



LEAGUE OF WOMEN VOTERS OF TEXAS

TESTIMONY BEFORE THE SENATE SELECT COMMITTEE ON REDISTRICTING

SB 4

June 3, 2011

I am Anita Privett, Advocacy VP, testifying on behalf of the League of Women Voters of Texas (LWV-TX). We thank you for this opportunity to present our concerns about SB 4. This redistricting plan, developed in secret proposes an unfair and unrepresentative congressional redistricting map that likely runs afoul of the Voting Rights Act and does not reflect the full diversity of Texas.

The LWV is a nonpartisan political organization that encourages informed and active participation in government and influences public policy through education and advocacy. In Texas and across the country, the League has worked for many decades to promote transparent and accountable democratic processes and has fought to put an end to the hyper-partisan practices that too often negatively impact the way our government functions.

Redistricting is an issue that goes to the heart of our democratic system of government. Representative democracy depends on voters freely choosing their elected officials. When, instead, officials choose their voters, our system does not work as intended.

The League of Women Voters of Texas supports redistricting of the congressional and state legislative districts by apportionment primarily according to population. We believe that districts should be single-member, contiguous and maintain communities of interest. A redistricting plan should fully reflect the diversity of the state and as a whole it should provide for competitive districts. In addition, we seek to ensure that any adopted plan comports with the one person, one vote requirements of the United States Constitution, Sections 2 and 5 of the Voting Rights Act, and the Texas Constitution. Additionally, in order to provide any redistricting plan with democratic legitimacy, the redistricting process must be transparent and responsive to the public testimony of those appearing before the committee and submitting comments to the official record.

Having only had access to the proposed congressional map since Tuesday morning, we have not had adequate time to fully analyze its expected impact. Based on the League's initial assessment, however, I would like to focus my comments on our significant concerns related to minority representation.

Although the proposed plan creates two new Hispanic majority districts, it also reduces the overall number of effective minority opportunity districts to 10 of the total 36 districts, compared to 11 in the current 32-member plan. It has been widely reported that Texas's main source of population growth over the last ten years has overwhelmingly occurred as a result of growing Hispanic communities, yet the proposed congressional districts do not adequately reflect this shift. This suggests political manipulation, as well as significant retrogression in terms of minority representation, which would effectively ensure that this plan would not hold up against a Voting Rights Act challenge. The League is especially concerned about the minority voters in districts 6, 7,

and 27. Under the proposed plan, minorities would comprise more than 50 percent of the population in each of these districts, yet would not have the opportunity to elect candidates of their choice, based on 2008 election data. Previously, district 27 provided minority voters the opportunity to elect candidates of their choice. That they would be unable to do so under the proposed map suggests clear retrogression. Additionally, communities of interest are not given any weight under this map. For example, the proposed district 27 appears to incorporate areas in different parts of the state as well as portions of counties, thus fracturing and diluting the collective influence of communities of voters residing within it. District 27 also appears to span several media markets, which could have the influence of driving up candidates' campaign costs and providing an advantage to wealthy and/or incumbent candidates. The legislature has chosen to draw its plans behind closed doors, giving community groups and citizens virtually no access to weigh in about the impact redistricting will have on their daily lives. As a result, the committee has released a plan that fails to adequately represent the diversity of our state, shortchanges minority voters, and fiercely protects powerful incumbents while providing little opportunity for competitive congressional elections in 2012 and beyond.

If put in place, this map would all but encourage our leaders to be less responsive to constituents, depress voter turnout, and restrict minority voters from effectively advocating on behalf of their communities. We call on the legislature to take additional time to develop a congressional redistricting plan that truly reflects the growing diversity of Texas and grants all voters the opportunity to meaningfully participate in their democracy. In doing so, the League believes the legislature should take additional time to fully consider the important ideas brought forth in the alternative map proposals submitted by the Texas Latino Redistricting Task Force and PLAN C 121 - Rep. Veasey and the one by A J Pate, as well as provide a full explanation of the data, rationale, and decision making process that led to the development of this particular plan.

Thank you for your time and consideration.