INTRODUCTION
Gerrymandering, a practice intended to establish a political advantage for a particular party or group by manipulating legislative district boundaries, has increasingly divided our communities, isolated and restricted the power of people of color, and undermined citizens’ right to a meaningful vote. It has created polarization and demoralization in the electorate, and undermined faith in our democracy. The General Assembly should continue tangible steps to put in place non-partisan, independent redistricting in time for the new commission to redraw lines in 2021.

BACKGROUND
In February 2019, the Virginia General Assembly overwhelmingly passed a bipartisan constitutional amendment proposal that could create Virginia’s first redistricting commission. This was the first crucial step toward reforming the way Virginia draws its legislative districts by including citizens in the redistricting process and adopting a non-partisan, independent and transparent process that will strengthen confidence and participation in our democracy.

The proposal reconciled several proposed amendments from the 2019 legislative session. Key elements of the plan include:

- Provides the General Assembly only up-or-down votes on the commission’s maps, without amendments; and,
- Excludes the Governor from the approval process, which would throw off the balance created by the above framework.

CONCLUSION
The bipartisan support of substantive reform during the 2019 legislative session marked a giant leap forward to significantly improve the way districts are drawn in Virginia. But there is still a long way to go. The same resolution must be passed again by the 2020 General Assembly and then win Virginia voters’ approval in a statewide referendum in November 2020.

Even though this would be the most comprehensive redistricting legislation that has ever passed through a state legislature, this constitutional amendment proposal can still be improved statutorily to further improve the redistricting process before districts are redrawn in 2021.

REFORMING HOW LEGISLATIVE DISTRICTS ARE DRAWN
Danielle Simms // Virginia League of Conservation Voters

Clearer Criteria. When drawing districts, the commission should have strong criteria to follow that focuses on keeping our communities together. These rules should prohibit all forms of gerrymandering and use existing local and municipal boundaries for districts where possible. This would minimize split precincts and keep our neighborhoods together.

Citizen Applications and Representation. As it is currently written, the commission will have eight citizens chosen by the selection committee of retired circuit court judges, but there are no requirements in the amendment for how they should choose citizens to be involved. Virginia should have an open application process that seeks a pool of potential citizen members that reflects the diversity of our Commonwealth.

Additional Transparency. The amendment already requires open meetings and open data, but there could also be specific requirements for a user-friendly website updated in real time, webcasting committee meetings, an email portal for Virginians who cannot come to meetings to use, and many other ways that address the nuts and bolts of broad-based community engagement that could be added to this process.