

Lowell should dismantle ‘majority rule’ system

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In the fall of 1957, a Lowell city councilor placed an advertisement in the local newspaper backing a referendum that would create at-large elections, with every councilor subject to a citywide vote. The system, he wrote, would promote “majority rule” and limit “minority rule” by ethnic groups like the French, Greeks, Irish, and Lithuanians.

Voters approved the measure by a wide margin and, ever since, Lowell city government has been dominated by “majority rule.” Today, that means an all-white city council and school committee, even though nonwhites — mostly Latinos and Asian-Americans — make up 49 percent of the Mill City’s population.

Last week, the Lawyers’ Committee for Civil Rights and Economic Justice sued to dismantle the at-large system and put at least some district-level representation in place, giving Colombian- and Cambodian-Americans and other minorities a better shot at electing people from their own neighborhoods.

It’s now incumbent on Lowell, a city of immigrants if there ever was one, to settle the lawsuit and create a government that is more reflective of its constituents.

Civil rights groups and the federal government have filed similar lawsuits all over the country, alleging violations of the federal Voting Rights Act. And they’ve won. Here in Massachusetts, in the midst of legal action, Springfield voters elected in 2007 to drop a purely at-large system and adopt a hybrid model that included local, ward-based elections.

That sort of the approach is the norm here. Boston, Somerville, Cambridge, Lawrence, and Chelsea have all put systems in place that give minorities a reasonable chance to elect minority candidates. Lowell, in fact, is the only Massachusetts city with a population of 100,000 or more still clinging to exclusively at-large elections.

The lawsuit, filed in federal district court, points to ample evidence of racially polarized elections. In 2013, for instance, two Cambodian-American candidates running for City Council were ranked as first- and second-choice candidates in precincts with heavy Asian-American and Latino populations. But in white areas, they were ranked 17th and 18th, out of 18 total candidates, and lost.

Oren Sellstrom, litigation director for the Lawyers’ Committee for Civil Rights, says that all-white elected bodies are not as accountable to minority communities as they should be. “They know they don’t have to care about [minority communities’] votes,” he says.

The lawsuit says the city was slow to reach out about a proposal to move Lowell High School away from downtown, near minority and poorer neighborhoods, and into a white enclave. They also say parks in minority areas are underserved and that a recent sanctuary city proposal got short shrift before the City Council.

There are, of course, arguments to be made on all sides of these issues. The Lowell city manager says police do not cooperate with federal authorities on immigration now, so there was no need for a sanctuary city ordinance. And there was some fear that passing one would bring unwelcome attention from the Trump administration.

Reasonable points. But there is a real debate to be had on this and other issues, and every community deserves a chance to participate fully. That’s democracy — and there’s not enough of it in Lowell.