

Give Islip voters the democracy they deserve

BY JOHN C. ZAHER

An effort is under way in Islip to replace its at-large method of electing the town board with councilmanic, or single-member, districts. If the petition drive is successful, Islip voters will join citizens in Brookhaven, Hempstead and North Hempstead who have replaced party politics as usual with democratic empowerment.

Consider these numbers: Islip's population is more than 322,000. Under a councilmanic system as proposed in the petition drive, four districts would be created, with each councilmember representing about 80,500 people from a distinct geographic area.

Greater accountability and representation are reason

enough for reform, but councilmanic districts could have a profound impact on party politics by continuing to shift power from the political elites.

Republicans have a numerical advantage in voter registration that has led to continued dominance over town politics. According to 2003 enrollment statistics, there are 39.5 percent of voters registered as Republicans, 29.7 percent Democrat and 24.1 percent independents (unaffiliated) and 6.5 percent other parties. With the odds in their favor, Islip Republicans have long held influence over civil service and contracted work.

While Republicans have been dominant on the town level, Democrats now represent two out of four Suffolk County Legislature seats and

two out of three Assembly seats covering Islip Town. Both the legislature and Assembly are elected from geographic districts. These smaller districts (75,000 people and 120,000 respectively) have allowed Democrats to win despite the Republican Party's advantages. Single-member districts let citizens with community support overcome financial advantages and party enrollment figures on a town-wide level. They can win seats that Republicans often take for granted, putting up candidates who are rewarded for party loyalty rather than political or public policy skills.

Democratic Suffolk County Executive Steve Levy and Assemblyman Ginny Fields (D-Oakdale) provide the perfect examples. For years, Levy represented the eastern portion of the town in both the Suffolk Legislature and the Assembly. By championing an independent and reform-minded agenda, serving his constitu-

ents well and vigorously campaigning door to door, he was ultimately able to win Suffolk's highest office. Likewise, Ginny Fields sought the Republican nomination for county legislature after former Legis. Joe Rizzo retired. She was denied the nomination when Republicans cross-endorsed Conservative Patrick Walsh. She campaigned hard door to door, rallied her supporters and won.

Today, in Islip Town, power has become less dependent on a particular party and more concentrated in the elected official, namely the town supervisor.

At no other time is the need for councilmanic districts so pronounced. American political history has been one of expanded

suffrage. As the political parties wane in influence and money becomes more dominant, these factors must be countered through political reform. By implementing councilmanic districts, power is dispersed to locally elected officials, who are often community-based leaders. They must represent the needs of their district to be re-elected.

Empowered by home computers and grassroots support, candidates can counter both the party dominance and the influences of money. In the end, with councilmanic districts, the quality of our elected officials and our representation should improve and we'll get the kind of representative democracy our Founders meant us to have.



John C. Zaher is an attorney who runs The Public Relations and Marketing Group in Central Islip, which handles political and other clients. He teaches government at Suffolk Community College.

TOMORROW IN OPINION

Joseph Dolman's series starts on 'Brown v. Board of Ed' — what it has and hasn't meant for race and education

