

Benefits of Single Member Districts

Equity for Citizens. With Vermont's current system of single-, two-, and three-member legislative districts, there will always be questions regarding equitable representation. As a constituent is it better to have one representative shared among fewer people, or better to be able to influence two (or three senators) when critical issues arise, albeit having to compete with more voices within a larger community. It is my personal belief that constituents who can call on multiple elected officials have an unfair advantage over those who can only call on one. This, I recognize, is debatable. But it is a subjective debate that can never really be resolved, and that in and of itself is a problem with the system. Moving to an all-single member system would eliminate this debate and any question of representational inequity. So would moving to all two-member districts, but I hope what follows illustrates that this is by far the poorer of the two choices. And that maintaining our current hybrid system is the worst, least equitable choice of all.

Equity for Potential Candidates. It is generally more difficult for a potential candidate to run for office in a two-member district than in a single member district. Logistically, it is more expensive (one has to mail twice as many people, buy twice as many lawn signs, for example), it requires covering more ground, and connecting with twice as many voters, which also translates into a larger time commitment. These additional hurdles, which undoubtedly discourage some candidates from choosing to run for office in the first place, should be enough to demonstrate the unfair burden placed on candidates running in multi-member districts. But additionally, and perhaps more importantly, the dynamics of multi-member districts generally require finding a suitable running mate(s) to make a campaign for office even mathematically possible. This is something entirely out of the control of an individual candidate, and an unfair burden for candidates in multi-member districts that candidates in single member districts do not even have to consider let alone contend with. Per this dynamic, multi-member districts lead to "sponge candidates" – people who are not seriously running for office but concede to put their names on the ballot in order to soak up the partisan second votes ("vote for no more than two") of voters. Alternatively, if no second candidate can be found at all, a strategy is to encourage "bullet voting" – asking voters to not use one (or two) of their votes and just vote for one candidate. These phenomena (disinterested candidates and encouraging non-voting), unique to multi-member districts, are not democracy at its best!

Diversity. Removing barriers to running for office as outlined above (higher cost, greater time commitment, weird running mate dynamics) will open the door to more people choosing to run for office, particularly those with fewer financial resources, which will in turn lead to more diverse candidates for office. It will also allow for more geographic diversity in representation as multi-member districts create unfair advantages for candidates who reside in higher population communities within the larger district. For example, as noted in our meeting of 8/29/21, in Bennington County both senators are from the population center of Bennington the town, relying on the same geographically skewed voter base to elect both candidates (see the later section of this memo regarding gerrymandering). Dividing the district into two single member districts would allow the more rural northern part of the County to elect its own senator to advocate for its unique interests, while maintaining one senator from the more urban/suburban southern part of the county.

Accountability. More candidates mean fewer uncontested races, which means greater accountability to the voters. Moreover, single member districts allow for direct and clear accountability to the voters. If an incumbent is doing a poor job representing a district, the district knows exactly who to vote out of office at election time and doing so is a straightforward affair. This is not as much the case in multi-member districts where instructions on the ballot are "vote for no more than two (or three)," especially if only one challenger can be found to take on two or three incumbents. As such, multi-member districts create an unhealthy "incumbent protection" dynamic by making it more expensive and logistically

complicated for challengers to run, more difficult for challenging parties to successfully recruit multiple candidates per district, and more difficult for voters to make clear-cut choices at the ballot box. While incumbents naturally enjoy a number of advantages come election time, being an incumbent in a multi-member district is one we can and should eliminate.

Gerrymandering and Jim Crow. Gerrymandering – drawing district lines with purpose to influence future election outcomes -- is always a hot topic around reapportionment time. Everyone is publicly opposed to gerrymandering but tends to be quieter about the topic if the lines drawn benefit their own partisan interests. From a non-partisan policy perspective, the best steps we can take as a board is to eliminate as many tools that enable gerrymandering as possible. Multi-member districts are such a tool. This has been the case historically both in terms of partisan gerrymandering and racial gerrymandering. As Vermont’s own Racial Equity Report and testimony from the state’s Executive Director of Racial Equity to the Legislative Apportionment Board confirmed, “Extensive political research and case law have demonstrated that in most of the U.S., states and localities have taken increasingly *flagrant tactics designed to suppress and dilute the votes of communities of color. One such tactic is the use of multi-member districts.*” [Emphasis added]. While I personally don’t think Vermont has historically used multi-member districts to engage in racial gerrymandering, this is only because Vermont has not had large enough minority populations to be a factor in drawing district lines. However, as the state grows more diverse and seeks to attract a more diverse citizenry, we should eliminate this weird holdover policy from a bygone era.

The One Benefit of Multi-Member Districts Becomes Less Relevant. Historically in Vermont, multi-member districts, particularly at the house level, have had one positive function: they allow for more options in which town lines can also serve as legislative district borders, lessening the need to “split” towns between different legislative districts. This does serve to benefit voter clarity about who their voting for. If I live in X town, I vote at X polling place for the candidate(s) from X. It is worth noting that even with the option of multi-member districts some towns do get split, and the voters and election officials in these districts are able to figure it out. Additionally, as Vermont moves to a system of mailing ballots to all voters and one’s kitchen table becomes the predominant polling place, such confusion regarding “what district am I in again and where do I go to vote?” becomes a less relevant factor. You vote the ballot that lands in your mailbox and send it to the address on the return envelope.

In Conclusion. The Legislative Apportionment Board serves only in an advisory capacity to the Legislature -- by default, incumbent politicians with a personal interest in enhancing their own election odds. We can either provide cover for the incumbents by recommending the status quo, but for necessary changes and those as minor as law allows.... Or we can take a once in a decade opportunity to recommend a commonsense policy reform and, at the very least, spark an important public debate about equity of representation.

Why is it important that we do this now? Obviously, the chance won’t come again for another ten years. But, specific to the here and now, the national debate over “what is democracy” and “what are equitable voting laws” gives us an even more unique window of public interest and opportunity to engage in a broader public discussion. Additionally, the law mandating the breakup of the Chittenden County “Six-Pack”, which recognizes the inequities and logistical complications of multi-member districts, highlights the issue in a way that likely won’t occur again in years to come. This is an opportunity I hope we do not waste.

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