



**Testimony before the Legislative Task Force On
Demographic Research and Reapportionment**
Queens, New York
September 7, 2011

Good morning. My name is Mary Lou Urban and I am the Secretary of the League of Women Voters of the City of New York. 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.

While we appreciate this opportunity to share our thoughts on the redistricting process, we feel compelled to preface our remarks with our belief that the public has spoken loud and clear in favor of independent redistricting and no longer supports a system controlled by the legislative body whose lines it is redrawing. 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.

As we approach redistricting in our State we are mindful of the fact that while our population has grown, other states had even larger population gains. As a result, New York State will lose two Congressional seats. Our concern is that in redrawing the lines for the remaining 27 Congressional seats and all of the state legislative districts, population be equitably and fairly distributed. In addition, we believe that counting prisoners in their home districts and not in locations where they are temporarily incarcerated is now state law and should be followed in this redistricting process. We are also concerned about how the 2010 census undercount, estimated at 200,000 people in New York City, will affect downstate representation and funding.

A key element of reforming the redistricting process is limiting the allowable population differential between legislative districts. In the past this practice has resulted in districts of widely varying populations, with sparsely populated upstate districts and densely populated downstate districts. After the 2000 census, the New York State Legislature approved a redistricting plan which allowed a plus or minus 5% population differential in Assembly and Senate districts. While this may seem like a very small disparity, it resulted in some districts being 10% larger or smaller than other districts.

Historically, the redistricting process has protected incumbents, including carving insurgents' homes out of districts, and have discouraged competition in our electoral system. In the 2010 election, New York State had one of the lowest rates of voter participation in the nation – coming in at 47th among 50 states. The League has been in the forefront of promoting informed voter participation for over 90 years and we strongly believe that in 2012 the voters should elect the candidates of their choice and not have incumbents, or a political party, draw the lines in such a way as to protect their interests and power base.

Over the past year, local Leagues have organized community forums educating the public on the issues surrounding redistricting in over 35 localities. Partly as a result of this effort, leagues around the state became active and influential players in local redistricting efforts. In New York City the League co-sponsored a redistricting forum with the Brennan Center and the Women's City Club. The New York City League has developed a *Legislative Redistricting Q & A* brochure in response to requests for information on how the process works.

Time is of the essence in drawing new district lines as there is a possibility that the 2012 Primary Date may be moved from September to June. Fortunately the technical tools available to draw lines, taking into account natural boundaries and the 2010 census population figures, have made it easier to form representative districts

The state legislature should return to Albany for a special legislative session to end partisan gerrymandering and enact redistricting reform by endorsing an independent commission to draw truly representative, impartial legislative and congressional lines. Continuing with the current LATFOR proceedings will result in Governor Cuomo vetoing the very lines it draws. New Yorkers cannot wait until 2021 for meaningful reform.