



Virginia: The Move Towards Fair Elections

By Denisse Manzo Gonzalez, August 2021

While the presidential election of 2020 brought with it historic moments and changes, it also brought fear and threats to voter rights and fair elections. Throughout the year of 2021, we have seen the move towards limiting mail-in voting and further restrictions on voting access for members of marginalized communities. It is in this crucial moment where we must not feel defeated but look towards the progress being made and acknowledge the democracy wins occurring all around the country, which were made possible by communities. As certain politicians and states look towards making voting more restrictive and difficult, other states look towards making voting more inclusive and are fighting to make future elections fair. One state in particular that is worth the acknowledgement and praise is Virginia for their battle to create fair elections for their communities.

While the main focus of the 2020 election for many was the presidential race, Virginia voters were tasked with deciding who and how they wanted their districts redrawn. On the ballot was a [constitutional amendment](#) that would shift the power of redistricting from the hands of partisan politicians to a bipartisan group of people made up of both lawmakers and citizens.

Drawing congressional and legislative districts holds a lot of weight as it can impact the results of an election. For years, the votes of marginalized communities in Virginia have been diminished by [gerrymandering](#), which is a practice of drawing district lines to favor one political party or candidate over another. This practice inherently diminishes the voting power of the people. It is a long-standing practice in Virginia that dates back to colonial times when Governor Patrick Henry drew districts in his favor to keep [James Madison](#) out of the House of Representatives.

The constitutional amendment on the ballot in 2020 sought to create a fair redistricting process that would lead to fairer elections in the future, so it was no surprise that voters voted [yes](#) on this amendment. However, the process of getting the amendment on the ballot in the first place was not without its struggles.

One advocate whose work helped bring the topic of redistricting reform to the larger public in Virginia and made it possible for the constitutional amendment to appear on the ballot is Brian Cannon. He ran [a seven year campaign](#) to limit partisan gerrymandering and served as Executive Director for both [FairMapsVA](#) and [OneVirginia2021](#). His work alongside others for redistricting reform played a large role in shifting the public opinion on redistricting and gerrymandering in the state.

Some of the hurdles he faced in the fight for fair redistricting was the push back from legislators in power. He faced a lot of resistance from Republicans when they were in office, but in 2017 and 2019 when many Democrats were elected into office, it created political pressure in favor of redistricting reform.

Brian states that “many legislators believe the system that got them in office is the fairest and best system” and so regardless of party affiliation, they were facing rejection and pushback on their redistricting initiatives. He also states “it was hard for the party in power to give up power.”

Regardless of the hurdles, this amendment created the first-ever bipartisan redistricting commission in Virginia. It was also the first time citizens would be able to be involved in the process.

The original vision for this amendment involved a redistricting commission that was off limits for legislators and fully run by citizens, but they had to compromise on a half-citizen and half-legislator-run commission to get the amendment on the ballot. Brian Cannon hopes that citizen-led groups will have full redistricting power in the future.

Large strides have been made in Virginia with this new redistricting commission, as it completely eliminates partisan gerrymandering. They have also been able to make [racial gerrymandering](#) illegal under state constitutional law in Virginia. Brian believes that one very important aspect of this new redistricting process is the increased transparency. People will be let into this process in a way they haven't before and they'll be able to have their voices heard. He believes the success in Virginia should serve as an example for other Southern states who want redistricting reform.

Brian has stated that “some of the benefits of this new redistricting measure is that there are more competitive districts and more legislators will be elected into office who are representative of the state's demographics.” This new

redistricting measure in Virginia can serve as an example to many states who want to work towards fairer elections.

Democracy is alive in Virginia!

Thank you to Brian Cannon for agreeing to be interviewed and sharing his voice in this article.