

Voting districts can be a bone of contention

Size rather than number of voters is the criterion used in establishing district size.

The difference in size between the largest and smallest districts from the ideal district, where all districts have the same population, is a source of contention. In 1982 when Providence changed from 13 to 15 wards, there was a deviation of 10.6 percent between wards, deemed acceptable by the courts because, the judge ruled, the US Supreme Court has said 1.9 percent is acceptable. In the recent Johnston case, the total deviation came to 52.7 percent—a figure much too high to accept.

In 1982, the Rhode Island Superior Court ruled against the senatorial districts established by the state because of gerrymandering—designing district lines to help a group or hurt its opponents. After two votes in the General Assembly, three court cases and a cost of \$2 million of state money, a special election was held in 1983 just for candidates in the 50 senatorial districts.

It's difficult to imagine, but in 1986, the Providence City Council took five city blocks from Ward 9 to be added to Ward 11 after the city councilperson from Ward 11, coincidentally, was alleged to have moved into that five block area, an area outside of his district. Local neighborhood residents challenged this shift of district lines in 1987. The city agreed to return to the old district lines after trying to make a case which they did not bring to court, and a special election, only in these two wards, was held in

1988. The whole debacle cost the taxpayers approximately one-half million dollars.

The most recent redistricting case involved the town of Johnston and its five voting districts. The town charter, adopted in 1963, mandated redistricting after each census, as do federal and state laws. The town did not redistrict after the 1970 census, nor did it after the 1980 census. Town leaders said that it was too late to do anything until after the 1990 results were in, but they were taken to court by two citizens and the Rhode Island affiliate of the American Civil Liberties Union.

It did not take long for the federal judge who was hearing the case to make a judgement: After hearing testimony in the morning, he made a decision in the afternoon. The five districts in town would be abolished for the 1990 election and all candidates would run on an at-large basis. This appeared to be the best short-term solution for this election before returning to the five districts for the next election which, of course, would be based on the 1990 census figures.

The Johnston case is interesting because, even though 1980 census numbers were used to provide evidence of the disparity of population size among districts, sources were used that gave detailed information for census blocks. And by using this block data, it was possible to establish that the largest—District 5—had a population of 6119, while the smallest—District 2—had only 3566 residents; a disparity that clearly violates all governmental mandates.

Block data are the smallest-size areas for which

data are published by the Census Bureau. Parts of Rhode Island, for example, have been divided into blocks, with roads on four sides, and numbers related to housing and population for these blocks are available in published form. The most recent Johnston court case, for which total cost to the taxpayers has yet to be established, is a prime example of the use of block data.

Although block data provide information for small areas, the amount of information given is very limited. Normally, the most detailed and comprehensive data obtainable from the Census Bureau is by census tracts, small statistical divisions of cities and towns. Each tract has from 25000 to 8000 inhabitants. Instituted in 1910, they are means of making comparisons of small areas over periods of time.

Johnston had four tracts in 1960, for example, when the town's population was 17,160, but by 1970, when the population had grown to 22,037, it became necessary to have five tracts. Census tract 124 was subdivided for the 1970 census, and now the five tracts form the general basis for the five voting districts. Block data are used where the districts and tracts do not exactly match.

Tracts form the basis for neighborhoods also. In Providence, data for Federal Hill can be obtained by using tracts 9, 10 and 11, while information about the downtown neighborhood is obtained by using tract 8.

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