

10 Things to Know about At-Large Voting in Lowell and the Voting Rights Lawsuit

Lowell uses an At-Large election system to elect its entire City Council and School Committee. This means all candidates are elected and must run citywide.

1 Problems with All At-Large Elections

- The voting method allows 51% of the voters to win all the seats. 51% works in a race when voting for only one winner for state legislature or Congress. But when many seats are elected at once- as for the Lowell City Council (9) and School Committee (6) - the result should be more representative of the whole city.
- One or two neighborhoods can win all the seats. Many voters and neighborhoods can end up without direct representation.
- All At-Large voting can be illegal under the Voting Rights Act meant to ensure that minority voters, and voters in general, have a fair opportunity to elect candidates of their choice.

2 What's the purpose of a lawsuit?

- To have the federal court as a neutral mediator for the sides to present and discuss the facts of the case.
- For the plaintiffs and the city to agree on a remedy that provides the same equal opportunity for minority voters and for all voters and neighborhoods.

3 Why would district elections provide better opportunity?

District elections provide more opportunity for all voters to:

- Elect someone that lives in their own neighborhood and shares similar experiences and concerns.
- Meet and get to know the candidates running in their local district and not citywide.
- Have better access after the election to a local representative who has campaigned in their area and lives in that neighborhood.
- Allow new candidates a better chance to run and get known in a neighborhood-based district rather than citywide.

4 Are there advantages to At-Large seats?

- A citywide view point to the table can be a benefit. Still, the large majority of seats need to be based in districts to ensure fairness and representation across the city.

5 What do other Massachusetts cities do?

- No other city over 100,000 people uses all-at-large election. Almost every large Massachusetts City uses a system that is all or mainly neighborhood-based districts with some at-large seats.

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6 Is the problem voter turnout?

- We all want higher voter turnout. But that is not the main problem. It's the underlying math of All At-Large voting that let's one bloc of voters control most or all of the seats. This is why:
 - The federal government banned this method for federal elections.
 - Most states discourage at-large voting. Alabama, one of the last states to use at-large voting statewide in its judicial elections, is now facing a similar lawsuit under the Voting Rights Act.
 - All-At-Large voting is no longer used in all larger Mass. and U.S. cities

7 How long does a voting rights lawsuit take?

- If the federal district court agrees to move forward, it can take up to a year or more. The city and plaintiffs can come to an agreement subject to court approval at any time.

8 What is the Voting Rights Act?

- The Voting Rights Act was passed by Congress in 1965 to ensure minority voters – and by extension all voters - have an equal opportunity under the law to elect representatives of their choice. It covers any minority population large enough to conduct appropriate analysis for a claim.

9 Who is filing the lawsuit?

- The Lawyers Committee for Civil Rights of Boston with the Boston law firm of Ropes and Gray on behalf of Asian American and Latino plaintiffs and voters in Lowell. The Lawyers Committee was established at the request of President Kennedy to help address discrimination issues in voting and other areas.

10 What it a lawsuit won't do?

- It won't affect this year's 2017 city election.
- It doesn't change Lowell's Plan E form of government with a city manager and a mayor elected from the city council.
- It doesn't guarantee what candidates might win. It provides more equal opportunity for voters to elect their own neighborhood candidates across the city representing the city Lowell is today.