

REMEMBERING MARIAN SPENCER - A MODEL FOR REFORMERS TO KEEP ON GETTING ON by Bill Woods for StreetVibes

When originally planned, the aim of this article was to review the current status of political reform locally, in Ohio, and in the U.S. in general. Then one of Cincinnati's leading, longtime reformers died. Marian Spencer, known for her major Civil Rights achievements in the Queen City, passed away on [July 9th](#).



Although we need to celebrate Marian Spencer's Civil Rights' victories such as the integration of Coney Island, we also must remember how she vigorously championed political reform throughout her life. Proportional Representation (PR) stood out as her particular reform cause, but she also supported a wide range of other political reforms. For instance, she became involved in the successful campaign in 2001 to pass a City Charter Amendment that addressed "big money" in Council and mayoral elections.

Spencer, the first African-American woman to serve on City Council, saw a direct link between Civil Rights and political reform. She saw that protecting the vote for everyone is a key to protecting other rights. Her dedication to Proportional Representation stemmed from the fact that this system of voting usually insures that a significant minority can elect a representative to office.

Cincinnati used PR to elect Council members from 1925 to 1957, and several African-Americans won seats under this system. In fact, the local referendum to eliminate PR in 1957 succeeded because of a racist campaign that warned that Councilman Theodore M. Berry was gaining too much influence and might become mayor. As a young Civil Rights leader during that period, Spencer would have felt the sting of that campaign and its results.

She threw herself into the unsuccessful campaigns to bring back PR, and as a Charter Committee board member she taught this reform Party that Proportional Representation was every bit as important as the City Manager System that was also adopted in 1925. When several younger Charter leaders wanted to oppose the 2008 Charter Amendment proposal to re-adopt PR, Spencer, then in her eighties, helped rally enough board members to insure Charter's endorsement. Ever the optimist, she was buoyed by the close results of that fall's campaign.

A month before Marian Spencer's death, reformers in Ohio and across the country were disheartened by the Supreme Court's decision that it was not the role of the federal courts to intervene in how states draw districts for elective office. This five to four decision marked a major setback for the movement to end the worst forms of gerrymandering in the U.S. Here in

Ohio, the decision of the U.S. Federal Court of Southern Ohio that new districts must be drawn before the 2020 election is now void.

Remembering Marian Spencer's lifelong commitment to keep working for Civil Rights and reform even when confronting huge obstacles should provide current reform activists with a model for going forward. Even if Ohio won't have un-gerrymandered districts in 2020, the Constitutional Amendments passed by the voters in 2015 and 2018 will insure fairer redistricting processes in this state after the completion of the 2020 Census. Although frustrated about the Supreme Court decision, Catherine Turcer, Executive Director of Common Cause Ohio takes the position of needing to move ahead on educating citizens about this state's new Redistricting Amendments as well as advocating other needed critical political reforms.

Thus, if we wish to honor Marian Spencer's life, we need to move ahead in pursuing her goal of eliminating all the obstacles that often block or make it difficult for many citizens to vote. Further, we must take on the dominance of "big money" in elections that is warping democracy and making average people feel that their voices aren't heard. Spencer's words say it all: "I didn't accept a 'no' when it was wrong. It has been my responsibility to change things."