

“ONE MAN – ONE VOTE” STANDARD IS THE RIGHT STANDARD

By Woodrow Wilcox

Recently, I sent a letter to the editor to local newspapers about the “ONE MAN – FIVE VOTES” system in Griffith, Indiana. After the letter to the editor was published, people started contacting me to express their agreement.

Under the “ONE MAN – FIVE VOTES” system in Griffith, each voter gets to vote for the town board member that represents each of the five town board districts of Griffith. So, a person in the first town board district gets to vote for the representative from that voter’s area and for the representative of each of the other four areas of Griffith.

It is this “ONE MAN – FIVE VOTES” system that was used throughout the U.S. for so many years to keep African Americans and Native American Indians from being able to elect representatives to various governmental bodies.

In Griffith, the system works against new residents and African American residents. If a new resident or African American resident runs for the town board, it is possible that the candidate will win a majority of votes in the district which the candidate wants to represent, but lose the election because people who don’t live in that district vote against the candidate.

This “ONE MAN – FIVE VOTES” system was not designed to prevent new residents or African American residents from running for office in Griffith. But, it has the effect of discouraging it.

The system was put in place when Griffith’s population was less than five thousand people. At that time, everyone knew everyone else in the town. At that time, it might have made more sense to let every voter vote on all the members of the town board. But, it does not make sense to continue that practice. Griffith has grown. It is more difficult for a capable new resident to become well know throughout the entire town. Keeping the “ONE MAN – FIVE VOTES” system in Griffith only encourages an “old resident – old families – old friends” established circle to run the town without having their policies questioned or challenged seriously.

Allowing voters in the fourth district to vote for the town board representative from the first district makes as little sense as allowing people in Lowell and Cedar Lake to vote for the Lake County Commissioner who represents Gary. Don't laugh. That really happened. Years ago, Indiana's election laws were changed to require that county commissioners be elected by district rather than at large throughout the county. But, Lake County officials ignored the law until former Gary City Court Judge Douglas Grimes filed a lawsuit to force Lake County officials to comply with the law. After that lawsuit, the division was made and Atterson Spann was elected the first African American Lake County Commissioner.

Since writing the letter to the editor, I learned that Highland has the same municipal election system as Griffith. Maybe there are more communities in Lake County that have retained the same election system from their rural community days.

Will these communities change their election laws to "ONE MAN – ONE VOTE" standards voluntarily? Or, will some local attorneys need to file civil rights – voter rights lawsuits to force these communities to adopt the "ONE MAN – ONE VOTE" standard?

Written and distributed by Woodrow Wilcox on March 28, 2007.

Note: The fall election in Griffith, Indiana brought new leadership to the town council. I believe that those new leaders should be given a chance to change the election process without legal pressure at this time. (Sept. 2008)