

Citizen Engagement Corner

## Knocking Down the Wall: So All Voices Can Be Heard – Part 1

### League of Women Voters of Brookline

Voters in the Democratic and Republican parties, and Independents, overwhelmingly want the government to clean up its act, citing the Electoral College, gerrymandering, virtually unlimited and unregulated money in politics and voter suppression laws as major indicators of our flawed electoral system.

Some common sense solutions include automatic voter registration, universal vote by mail, restoration of voting rights to the disenfranchised, overturning Citizens United, an end to gerrymandering, and election of the president by national popular vote.

Any action yet? A partial list follows...

**Federal:** The first legislation presented by the new Congress is a massive anti-corruption reform bill, H.R. 1, aiming to expand voting rights and tackle campaign finance reform. It would establish automatic voter registration as well as online registration. It would reinvigorate the original 1965 Voting Rights Act, crippled by a 2013 Supreme Court decision, essentially making it harder for states to discriminate against voters of color, and would outlaw removing eligible names from voter lists.

H.R. 1 would remove redistricting power from state legislatures and give it to independent commissions. Other provisions would provide support for a constitutional amendment to end Citizens United, which declared political spending is First Amendment free speech. It would mandate more disclosure of outside money and establish a public financing match for small contributions.

Although there is little chance for passage by the Senate or signature by the president, it sets the bar high. One immediate strategy is to break up H.R. 1 into smaller pieces, to start the process.

**Massachusetts Initiatives:** In 2014, after many years of lobbying by the League of Women Voters of Massachusetts and its Election Modernization Coalition partners, a major election reform bill was passed. It included online voter registration, an online portal to check voter registration status, preregistration of 16-17 year olds, and early voting for biennial statewide

elections during business hours at a city's or town's election office. Going forward, the League will keep pushing to expand early voting and to implement Election Day registration, the reform that has been shown to have the greatest impact on voter participation.

In August 2018, Massachusetts became the 14th state in the country to adopt an automatic voter registration system, automatically registering eligible voters when they interact with the Registry of Motor Vehicles and MassHealth — unless they opt out. AVR should be in place on Jan. 1, 2020, and ready for the presidential primaries.

In November 2018, Massachusetts citizens overwhelmingly voted in favor of establishing a 15-member Statewide Citizens Commission on Money in Politics “to advance the policy of MA in favor of amending the U.S. Constitution (i) to affirm that artificial entities do not possess the inalienable Constitutional rights of the people, and (ii) in order to eliminate the undue influence of concentrated money on elections and on governmental policy, campaign contributions and spending may be regulated and limited.” A report from the Commission is due before Dec. 31, 2019.

Actions to improve voter registration, turnout and engagement: In two weeks, look here for Engaged Citizen Corner “Knocking Down the Wall: So All Voices Can Be Heard — Part 2.”

*Prepared and submitted by a member of the League of Women Voters of Brookline. The League is a nonpartisan organization that encourages informed and active participation in government and that works to influence public policy through education and advocacy.*