

# Voting districts, tailor-made

**W**HEN a federal district court judge threw out the five voting district boundaries in Johnston this summer, it should have come as no surprise. After all, this marked the third time since the 1980 census that boundary districts in Rhode Island have been challenged and changed as a result of improper political decisions made by elected officials.

This small state must have established some kind of record in the nation for politicians who have either done a woefully inadequate job of drawing voting district lines, or seriously abused their political privilege and responsibility of providing districts in which all voters are treated equally. Three times in less than a decade court decisions or threats of court action have required special elections to rectify voting district lines.

In the first case, in 1982 the state was hauled into court and forced to delay senatorial elections for several months as a result of a gerrymander on the East Side of Providence. Six years later, Providence rescinded a boundary change in Wards One and Nine when faced with a court case, and a special election was held for these two wards only. Now the Johnston decision will require at-large elections for town council and school committee elections this fall.

The Supreme Court has ruled that voting districts must be of the same or

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nearly the same population size — the "one man, one vote" ruling — and this applies to federal, state and local districts. Of course, the purpose of this is to ensure that all votes have the same weight.

For example, in a district that has a population of 10,000 with one representative, votes would have only one-half the value of a district of 5,000 population with one representative. It should be noted that population size rather than number of voters is the criterion used in establishing district size.

The population numbers come from the decennial roll calls taken by the Census Bureau. By law, every state, city and town must change its voting district boundaries based upon the redistribution of the population. Every city and town in Rhode Island went through this redistricting process after the 1980 census — except Johnston. Further, after the previous 1970 census, Johnston did nothing about determining population for its five voting districts, even though its 1963 town charter also mandates this process.

The results of this maldistribution of district population were revealed at the U.S. District Court in Providence. Block and census tract data from the 1980 census indicated that the largest,

District Five, with its 6,119 population, was 72 percent larger than the smallest, District Two, with its population of 3,566. In other words, votes were diluted in Five because they were not equal to those of Two. Further, the council member from District Five could not provide the same services to his constituents, based upon population numbers, as could the council member from District Two.

The federal judge ruled that for this fall's election the five districts will be abolished and votes for town council and school committee will be conducted throughout the town on an at-large basis. Johnston will go back to its five districts after it has used the results of the 1990 census to redraw its district lines.

Not only did voters lose out in Johnston districts with regard to voting equality, but the taxpayers in town will also pick up the tab for court costs in a case that should never have been allowed to happen. This is exactly why all voters in Johnston, and all cities and towns of the state, need to watch the redistricting process closely after the 1990 census results are announced.

The past 10 years have shown that, one way or another, all of us end up paying for these abuses of the democratic process.

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