

May 2017 Annual Meeting



Dr. Sam Wang Speaks at
Annual Meeting

"Can Math Help Save
Democracy? Gerrymandering,
Statistics, and the Supreme
Court"

[Sam Wang's Remarks](#)

The Annual Dinner attracted 38 guests, among them Nancy Hedinger, LWVNJ President, and members of Leagues as far away as Red Bank and Mountain Lakes. Nancy saluted Grace Sinden's 50 years in League and spoke of Grace's contributions and her personal influence as a mentor to Nancy. A show of hands revealed that the Princeton Area League has many 50-year members.

In the business meeting led by Chrystal Schivell, members voted to approve the Princeton League positions, the budget, and the leadership committee. Grace asked that members keep an eye on a bill (S1632/A3770) that limits the use in multifamily dwellings of light frame wood construction that may have contributed to the fires at Avalon properties in northern New Jersey. She may ask the Princeton League in the future to advocate based on our Housing and Environment position.

Ingrid Reed introduced the speaker, Dr. Sam Wang, professor at Princeton University in the Neuroscience Institute and the Department of Molecular Biology. She noted that Sam's interests and talents are wide-ranging. His research concerns how the brain

learns during development and adulthood, but he has also pioneered the analysis of state polls to track Presidential races. He founded the Princeton Election Consortium and writes about politics and neuroscience for *The New York Times*, *The American Prospect*, *The New Republic*, and *The Washington Post*.

Sam spoke on the topic, “Can Math Help Save Democracy? Gerrymandering, Statistics, and the Supreme Court.” He explained that he is working on a statistical standard whereby the Supreme Court may be able to identify partisan gerrymandering, thus leading to election reform.

Sam began his topic by noting that when legislatures create election districts that benefit one party over another, it is the legislators who chose their voters—not the voters, their legislators. This is the problem of partisan gerrymandering. Increasing polarization and more sophisticated computer programs have taken partisan gerrymandering to new heights, making dozens of seats noncompetitive, yielding a net gain of seats for Republicans. The remedy lies with the courts.

The term “gerrymandering” originated with a salamander-shaped election district created in 1812 by Massachusetts Governor Gerry to benefit his party. Although Sam showed slides of a number of such contorted districts, he noted that some are the result of the Voting Rights Act and are designed to empower minorities. Conversely, neatly rectangular districts may actually contain partisan gerrymandering because of cracking and packing. “Cracking” (along district boundaries) involves spreading voters of a particular type among many districts in order to deny them a sufficiently large voting bloc in any particular district, while “packing” concentrates as many voters of one type into a single electoral district to reduce their influence in other districts.

Partisan gerrymandering is unconstitutional, yet the courts have been reluctant to tackle the issue because there has been no standard by which to determine whether an election district has been subjected to partisan gerrymandering. However, the four liberal justices along with Justice Kennedy are looking for a manageable standard. Although Justice Scalia was against partisan gerrymandering, he believed that it was

time to give up trying to find such a standard. Chief Justice Roberts agrees that finding such a standard is too difficult. (Justices Thomas and Alito believe it is not the business of the court to determine gerrymandering.)

Here's where Sam and his colleague, Brian Remlinger, who was also at the dinner, come in. They propose using a 100-year-old statistical formula: the widely-used Two-Sample T-Test. Sam illustrated its use and noted that it may appeal to the Supreme Court justices because it is time-tested, fairly simple and rapid to use, and requires no maps or consideration of a state's redistricting procedures. Sam's idea won a prize in 2016 in Common Cause's annual contest to identify a rigorous standard for identifying partisan gerrymandering. More information can be found at gerrymander.princeton.edu.

Sam is working with Common Cause, the Brennan Center for Justice, and others and anticipates that the Supreme Court will consider standards to determine partisan gerrymandering this fall. Sam proved that math may help save democracy through election reform, but he noted that the timing is crucial since it is likely that some justices favorable to a standard will not remain on the Supreme Court much longer. The League thanked him for a dramatic and timely presentation.



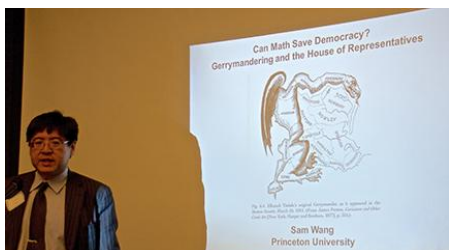
Chrystal Schivell conducts the business meeting.



Nancy Hedinger, President LWVNJ, salutes Grace Sinden's 50 years of League membership.



Grace Sinden informs us about introduced NJ State Legislative fire safety construction legislation.



Can Math Save Democracy?



Professor Sam Wang, Annual Meeting speaker



Annual Dinner Meeting attendees



Sandy Smith welcomes new member Jeanne Turner (Ingrid Reed in background).



Sandy Smith welcomes new member Jeanne Turner (Ingrid Reed in background).



John Schivell and Lee Forbes



Frieda Gilvarg, Beth Mueller, Rita Ludlum, Edith Neimark



Ingrid Reed, Beth Mueller, Frieda Gilvarg



Elizabeth Bidwell Bates