

Main Street Journal: Online Exclusive: Why Single Member County Commission Districts Are Better For Voters by County Commissioner Steve Mulroy



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By: County Commissioner Steve Mulroy



Shelby County has a once-in-a-decade chance to make local legislative elections simpler, more competitive, and more accountable. Instead, we are sacrificing all those virtues in the name of helping incumbents stay in power.

Every ten years, after the Census numbers are published, the County Commission ends up having to redraw its district lines. Currently, a majority of the 13-member Commission favors a plan using 6 multimember districts, each electing two Commissioners, plus a seventh single-member district (SMD) electing only one Commissioner.

At the first of three readings, it endorsed such a "multimember" plan over an alternative plan with 13 smaller single-member districts (SMDs), each electing one Commissioner. This is a shame, for the SMD plan is clearly better, for several reasons.

Competition. Under the SMD plan, each district would have only 71,000 people, and would be fairly small geographically. Everyone involved in politics knows that the smaller the district, the easier and cheaper it is to campaign in it. First-time candidates who want to get involved in government—candidates without a lot of money or name recognition—have a chance in such districts. They can knock on doors and run a grass roots campaign.

Under the Commission's preferred plan, each district has over 140,000 people, about twice the size of a State House district. One district covers about half the surface area of the whole county. In districts this large, incumbents with name recognition and campaign war chests have an almost unbeatable advantage—which is precisely the point for some incumbents pushing the plan (as at least some have admitted publicly).

Accountability. SMDs further accountability by keeping the representative closer to the neighborhoods which elected him (and which can vote him out of office).

They also further accountability on constituent service. If a constituent makes a request in a multimember district, each representative can expect the other to follow up, and blame for failing to do so is spread around. In an SMD, by contrast, there's only one person responsible, and only one person to blame.

Defenders of the proposed multimember plan say that constituent service is better when you have several legislators who can do it per district. But common sense tells us that you're more likely to see the job get done when the buck stops with only one person.

Simplicity. Under the multimember plan, three or four candidates would run for, say, "District 1, Position 1," and another three or four would run for "District 1, Position 2." Voters would have to keep track of which candidates are running for which position.

Isn't it simpler to just vote for one representative? That's what people are used to when they vote for Congress, State House, and State Senate. In fact, SMDs are the norm in this country, and multimember districts the anomaly.

Moreover, the Commission will almost certainly increase the new Unified School Board from 7 members (the size it will have when the current federal court consent decree expires in September 2013) to 13 members, as the federal court order allows it to do. Many people favor using the same County Commission redistricting plan for the Unified School Board, to make it less confusing for voters. But under state law, we can only do that if we use SMDs for the County Commission.

Whether you like having a Unified School Board or not, it will be there, and with 13 members. Doesn't it make sense for voters to keep track of just one districting plan for both bodies?

Equality. Multimember plan backers argue that it's good for voters to have 2 County Commissioners, because if you don't like one, you can always call the other. But that's unrealistic.

Even in a SMD plan, if you don't like your Commissioner, you can always call another. We Commissioners don't refuse to listen to citizens who contact us just because they live outside our district lines. In fact, we usually don't know whose district they're in when they call, write, email, or buttonhole us at the corner grocery.

And, realistically, Commissioners elected from the same district are going to be of the same party, same race, and same ideology. They just won't differ enough for this to be a good reason.

Even if that *were* an important enough reason to justify making elections less competitive and more confusing, it's

simply unfair to give that supposed advantage to some voters (those in the multimember districts), and deny it to others (those in the lone single-member district in the Commission's plan). Even on its own terms, this argument doesn't hold up to scrutiny, revealing it for the incumbency protection pretext it really is.

We teach our children that the voters choose their representatives. But in reality, the representatives choose their voters, at redistricting time.

It's easy to see why incumbents would prefer to keep elections uncompetitive in sprawling multimember districts. It's hard to see why we would let them get away with it.



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