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## Coalition of redistricting reform advocates issue recommendations for fair maps and call on Legislators to end gerrymandering in New Jersey

Trenton, NJ – Members and supporters of the Fair Districts New Jersey coalition gathered to unveil recommendations for reforming the state’s legislative redistricting process into one that is more transparent, inclusive and community-driven. The reform advocates want a new system in place before the next redistricting cycle in 2021 that elevates people over partisanship, protects the voting strength of communities of color, restores the public’s trust in government, and eliminates gerrymandering for good.

“Redistricting shouldn’t be a process that happens behind closed doors, without significant public input and participation,” said **Jesse Burns, Executive Director of the League of Women Voters of New Jersey**. “Our recommendations open up those backrooms and demand transparency, accountability, and above all a commitment to serving voters, not political interests. Like everything else in democracy, robust public engagement is the only true safeguard against partisan antics.”

Recommendations for a constitutional amendment to change New Jersey’s redistricting process follow the release of a [report issued by the League of Women Voters of New Jersey](#). The report outlines the major issues within the current redistricting process and identifies the reform priorities of dozens of advocacy organizations and hundreds of New Jersey residents. Members of the public had an opportunity to submit feedback on redistricting principles by attending 1 of 11 educational forums earlier in the year and responding to a survey.

“We know New Jersey residents care about how their district lines are drawn, because without fair maps, we don’t have fair elections. We saw this concern in December when the public rallied against the redistricting reform proposal being fast-tracked in the Legislature. That’s why it was important to include the voices of voters in future reform recommendations,” said **Helen Kioukis of the League of Women Voters of New Jersey**. “We believe informed public input should be influencing policymaking, not special interests. And through our redistricting survey, we were able to better understand which redistricting principles and criteria resonated most with New Jersey voters.”

The Fair Districts advocates recommend the following guiding principles for reform:

- A more **independent, representative** redistricting commission that minimizes partisanship, reduces the level of political influence over the redistricting process and includes the voices of ordinary citizens with no vested interests in a final map.
- **Transparency and accountability** measures that open up redistricting and allow the public to meaningfully engage in the process; make data, resources, and drafts of maps publicly available; afford the public the opportunity to submit drafts of maps; and require redistricting reports that justify commissioners’ map-making decisions.
- **Cooperation** among redistricting commissioners so a final map is approved with more than a simple majority vote.

- A **racial equity** provision that reinforces the equity provisions of the Voting Rights Act to protect the voting rights and voting strength of New Jersey’s communities of color.
- **Protections for communities of interest** within the redistricting process, which would require ample public hearings and the solicitation of public input across every part of the state.
- A set of **clear line-drawing rules** ranked in order of priority to guide redistricting commissioners and provide checks against attempts to manipulate boundary lines for political gain.
- Resources to ensure a **complete and accurate Census** count in New Jersey.
- An **end to prison-based gerrymandering**, a discriminatory practice that counts incarcerated individuals at their prison address for legislative redistricting purposes.

“Every voter deserves to have their vote count and to be equally represented, regardless of their party affiliation. It is essential that we reform the redistricting process so we can build meaningful representation, not maintain partisan power,” **said Suzanne Almeida, Redistricting and Representation Counsel at Common Cause.** “Fair Districts New Jersey and their coalition partners are part of a growing nationwide movement to stop gerrymandering and create a fair, impartial, and transparent process for drawing maps for the people, not the politicians.”

Additionally, the Fair Districts New Jersey advocates released specific proposals for a constitutional amendment, including expanding the redistricting commission to 15 members, with five members appointed from an applicant pool of ordinary citizens, three of whom must not be affiliated with either major political party. Expanded eligibility requirements would apply to all appointed commissioners to eliminate potential conflicts of interest and further improve the independence of the body.

“The U.S. Supreme Court has made it clear that it will not step in to address issues of partisan gerrymandering, leaving it to the states to protect our democracy. It is time for New Jersey to join the growing number of states that have adopted redistricting reforms that maximize the voice of voters,” **said Renee Steinhagen, Executive Director of New Jersey Appleseed Public Interest Law Center.**

“It is crucial for our redistricting process to be fully transparent, to engage the public, and importantly to prioritize racial equity. The redistricting process is foundational in our representative democracy, and New Jersey’s process must reflect the values of our diverse state,” **said Henal Patel, Associate Counsel at New Jersey Institute for Social Justice.**

“As social workers, it is our ethical mandate to ensure that all persons have a voice in the public arena, especially those individuals from historically-marginalized and under-represented backgrounds. As such, we strongly support these fair redistricting efforts that seek to eliminate partisan gerrymandering and protect the voting rights of all individuals, particularly persons and communities of color,” **said Jennifer Thompson, Executive Director of the New Jersey Chapter of the National Association of Social Workers.**

“We urge the NJ legislature to act now. These reforms will make our redistricting process more democratic, more independent and more transparent, with greater public participation. Time is running out to enact these badly-needed reforms before the new district maps are redrawn. We expect the Legislature to meet this higher standard for redistricting and to agree that legislators shouldn’t be drawing their districts,” **said Liz Glynn, Director of Organizing, New Jersey Citizen Action.**

“As a community leader I work daily on building stronger communities and consensus. We need to bring *this* to the redistricting process. We need a process that encourages cooperation, engages with the public and puts communities above political power,” **said Margaret Illis, grassroots leader with NJ7 Forward.**

"Persons associated with third parties and independents, rather than just Democrats, Republicans and sitting legislators, are needed in this important process, with clearer standards for how lines are drawn and protections for the voting rights of minorities and communities of interest," said Steinhagen.

"You don't get environmental protection without good government, and you don't get good government without good redistricting. This proposal gets us there – an independent, inclusive commission producing fair, compact, representative legislative districts, from which a healthy dose of competition will follow," **stated Amy Goldsmith, Clean Water Action's, NJ State Director.**

"Unfair redistricting practices are an insult to democracy. Unfair redistricting practices keep unresponsive elected officials in office. Unfair redistricting processes dilute the voting power of marginalized communities. We can do much better. New Jersey deserves a fair process with clear rules, transparency and racial equity. No more backroom deals. No more barriers to the power of the voting booth for marginalized communities who are often the first to be blamed when a candidate doesn't get into office but are also often left behind by a government that does not work for them. Let's come together and work for a fair redistricting process that works for every one of us," **said Imani Oakley, Legislative Director for the New Jersey Working Families Alliance.**

The urgency of reform is underscored by the recent launch of the League of Women Voters of the United States' People Powered Fair Maps Campaign, a multi-million, multi-year campaign, the organization's largest since the suffrage movement. This will be a coordinated effort across all 50 states and the District of Columbia to create fair and transparent district maps nationwide. The campaign will support the League of Women Voters of New Jersey's ongoing redistricting reform efforts.

The Fair Districts coalition is calling on the New Jersey Legislature to once again be a leader in redistricting reform, as they were in 1966 when they handed over the redistricting power from the Legislature to an appointed bipartisan commission. Helen Kioukis stated, "50 years ago, the New Jersey Legislature was at the forefront of progressive redistricting reform. Today, we have unfortunately fallen behind. It's time for our lawmakers to once again take the lead and put power where it belongs: in the hands of the people."

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*The League of Women Voters of New Jersey is a nonpartisan, political organization founded in 1920 that works to empower voters and defend democracy across the state. The League envisions a democracy where every person has the desire, the right, the knowledge and the confidence to participate.*