

WHERE DO THINGS STAND IN TERMS OF RENEWING DEMOCRACY? A YEAR END STATUS REPORT

by Bill Woods for StreetVibes, December 28, 2018

As 2018 comes to a close, what is the status of political reform in the U.S., Ohio, and locally? The end of the year offers a good time to evaluate achievements and failures, and 2018 brought both ups and downs for activists and groups working to restore the health of democracy in this country. With so much of the news media focused on the horrors of the White House, there is a tendency to emphasize gloom when writing about politics. A closer examination, however, reveals some positive results that reformers can celebrate.

In Ohio, Congressional redistricting reform won a big victory in May. As 2018 started, the League of Women Voters, Common Cause, and the other organizations that comprised the Fair Districts/Fair Elections Coalition were preparing their final signature gathering in order to qualify their Congressional Redistricting Constitutional Amendment proposal for the ballot. Suddenly, members of both Houses of the Ohio General Assembly began talking about putting their own proposed Amendment on the May ballot.

The citizen Coalition let members of the House and Senate know that they were prepared to attack and to campaign vigorously against any proposal that failed to adequately eliminate gerrymandering. To the reformers' surprise, the Republican majority in both chambers worked with their Democratic colleagues to produce Amendment language that the Fair Districts Coalition could support. Although not perfect, the proposal included enough stipulations to insure that one party gerrymandering would end if the voters approved it.

In the proposed new redistricting process, half the members of the two major parties in both Houses must approve the newly drawn Congressional districts. The process also requires public input, and besides public hearings, citizens are invited to submit district map plans to the drafting committee. Further, the proposal calls for compact districts that keep the splitting of counties and large cities to a minimum.

With both major parties supporting this genuine reform proposal, reform groups viewed this as a win/win situation, and actively got behind what became known as Issue I in the brief campaign that ensued. Locally, the League of Women Voters, Common Cause, and Applied Information Resources held forums, wrote newsletters and letters to the editor, and sought organizational endorsements. Examples of religious community involvement can be seen in the informal support of the Faith Community Alliance,

and the formal endorsement of Issue I by Christ Church Cathedral. On May 8th, Issue I won a lopsided victory at the polls.

This major reform win in Ohio, plus some positive court rulings on redistricting in several other states constitute the most tangible successes for political reform in 2018. Voting rights is another issue that received a lot of attention both national and locally. With the midterm elections taking place, protecting voting rights and helping people know the stumbling blocks that could prevent them from voting ranked high on the agendas of traditional reform organizations. Furthermore, some non traditional groups also got involved in attempting to reach populations that tend not to vote in non-presidential election years.

Locally, an informal coalition emerged last fall with a focus on voting rights and reaching out to those groups that often have difficulties with the whole voting process. The Ohio Poor People's Campaign, the Faith Community Alliance, the NAACP, For Our Future Fund, Project AMOS, and Applied Information Resources were part of this grassroots effort. Voting certainly was up in the midterms, but too little statistical data is available to measure the impact on reaching those vulnerable voter populations.

The last and most disturbing problem confronting reformers is the warping impact of "big money" on our

elections. The 2018 midterms provided a dismal example of this impact by ending up as the most expensive non-presidential election in U.S. history. When election costs at all levels were added up, this election cost 5.2-billion dollars. Locally, this provided reformers with a lot of data that showed the desperate need for change. Applied Information Resources, Common, Cause, and the League of Women Voters organized a Halloween event entitled "The Horrors of Money In Politics" to call attention to all the "dark money" that was flowing into Ohio and Cincinnati.

Cincinnati took a small but significant step in terms of dealing with money in politics this November. By a large margin, local voters passed a Cincinnati Charter Amendment that restored individual contribution limits to Council and Mayoral elections. Such small steps, however, need to be celebrated in order to take on the bigger battles that must still be waged.