

Uncommon Sense

The Newsletter of the USF Chapter of the United Faculty of Florida
(UFF is a Florida Education Association affiliate)

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Tallahassee Matters

Perhaps the most important lesson of this legislative session is: the legislature matters. The Legislature directly allocates a lot of the money that the university gets and indirectly and eventually influences all monies that the universities receive from the state.

In addition, the Legislature passes laws barring faculty from traveling to nations that the Legislature doesn't like, and at least toys with laws cutting pension benefits and imposing unfunded mandates on colleges that the Legislature feels like kicking around.

To protect and advance the cause of higher education, we must speak to the Legislature.

While sending letters and making phone calls has an incremental effect – especially when addressing a hot topic – over the long run, an organization has the most influence if it builds connections and works with legislators over time.

That's what the Florida Education Association does. But legislators are used to seeing advocates for firemen, real estate development, consumer rights, gun rights, transparency in government, and oil drilling, all prowling the Capitol, hunting for legislators. That's why advocates and lobbyists often ask constituents to "put a human face" on the cause.

That is one reason why the USF Chapter of the United Faculty of Florida formed a Political Action Committee: to build connections and work with the legislative delegations of the Tampa Bay area.

This means getting to know our legislators and getting our message across. Getting our message across means more than just presenting wishlists. It means showing how USF is benefitting Florida by educating students, by solving major problems of the day, by developing new technologies, by

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The Gerrymander

If we are to build meaningful relationships with legislators, there must be a reason for them to pay attention to us. That reason must be: because we vote for them – or their opponents. But our ability to elect the candidates we choose – and consequently, our ability to be heard by our elected representatives – is increasingly compromised by a once-quaint practice that is metastasizing into one of the great political problems of our era.

Elbridge Gerry did not invent the "Gerrymander", but you can see from the cartoon below that as of 1812, it was still a primitive creature: twelve counties plus or minus change. As late as the early 1970s, Gerry's followers would lay immense maps on the floor, break out the markers and coffee, and spent the night on a moderate work of moral corruption.



But now, the U.S. Census employs a *Topologically Integrated Geographic Encoding and Referencing* (TIGER[®]) system to index the relative positions of residences within natural and artificial boundaries. Using voter registration and marketing data, gerrymandering can go to an

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reaching out to the community, and by discovering neat things. USF's strongest message always begins, "Here is what we are doing to help *your* constituents..."

And this is why individual USF faculty and professionals will be so effective contacting legislators: we know what USF is doing because *we are the ones who are doing the great things that USF is doing.*

But we would be even more effective if the major players worked together. UFF is eager to work with the Student Government, the Faculty Senate, the Staff Senate, the Staff Union, the Police Union, and the Administration and the Board to get our message to the Legislature. We can use all the concerted volume we can get, for it is only by being heard that we can move the Legislature to support USF's mission.

If you wish to join UFF's effort to speak to legislators, contact our Political Action chair, Bob Welker, at RobertFWelker@aol.com.

Logistics

The USF Chapter of the United Faculty of Florida publishes two newsletters, *Uncommon Sense* and a UFF Biweekly (or, if you prefer, a fortnightly), the latter every other Thursday, with news and items of interest and announcing the Chapter meeting the next day. All members of the bargaining unit should be getting both newsletters: to get on the mailing lists, contact the UFF/USF Webmaster, Greg McColm, via [uff_biweekly-owner@ourusf.org](mailto:uff_biweekly_owner@ourusf.org).

Our website is <http://uff.ourusf.org/index.html>, and our blog is at <http://faculty.ourusf.org/>. Come and visit us!

This summer, starting May 21, we will meet in Tampa on alternate Fridays at 12:30 pm, just east of the USF-Tampa campus, at CDBs Restaurant at 51st & Fowler, except when otherwise announced. All UFF members are invited – no, urged – to attend. Non-members are also welcome; pizza and beer are courtesy of the Chapter. Come and join the movement.

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almost house-by-house level.

And the traditional "packing" (dumping people of the opposite party into a small number of districts) and "cracking" (spreading opponents into minorities across many districts) techniques are being enhanced or replaced by more powerful regimes implemented by computers.

If the House and Senate leaderships choose who will elect which legislator, the leadership grows more powerful. Legislators have more incentive to obey the leadership and less incentive to pay heed to their own constituents – who would not be able to do much with their votes.

That is the result of intense gerrymandering: votes don't matter.

We have already seen the result this legislative session. Florida has more Democrats than Republicans, which means that a predominately Republican legislature should push a careful and incrementalist expansion of the GOP agenda. But instead, a hard right wing leadership pushes a hard right agenda – backed by the expectation that it will be the leadership that draws the district lines.

Or will it?

Perhaps the most farsighted reaction against "politics as usual" today is the national movement to reduce gerrymandering. For the first time, California's district lines will be drawn by a nonpartisan Citizens Redistricting Commission, and this year the fight is on in Florida. This fall, Amendments 5 and 6 would require that legislative and Congressional district boundaries be drawn so as not to favor any party or incumbent, that districts will be compact and "where feasible" use existing boundaries.

As usual, the party in power opposes reform while the party out of power supports it (the California Republican Party supported the initiative while Democratic Party opposed it – the reverse of the current Florida situation). For the vested interests, the question is who benefits. But for citizens, the issue is making our representatives answer to us, not the leadership.

For more information about the initiative, see <http://www.fairdistrictsflorida.org/>.