County. The process failed, when a gerrymandered plan approved by commission members of one political party was defeated by another gerrymandered plan created and approved by the opposing party in the legislature, which in turn was vetoed by the county executive. The veto was not overruled. A federal judge decided Erie County reapportionment. Representative government and the voters have not been well served.

Therefore we appreciate the opportunity that today's hearing provides to comment on the redistricting process. We believe that New Yorkers want an independent commission - not LATFOR - to draw state legislative and congressional district boundaries according to fair and objective criteria while allowing for public input into the process. An independent commission drawing impartial district lines would maintain the legislature's ability to give input on the plan and ultimately pass legislation in accordance with the state constitution.

Voters across all parties believe an independent body should draw the lines. The Governor has proposed legislation to form an independent commission. In addition, 61 out of 62 senators and 123 out of 150 assembly members have either signed on to his legislation or legislation proposed in their respective houses, or otherwise publicly supported reforming the redistricting process.

We believe that the redistricting process under the new independent commission should be transparent in all respects both through multiple public hearings throughout the state and by using technology to have citizens participate at all stages of the process. All data on which the commission relies should be available to the public, both in writing and electronically, including all draft and proposed final maps of districts, criteria used to generate each draft and proposed final map of districts, software used to generate each draft and final proposed map of districts, and proposed plans.

A key element of reforming the redistricting process is limiting the allowable population difference between legislative districts that in the past has created districts that vary widely in population size, thereby favoring one region over another. The current redistricting process has also historically protected incumbents. In the 2010 election, New York State had one of the lowest rates of voter participation in the nation – coming in at 47th among states. This is no surprise. Why should people vote if they face no real choice in candidates? The League believes it imperative that an independent redistricting process be adopted so that people, not partisan interests, are protected.

Ignoring the public will and continuing with LATFOR proceedings, the only legally mandated process at this time, will end in Governor Cuomo vetoing the very lines it draws, making this entire process a waste of time. Legislators should return to Albany during a special legislative session to end partisan gerrymandering and enact redistricting reform by handing the power to an independent commission to draw impartial legislative and congressional lines. New Yorkers cannot wait another ten years for reform.