

Redistricting: What People Think

In order to better understand what people know about how legislative districts are determined and assess how people might feel about changes to the current process, the Virginia Redistricting Coalition commissioned a study of the issue through the Center for Public Policy at Christopher Newport University. The study sample size was 700 individuals and followed the CATI interview method. The findings carry a margin of error of +/- 3.7 percent at the 95 percent confidence level. Interviews were conducted Sept. 4-10, 2008. This report presents the study's key findings.

What do people know about redistricting?

- A majority of respondents (52.3%) have heard nothing about the debate over redistricting, and another 40% have only heard a little. (Table 1)
- Only 6.7% of respondents would be "very confident" in describing how Virginia redistricting is done right now.
- But nearly half (47.7%) assume that elected officials are in charge of the process; another third (35.7%) don't know who is in charge. (Table 2)

Table 1: Awareness of redistricting process

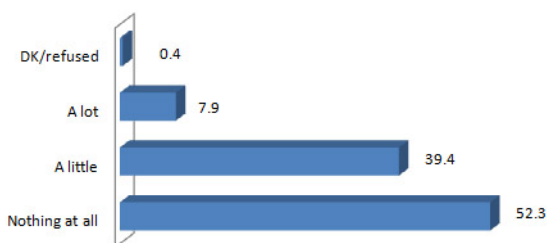
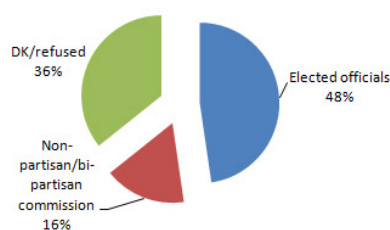


Table 2: Who is in charge of redistricting process



Redistricting

Every decade, Virginia legislators convene to redraw the lines of our state's electoral districts. However, our current system promotes "partisan redistricting" which gives the party in control of the legislature power to control how districts get carved out. With the advent of powerful mapping technologies, these delegates and senators can now use computers to draw preferential, gerrymandered or "safe," districts to a degree never before seen.

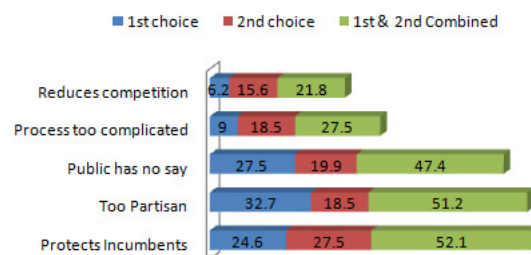
Bottom Line: There is a great opportunity to educate voters on the issue of redistricting. Voters admit to not knowing much about the issue or the process and assume that the politicians are in charge of it.

Bottom Line: Among those respondents who report being dissatisfied with the process, there is a clear dissatisfaction with the partisan way in which redistricting is done and the protection it provides to politicians. These respondents would also like to be more involved in the process. Among all respondents, there is strong support for a vote on reform in the General Assembly.

How do people feel about redistricting?

- When told how redistricting is done in Virginia, about a third (30.1%) of respondents report being dissatisfied with it, but almost half (44%) have no view either way.
- Of those respondents who find the current method of redistricting dissatisfying, the top three reasons are 1) the process protects incumbents, 2) the process is too partisan, and 3) the public has no say. (Table 3)
- A strong majority (61.7%) feels that it is a conflict of interest for legislators to draw their own districts, and an equally strong majority (61.3%) would like to see both houses of the General Assembly vote on a redistricting reform bill.

Table 3: Top reasons for dissatisfaction



Support for Various Reform Options

- When asked to evaluate each of three ways in which people support redistricting being done in Virginia, the bipartisan redistricting commission is seen as the most fair by respondents, with 58% calling it fair. Continuing redistricting as it is currently done is seen as fair by 53.1% of respondents, while only 39.3% consider a constitutionally-mandated redistricting commission as fair. (Tables 4, 5, 6)
- In a head-to-head matchup, the bipartisan redistricting commission is the one method of redistricting most favored by 41.4% of respondents. A redistricting commission is favored by 26.6% of respondents, and having the General Assembly draw the lines is favored by only 21.1% of respondents. (Table 7)

NOTE: It may be that respondents were confused by the description of the constitutionally-mandated redistricting commission. As seen in the short description head-to-head matchup, this choice beat out the General Assembly choice by 5.5%. Respondents probably found the term “redistricting commission” more appealing than “General Assembly draws lines.”

Chart 4: General Assembly draws lines

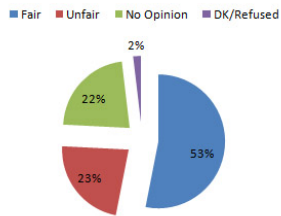


Chart 5: Bipartisan commission

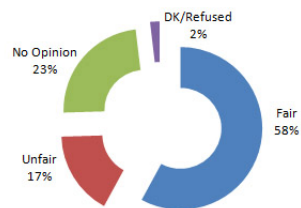


Chart 6: Constitutionally mandated commission draws lines

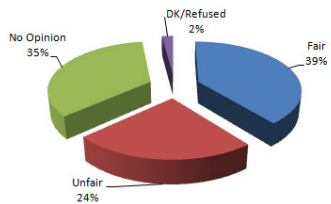
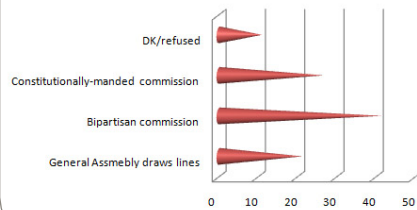


Chart 7: Plan preference

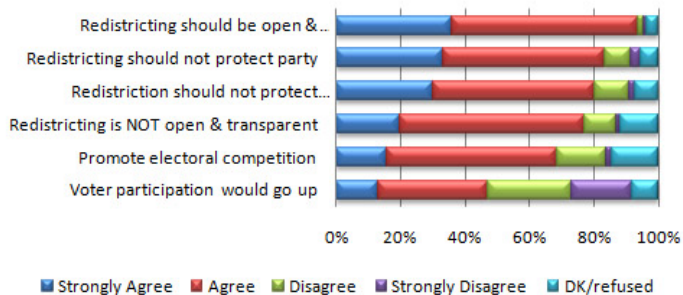


Bottom Line: Respondents support the idea of a bipartisan redistricting commission over the other two options, with a solid majority of 58% calling it fair and only 16.6% calling it unfair.

Views on Redistricting and the Electoral Process.

- By wide margins respondents agree or strongly agree that redistricting should be open and transparent, that it should not protect either the party in power or incumbents, and that it should promote electoral competition.
- Respondents have little confidence that voter participation would go up with more electoral competition.
- Voters do NOT think that redistricting is open and transparent right now.

Chart 8: Respondent views on redistricting and electoral process



Bottom Line: Respondents agree by wide margins with many of the arguments to be made about redistricting reform, even if they are less confident that more citizens will participate in a more open and transparent electoral process. Respondents appear to want an open and transparent process because it is good for the electoral process.

Conclusion

There is a great opportunity to educate voters about how redistricting is done.

- Voters don't understand the way redistricting is done.
- When explained how it is done, voters respond negatively or ambivalently, assuming politicians control the process.
- Voters do think it is a conflict of interest for elected officials to be in charge of drawing their own electoral lines.
- When offered reasons to be dissatisfied with the redistricting process as it currently is done, voters don't like the fact that it protects incumbents, is partisan, and doesn't involve the public.

Voters like the bipartisan redistricting commission approach.

- When given the choice between three ways of redistricting, 4 in 10 voters choose the bipartisan redistricting commission over either keeping it the way it is done now or a constitutionally-mandated redistricting commission. A solid majority thinks the bipartisan redistricting commission is a fair way to redistrict.
- In supporting the bipartisan redistricting commission like they do, voters are saying that they recognize redistricting as being a political activity, but they want it to be fair, and having two parties involved in the process seems more fair to voters than any other method offered to them.

Voters want “good government.”

- By wide margins voters want the process of redistricting to be open and transparent. They also don't want it to be designed simply to protect incumbents or parties in power. And, they don't think the way it is done now is very open or transparent.
- Voters would like the redistricting process to promote electoral competition rather than retard electoral competition.