

Seizing Party Control

By John C. Zaher

WHILE PARTISAN politics played a predominant role in the Brookhaven referendum to create council districts — just look at the money both Republicans and Democrats pumped into the campaign. The effort represents a trend toward decentralization of political power from parties and political elites to issues and grass-roots organizers.

Money, influence and candidate-centered campaigns combined with an increase in diversity and information technology have diminished the power of political parties. After three decades of trying, Brookhaven's vote in January to do away with the town's at-large system is symbolic of these trends. It will encourage other towns on Long Island where residents have tried to create council districts — from Republican Oyster Bay to Democratic Babylon — to do the same. It will also force political parties in towns that continue to elect officials at large to reach out to communities and become more inclusive.

Brookhaven becomes the second municipality out of Long Island's 13 towns and two cities to embrace a ward system. Hempstead moved to council districts in 2000, after a federal court found that the town's at-large voting system discriminated against minorities. The decision came four years after a federal judge ordered Nassau County to replace its Board of Supervisors, determining that the five-member system violated the 14th Amendment's principle of "one person, one vote." It was replaced by the 19-member legislature, whose representatives are elected geographically.

The move toward single-member districts on Long Island, whether by litigation or not, can best be understood in the context of political liberalization. Although many at-large systems represent an outgrowth of the Progressive era, when reform came in response to abuse and corruption of city-based ward systems, American political history has been one of expanding suffrage, including the election of U.S.

Brookhaven's vote for council districts reflects an important shift in local politics.



Illustration by Igor Kopelitsky

senators and political candidates in primaries and the enforcement of the federal Voting Rights Act.

The role of money and the rising cost of political campaigns, the increased influence of the media and special interests, and the use of information technology have contributed to shifting power away from political parties. In the past, the Republican and Democratic parties had been the only institutions able to effectively organize the vote and elect candidates.

Today, political lobbyists, special-interest groups and wealthy candidates have taken away much of that power. At the same time, the influence of parties has become more concentrated in candidates. Such is the case in the Brookhaven vote, where Supervisor John LaValle was the largest single spender. He contributed more than \$80,000 from his cam-

aign fund to defeat the referendum. Politicians now have greater access to campaign donations and the support of special interests. They can use information technology, such as the Internet, to organize and communicate with supporters. They can also use the media and the resources of political office to communicate directly with voters.

These changes have clearly begun to take hold on Long Island, and the growing popularity of council districts is not only symbolic, but in the case of Brookhaven, can be considered a direct result. These changes will only be accelerated when communities across Long Island that have long discussed replacing their at-large systems see what happens when the size of the districts where candidates must run is reduced. Oftentimes, to improve their chances for re-election, officials in ward systems find that they must be more attentive to the issues of a district, represent those interests and provide constituent services.

In the case of Hempstead, Democrat Dorothy Goosby's election to the GOP-dominated town board appears to have brought voting influence closer to the people. The first black member to hold office in the town, Goosby, a plaintiff in the Hempstead voting rights case, was instrumental in establishing council meetings at night to give more people who work the opportunity to get involved in town affairs. It is a good example of how an opposition party member can help make changes to open up the political process.

While Brookhaven's referendum was partisan in nature and Republicans in power were justified in opposing it as such, their challenge was that much more formidable in the face of trends toward political decentralization. Through effective organization, including the use of media resources and communications technology, supporters of council districts were able to energize voters to overcome being outspent by one of Long Island's strongest town GOPs.

In the face of such change, the major parties will have to reach out to communities and work more closely with civic groups and grass-roots activists in order to garner support and groom potential candidates for public office. Both parties will also have to ensure minority representation.

The trend toward single-member systems should send a message to Long Island's dominant political parties, who are already being challenged by the proliferation and growing strength of third parties. To reverse trends, they must adapt to changing technology and the communications age and decentralize their own parties by bringing power closer to their rank-and-file memberships.



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