

Town districts must hurdle the status quo

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July 25, 2005 8:00 PM

The recent court decision to invalidate petitions signed by thousands of residents seeking a referendum on whether to replace Huntington's at-large system with a council district system illustrates another example of how election law attorneys cooperate with elected officials to maintain the status quo and disenfranchise voters. This is an effort by officials to retain power in the face of America's history of expanding suffrage.

According to the 2000 census, Huntington's population is 195,289.

Currently, with four council members, each is elected to a four-year at-large term by all voters, with two seats up for election every two years. Under the initiative put forth by Huntington residents, six districts would have been created with each council member representing

approximately 32,500 persons from

a distinct geographic area. Council members, who still would vote with the town supervisor, would have been elected every two years.

Arguments in favor of councilmanic districts include providing greater

accountability, better representation and better constituent services. When an elected official is chosen from a geographic area, he or she must represent district interests and address the concerns of constituents. An official who fails to do so can be held individually accountable, unable to shift blame to the town board as a whole.

Those who oppose council districts often argue that such reforms are disenfranchising in that you can vote for only one official, rather than all members of the board. Also, where once you could take your concerns to all the officials, you may be limited to only one official who will listen. Further, people point out the dangers of gerrymandering, in which district boundaries are drawn for political advantage, or say the district may be "dumped" on if represented by the minority party. But these arguments are outweighed by the increased accountability and better representation provided by council districts.

State Supreme Court Justice Thomas Whelan's decision June 23 to side with arguments made by Huntington Conservative Party chairman Richard Thury and invalidate petitions on technical grounds, even after the petitions were certified by the town clerk, helps to illustrate flaws in state election law.

The law is in dire need of reform, but the power to reform lies solely with elected officials who have no desire to change a system that helps to maintain

the status quo.

This was evident when Gov. George Pataki agreed to support a statewide reform initiative in exchange for the Independence Party leadership's endorsement in 2002 (he eventually lost the nomination when defeated in a primary by B. Thomas Golisano). The reform would have allowed residents to circulate petitions statewide to change state law.

But the reform never made it through the State Legislature. If it had passed, state officials would be giving citizens the power to circumvent them when they do not act, including the power to make changes to the election law.

Considering how dysfunctional state government has been, they certainly would have had much to fear.

Opponents of the Huntington initiative argue that the effort is merely one in which those out of power are seeking to gain power. With changes to council districts in Hempstead, North Hempstead and Brookhaven in recent years, it may be true that those out of power generally supported the change. But the result is a more democratic system that puts more power in the hands of the people, including racial and political minorities. In time, it can be predicted that towns and cities across Long Island will adopt council districts. But along the way, those who have the most to lose will be certain to oppose the efforts and delay change. For now, Huntington's officials may have bought themselves some

time, including time to get re-elected and hold on to power. But, if the history of expanded suffrage and providing more power to individual citizens over political elites repeats itself, their efforts will only embolden those who seek and obtain reform.

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