

Slicing, Dicing of Gerrymandered Districts in Pa.

By Regina M. Parker

THE TIME IS NOW FOR PENNSYLVANIANS to act to save our democracy by bringing an end to gerrymandering and creating voter integrity, panel members told attendees during the Philadelphia Bar Association CLE hosted by the Young Lawyers Division titled "Lines Drawn: The Modern Political and Legal Campaign Against Gerrymandering" on Nov. 6. The panel included Benjamin Geffen, staff attorney at Public Interest Law Center and Jamie R. Mogil, attorney and principal at JRMogil Law and representative of Fair Districts PA.

Gerrymandering is the practice of manipulating electoral maps and district lines for political advantage. This practice has resulted in lack of choice at the polls and an unaccountable legislature. Mogil said that Pennsylvania is one of the most gerrymandered states in the country with

congressional representatives, state legislators and many local officials being elected from districts. Every 10 years, the national census recounts populations, and if there is a significant change, those districts will be redrawn. The panel warned that the problem with the current system is that politicians oversee redistricting and can choose their voters by drawing electoral district lines in their favor. This conflict of interest is at odds with the true meaning of democracy.

The panel further explained that politicians use several tactics to draw lines as a means of ensuring that they keep their seats and keep their party in power. These tactics include cracking, packing, sweetheart gerrymandering, and prison-based gerrymandering. Cracking is used to reduce the voting power of a certain party or community by splitting its population and spreading its members among several districts where they become an irrelevant



Photo by Thomas E. Rogers

Eli H. Klein, Young Lawyers Division Executive Committee member (left), with Benjamin Geffen and Jamie R. Mogil at the Philadelphia Bar Association CLE on Nov. 6.

minority. Packing concentrates voters of one party or community in as few districts as possible to reduce their influence in the remaining districts. Sweetheart gerrymandering is a deal between parties to

maintain the status quo by protecting incumbents of both parties regardless of what the voters want. Prison-based gerrymandering counts incarcerated people,

continued on page 19

Gerrymandering

continued from page 14

who are not allowed to vote, in the district where the prison is located, and not in their home districts. These tactics give party leaders significant influence over of the outcomes of the elections.

Geffen said that until we correct the flaw in the electoral process, our votes are essentially meaningless. The panel noted

that House Bill 722 and Senate Bill 22 have been introduced in both the Pennsylvania House and the Senate. These bills are bipartisan redistricting reform bills aimed at ending gerrymandering in PA by putting an independent citizens commission in charge of redistricting. The goal for the independent citizens commission would be to draw equitable lines to reflect an accurate depiction of the population and community, free from

partisan and financial influence. In a fair district, voters can make real choices at the ballot box.

The panel agreed that there is a long road ahead and reiterated the importance of ending gerrymandering, including enacting the proposed bills and amending the PA Constitution. To change the law before the next redistricting process begins in 2021, a bill must pass both houses before the end of the session in

July 2018. Pennsylvania residents are urged to contact their legislatures in support of the bills. It's about making sure that the politicians do not get to choose us, but we get to choose them.

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