

## AT-LARGE VOTING FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

### **What is at-large voting?**

Under at-large voting, all voters cast their ballots for all candidates in the jurisdiction. In Columbus city council elections, for example, all voters cast their ballots for seven positions, with the top seven candidates who receive the most votes citywide winning seats on the city council.

### **Why can at-large voting be discriminatory?**

At-large methods of election can be discriminatory because they, in combination with racially polarized voting, can prevent voters of color from electing their candidates of choice where they are not the majority in the jurisdiction. Under this system, the votes of voters of color often are drowned out or submerged by the votes of white voters who do not support the candidates preferred by Black voters.

### **How does at-large voting affect communities of color?**

Fewer and fewer jurisdictions still practice at-large voting. That is because courts and other decision-makers have recognized that discriminatory methods of election, like at-large voting, exacerbate the discrimination that communities of color experience because of socioeconomic and other disparities in life opportunities between Black and white communities. LDF has long worked to eradicate discriminatory at-large methods of election that dilute the voting strength of communities of color.

### **How can jurisdictions switch from at-large to district-based voting?**

In certain jurisdictions, elected officials can call for a referendum on the question of changing from at-large to district-based voting, and voters can approve a change to the method of election through a referendum. Ohio law allows local city councils to propose a change to the method of election with approval from two thirds of council members. The proposed change to the method of election would then be subject to a referendum that requires approval from a majority of the electors. Alternatively, communities can petition a city council to put the question of a change to the method of election to the voters. Without action by local municipalities, politicians who choose to maintain at-large voting can face time-consuming (e.g., two to five years) and costly litigation (e.g., millions of dollars).

### **How are single-member districts created?**

To remedy dilutive at-large electoral systems, single-member districts often are created by a demographic mapping expert and include at least one district in which voters of color are the majority of the voting-age population in that district. These districts must satisfy all relevant laws and traditional redistricting principles. These districts are not intended to guarantee the election of politicians of a particular color, but rather to empower all voters with the opportunity to elect their candidates of choice.

### **Are at-large systems rare or widely-used?**

Since the passage of the Voting Rights Act in 1965, numerous at-large systems have been struck down under Section 2 of the Voting Rights Act. Although at-large voting is becoming rarer and rarer, in part due to the advocacy of LDF and other civil rights organizations, such discriminatory election systems remain in some places in our democracy.

The Voting Rights Act forbids the use of any electoral scheme, such as the at-large method of election, that submerges the votes of people of color in elections that a white majority of voters control. Widely considered the crown jewel of American democracy, the Voting Rights Act is the most effective tool for protecting voters of color against methods of election – like at-large voting – that weaken the voting strength of communities of color.

### **What are some notable cases that struck down at-large voting?**

In a case that LDF successfully litigated, *Dillard v. Crenshaw County, Alabama*, a federal district court found that hundreds of Alabama districts intentionally employed at-large electoral methods to discriminate against Black voters. Because of that litigation, 176 jurisdictions settled and adopted some form of district voting.

More recently, in *Georgia State Conference of the NAACP v. Fayette County Board of Commissioners*, LDF successfully challenged the at-large electoral method to the county board of commissioners and board of education in Fayette County, Georgia.