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Though theory and empirical evidence suggest that minorities are less likely to be represented under multimember districting plans than under single-member plans, there are reasons to wonder whether this logic and evidence are applicable to the political party case. Evidence from multiple tests shows that, as a general proposition, minority party strength in state legislatures is not diluted by multimember districts. Reasons include concentration of the minority party in areas using multimember districts and the use of multimember districts for only a portion of all districts.

One of the unsettled concerns in the apportionment revolution of the last 20 years is the status of multimember districts. In specific instances, the Supreme Court has declared that multimember districts were created or maintained for the purpose of illegal discrimination against racial or linguistic minorities (*White v. Regester* 412 U.S. 755; *Rogers v. Lodge* 458 U.S. 613 [1982]). The Court has also indicated a strong preference for single-member districts, so much so that it has virtually required them ("absent particularly pressing factors") in court-imposed districting plans (*Chapman v. Meier* 420 U.S. 1 at 20). Yet in case after case, it has consistently held that such districts are not inherently unconstitutional (see, for example, *Mobile, City of v. Bolden* 446 U.S. 55, 1980).

Black and Hispanic minorities have in many jurisdictions throughout the south and southwest sought to end the use of multimember districts. It is not hard to see why. Except in extremely one-sided areas, where no amount of tinkering will alter the results, there is a strong possibility that the majority will win all of the seats under a multimember district plan but not under a single-member district arrangement. The logic behind this argument is simple. If a cue such as race (or party) predominates, as is likely to be the case in many state legislative elections, then the majority will sweep a multimember district; yet if that district were divided into single-member districts, the minority might predominate in some of them.

The extent of majority domination depends on the geographic concentration of the minority, the degree to which the majority (and minority) vote homogeneously, and the extent to which gerrymandering—or even neutral districting—isolates whatever pockets of minority strength there are. Yet, all else equal, the likelihood of majority sweep is greater—possibly considerably greater—when each race is contested in a single majority-dominated multimember district rather than in several single-member districts, some of which may be dominated by the group that is a minority in the larger area.

Evidence about representation of racial minorities strongly supports this logic. In at-large municipal elections, for example, there is strong evidence that minorities are underrepresented (Grofman, 1981, 1982; Engstrom and McDonald, forthcoming). More to the point, several recent analyses indicate that the same underrepresentation of racial minorities is true for state legislative districts (Jewell, 1980, 1982; Grofman, 1983).

There are reasons to wonder, nonetheless, whether this tight logic and strong empirical evidence are applicable to party representation at the state level. Most importantly, multimember districts typically comprise only a portion of the total representation in state legislatures. Hence, the impact on overall representation may be minimal. Moreover, a statewide minority party may be in the majority in some multimember districts. In fact, multimember districts may actually increase representation of the statewide majority by giving it a bonus in selected areas. In addition, party voting—especially with the decreased emphasis on partisanship in recent years—may not be as strong as racial voting, so members of minority parties might win seats in multimember districts in which they are outnumbered more frequently than might members of a racial or linguistic minority.

Evidence about the effect of multimember districts on partisan representation in state legislatures is fragmentary and inconclusive, consisting mostly of unsubstantiated assertions that minority parties are underrepresented (see, for example, Walker, 1976; Rosenthal, 1981, p. 15). The only systematic evidence—in Hamilton's (1967) study of three midwestern states—is from the 1950s, before the reapportionment changes of the 1960s and 1970s. Thus, the evidence, like the logic, is unclear as it applies to party representation at the state level.

In this paper we present a series of results about multimember districts and party representation in state legislatures. First, since the number and distribution of these districts has been changing rapidly over the past 20 years, we begin with a brief description of multimember districting in the states. Second, we show the extent to which seats in multimember districts go to one party or are split between parties. Finally, we present a series of tests of the effect of these districts on party representation. Overall, the

results show that, contrary to expectations, multimember districting does not result in underrepresentation of the statewide minority party.

The Use of Multimember Districts in State Legislatures

When Klain (1955) brought multimember districts to the attention of the discipline in the 1950s, he noted that such districts were surprisingly widespread. In fact, only nine states elected all of their legislators in single-member districts. Over the next few years, the use of multimember districts actually increased a bit, apparently reaching a maximum in the early 1960s. By 1964 the number had declined slightly, and in the decade after the Supreme Court's one person, one vote decision (June 1964), the number fell substantially. A few more states moved to all single-member districts in 1980, 1982, and 1984. Nevertheless, as of the 1984 elections, some 16 states still used multimember districts to elect all or a portion of their state legislators.

Table 1 indicates the electoral system in each state, and Table 2 provides a year-by-year summary of the number of states using multimember districts, as well as the proportion of representatives elected from them. Such districts are especially frequent in election to the lower house, with over a quarter of all representatives still elected in this fashion.¹

The numerous changes and combinations of single-member and multimember districts evident in Table 1 in different states and sometimes within the same state make data analysis and presentation somewhat complicated. Despite these and other minor complications (for example, states that eliminated multimember districts in stages), the multiple patterns of change permit a variety of tests for the possible effects of multimember districts. Before-after tests and comparisons of changed versus unchanged chambers, of chambers within state legislatures, and of single-member and multimember districts within a single state will all be used below. First, however, we consider the frequency of one-party sweeps in multimember districts.

One-Party Representation in Multimember Districts?

The assumption underlying most discussions of multimember districts is that the majority group will vote homogeneously, thereby electing only members of that group. To see whether this is true, we examined party divisions in all multimember districts in 1980. The results vary, of course, from one state to another, and there are a few states in which one-party sweeps are the rule. (This in itself is not surprising since some states had only a few multimember districts with two or three members each, and since one party sometimes dominates state politics.) Taken as a whole, however, the frequency of districts with seats split between the parties is remarkably

TABLE 1
Multimember Districts
In State Legislative Elections since 1960^a

States That Have Eliminated All Multimember Districts since 1960^b

| <i>House</i> | <i>Senate</i> |
|------------------------------|-----------------------|
| Alabama (1974) | Alabama (1974) |
| Arkansas (1982) | Arizona (1972) |
| Colorado (1968) ^c | Arkansas (1972) |
| Connecticut (1966) | Colorado (1964) |
| Florida (1982) | Florida (1982) |
| Hawaii (1982) | Hawaii (1982) |
| Illinois (1982) | Indiana (1972) |
| Iowa (1968) | Iowa (1968) |
| Louisiana (1971) | Louisiana (1971) |
| Maine (1976) | Maine (1968) |
| Massachusetts (1972) | Maryland (1974) |
| Michigan (1964) | Mississippi (1979) |
| Minnesota (1972) | New Jersey (1973) |
| Mississippi (1979) | New Mexico (1972) |
| Montana (1974) | Ohio (1966) |
| Nevada (1972) | Oklahoma (1964) |
| New Mexico (1966) | Oregon (1972) |
| Ohio (1966) | Pennsylvania (1966) |
| Oklahoma (1964) | Rhode Island (1966) |
| Oregon (1972) | South Carolina (1984) |
| Pennsylvania (1966) | South Dakota (1984) |
| Rhode Island (1966) | Tennessee (1966) |
| South Carolina (1974) | Virginia (1984) |
| Tennessee (1972) | |
| Texas (1976) | |
| Virginia (1984) | |

States That Continue to Use Multimember Districts to Elect Some or All Legislators

| <i>House</i> | <i>Senate</i> |
|----------------|----------------|
| Alaska | Alaska |
| Arizona | Nevada |
| Georgia | North Carolina |
| Idaho | North Dakota |
| Indiana | Vermont |
| Maryland | West Virginia |
| New Hampshire | Wyoming |
| New Jersey | |
| North Carolina | |
| North Dakota | |
| South Dakota | |
| Vermont | |
| Washington | |
| West Virginia | |
| Wyoming | |

TABLE 1 (cont.)

States That Have Used Only Single-Member Districts since 1960

| <i>House</i> | <i>Senate</i> |
|--------------|----------------------|
| California | California |
| Delaware | Connecticut |
| Kansas | Delaware |
| Kentucky | Georgia ^d |
| Missouri | Idaho |
| New York | Illinois |
| Utah | Kansas ^d |
| Wisconsin | Kentucky |
| | Massachusetts |
| | Michigan |
| | Minnesota |
| | Missouri |
| | Montana ^d |
| | Nebraska |
| | New Hampshire |
| | New York |
| | Texas |
| | Utah |
| | Washington |
| | Wisconsin |

^aThe data were compiled by the authors from *The Book of the States*, 1968-1969 through 1980-1981 editions; *The Book of the States*, 1983-1984, Supplement 1; Hardy, Heslop, and Anderson, 1981; Bushnell, 1970; and information provided by state officials.

^bThe year indicates the date of the first election after the change to all single-member districts.

^cThe Colorado House had multimember districts through 1962, single-member districts in 1964, multimember districts again in 1966, and then switched permanently to single-member districts.

^dThe Georgia and Kansas Senates used multimember districts in the 1968 and 1970 elections only, the Montana Senate in 1968, 1970, and 1972 only.

high (Table 3). Just over a quarter of the districts in both state senates and houses elect members of both parties. It is possible that split delegations were less frequent years ago, when party identification was stronger. But, currently at least, the assumption that all or almost all multimember districts are one-party is untenable.

The frequency of split districts does vary greatly by the number of candidates elected (Table 3). When four or five or more legislators are elected from a single district, it is quite likely that at least one candidate from the minority party in that district is able to make himself visible above the crowd and get elected in spite of the odds. This is at least mildly surprising, since

TABLE 2
 Contribution of Multimember Districts
 To the Composition of State Legislatures across Time^a

| Year | Number of States Using Multimember Districts | | Percentage of Legislators Elected from Multimember Districts ^b | | | |
|------------|---|-----------------|--|--------|--------|--------|
| | House | Senate | House | (n) | Senate | (n) |
| 1870 | 29 (of 37) | | | | | |
| 1912 | 35 (of 48) | | | | | |
| 1954 | 36 (of 48) | 16 ^c | 45.8 | (5713) | 12.0 | (1841) |
| March 1962 | | | 46.0 | (5883) | 16.0 | (1903) |
| 1962 | 41 | 30 | | | | |
| 1964 | 37 | 29 | | | | |
| 1966 | 34 | 24 | | | | |
| 1968 | 32 | 24 | 49.0 | (5622) | 29.8 | (1991) |
| 1970 | 32 | 24 | 51.7 | (5576) | 30.4 | (1981) |
| 1972 | 26 | 17 | 44.2 | (5583) | 22.3 | (1978) |
| 1974 | 23 | 13 | 36.4 | (5581) | 14.5 | (1981) |
| 1976 | 21 | 13 | 34.4 | (5501) | 14.5 | (1981) |
| 1978 | 21 | 13 | 34.4 | (5501) | 14.5 | (1981) |
| 1980 | 20 | 12 | 33.2 | (5501) | 13.3 | (1981) |
| 1982 | 16 | 10 | 27.3 | (5452) | 10.3 | (1981) |
| 1984 | 15 | 7 | 26.0 | (5452) | 7.5 | (1981) |

^aThrough 1954, our source is Klain, 1955; for March 1962, David and Eisenberg, 1962, p. 20; for 1962 to 1984, the sources indicated in the footnote to Table 1.

^b(n) is the total number of legislators elected in the given year.

^cKlain's count did not include multimember districts that used staggered elections (that is, those from which more than one member was elected, but only one in any given year).

one might expect voters to become increasingly reliant on simple cues like party as the number of candidates increases. Yet even when there are only two members, over a fifth of the multimember districts elected candidates from both parties. While it remains to be seen whether the statewide minority party is underrepresented, our initial results make that more doubtful.

Minority Party Representation

Ideally, what we would like to know is what the levels of minority party representation would have been had multimember districts been split into single-member districts. That is unknowable, of course. Any districting plan that we might impose on multimember districts would not tell us what

TABLE 3
Party Divisions in Multimember Districts in 1980^a
(in percentages)

| Characteristics of Multimember District | Party Division | | Total | (n) |
|---|---------------------------|--------------------------------|-------|-------|
| | All Seats to One Party | Seats Split Between Parties | | |
| Chamber | | | | |
| House | 73.5 | 26.5 | 100 | (633) |
| Senate | 72.1 | 27.9 | 100 | (86) |
| Number of Seats Contested | | | | |
| Two | 78.3 | 21.7 | 100 | (475) |
| Three | 75.8 | 24.2 | 100 | (149) |
| Four | 56.6 | 43.4 | 100 | (53) |
| Five or more | 28.6 | 71.4 | 100 | (42) |

^aData compiled by the authors from *The Book of the States*, 1981-1982, Supplement 1. When no election was held in 1980, data are from the next previous election, Illinois excluded.

would have been, since the choices available to voters presumably would have differed under single-member districting. Therefore, our analysis consists of a series of indirect tests. As the first such test, we look at minority party representation in state legislative chambers that have a mixture of single-member and multimember districts. In each case—again using data from 1980—we counted the number of minority party legislators elected in each type of district.

Table 4 shows the results for each case separately, along with the average representation for state houses and senates. No matter how one examines these data, they fail to show a general underrepresentation of the minority party. There are some cases—the Maine and West Virginia Houses, for example—in which the minority party is much better represented in single-member districts. In fact, the statewide minority party actually has a majority of the members from those districts. But there are also instances of the opposite—states like Vermont and Wyoming in which the minority party is better off in multimember districts. The degree of minority party representation holds equally well for upper and lower houses. There is more variation in the senates, due to instances of only a few districts of one type; however, in each case the number of states in which the minority party is better off and worse off in multimember districts is almost identical.

TABLE 4
 Minority Party Representation in Chambers with Both
 Single- and Multimember Districts in 1980^a
 (in percentages)

| State | House | | Senate | |
|----------------|-------------------------|-----------------------|-------------------------|-----------------------|
| | Single-Member Districts | Multimember Districts | Single-Member Districts | Multimember Districts |
| Alaska | 16.7 (12) ^b | 57.1 (28) | 53.8 (13) | 42.9 (7) |
| Arkansas | 5.4 (74) | 7.7 (26) | | |
| Florida | 33.3 (21) | 30.3 (99) | 40.0 (5) | 31.5 (35) |
| Georgia | 13.1 (137) | 11.6 (43) | | |
| Hawaii | 16.7 (6) | 24.4 (45) | 0 (1) | 33.3 (24) |
| Indiana | 35.8 (53) | 35.6 (47) | | |
| Maine | 53.7 (108) | 20.9 (43) | | |
| New Hampshire | 35.3 (34) | 40.4 (366) | | |
| Nevada | | | 40.0 (5) | 20.0 (15) |
| North Carolina | 30.0 (10) | 19.1 (110) | 22.2 (9) | 17.1 (41) |
| North Dakota | | | 18.8 (48) | 50.0 (2) |
| South Carolina | | | 0 (3) | 11.6 (43) |
| South Dakota | | | 32.0 (25) | 20.0 (10) |
| Vermont | 30.3 (33) | 48.7 (117) | 0 (2) | 39.3 (28) |
| Virginia | 24.0 (25) | 26.7 (75) | 24.3 (37) | 0 (3) |
| West Virginia | 63.6 (11) | 16.9 (89) | | |
| Wyoming | 18.2 (11) | 41.2 (51) | 28.6 (7) | 39.1 (23) |
| Average | 28.9 | 29.2 | 23.7 | 27.7 |

^aThe sources are the same as for Table 3.

^bNs are the total number of legislators elected from each type of district (which for single-member districts but not for multimember districts is equal to the number of districts).

(In 7 of 13 lower houses and in 5 of 11 upper houses, there is more minority party representation from multimember than from single-member districts.) Finally, if one looks at the average levels of representation, they are basically the same, with what slight edge there is giving the advantage to multimember districts. In short, our first test yields no support for the conclusion that multimember districts underrepresent the statewide minority party.

The comparisons in Table 4—while part of the story—suffer from the fact that different geographic areas are being compared. That does not account directly for the mixed results, but in some instances at least, it may simply be that the statewide minority party is the majority in the areas using multimember districts.² This is a potential source of error in our first test.

Our second test overcomes the problem just noted and also extends the analysis back in time. A number of states—some of the same ones as in Table 5 but quite a few different ones as well—use only single-member districts in one chamber (typically the senate) and some or all multimember districts in the other chamber. Comparing minority party representation in one chamber with that in the other is useful because each is based on the same overall geographic unit (that is, the entire state).

The results are shown in Table 5 for 1980 and two earlier years. In each year, all relevant cases are included, but the number varies because of the changes in district type summarized in Table 1. The results closely parallel those in the previous table. There are occasional large differences, but overall, there is little systematic variation between single-member and multimember districts. In 1966, minority representation is almost always greater in single-member districts (6 states to 1), but the differences tend to be very small. In the other two years the advantage is split more evenly (8 to 5 in 1972, 7 to 5 in 1980). The average differences are only 2 to 3 percent, slightly favoring single-member districts. In individual states across the years, more than half the cases indicate that there is no clear advantage to one type of district; the minority has more seats in single-member districts in one year and more seats in multimember districts in another year. In general, then, this second test gives little or no support to the hypothesis of greater minority party representation in single-member districts.

Interestingly, if one limits the comparisons to states in which all or almost all of the legislators are elected in multimember districts, the evidence is slightly more favorable to the underrepresentation thesis.³ The body with single-member districts typically gives more representation to the minority, with an average difference of about 7.5 percent, although there are several instances (Idaho in 1966, New Jersey in 1982, and Washington in 1972) in which the reverse is true. These differences are not all that striking, inconsistent as the several states are across the years. Nevertheless, this is the most supportive evidence we have for the original hypothesis.

TABLE 5
 Minority Party Representation within State Legislatures
 In Which Only One Chamber Has Multimember Districts^a
 (in percentages)

| State | 1966 | | 1972 | | 1980 | |
|----------------|---|------------------------------------|---|------------------------------------|---|------------------------------------|
| | Chamber with Single-Member Districts Only | Chamber with Multimember Districts | Chamber with Single-Member Districts Only | Chamber with Multimember Districts | Chamber with Single-Member Districts Only | Chamber with Multimember Districts |
| Arizona | - | - | 40 | 34 | 47 | 28 |
| Arkansas | - | - | 3 | 1 | 3 | 7 |
| Colorado | 43 | 42 | - | - | - | - |
| Georgia | 15 | 10 | 14 | 16 | 9 | 13 |
| Idaho | 37 | 46 | 34 | 27 | 34 | 20 |
| Indiana | - | - | 42 | 27 | 30 | 35 |
| Maine | - | - | 33 | 48 | 48 | 56 |
| Maryland | - | - | 23 | 15 | 15 | 11 |
| Massachusetts | 35 | 29 | 20 | 22 | - | - |
| Nevada | - | - | 38 | 30 | 35 | 25 |
| New Hampshire | 43 | 39 | 42 | 34 | 43 | 40 |
| New Jersey | - | - | 26 | 18 | 33 | 45 |
| South Carolina | - | - | - | - | 14 | 11 |
| Texas | 3 | 2 | 10 | 11 | - | - |
| Washington | 59 ^b | 44 | 37 | 42 | 49 | 43 |
| Average | 33.6 | 30.3 | 27.8 | 25.0 | 30.0 | 27.8 |

^aPercentages were computed by the authors from *The Book of the States*, 1968-1969, 1974-1975, 1982-1983 editions. Percentages are for the Democrats, who have a minority in one house and a majority in the other.

Our final two tests compare minority party representation before and after a switch from multimember to single-member districts. If multimember districts inhibit minority party representation, an increase in minority party seats should accompany the switch to single-member districts. In order to avoid the effects of short-term fluctuations, we attempted to compare the results in three elections before the shift to those in three elections after. This was not always possible. In a few cases, the switch occurred very recently and only one or two elections have been held since the change. More important, major reapportionments took place in many states in the 1960s, accompanied by large changes in party support. In those cases we began the "pre" or baseline period with the first election after reapportionment.⁴

Comparisons were possible in 14 senates and 11 houses in 19 states. Though this test is largely independent of the previous ones, the results should no longer be surprising. Minority party representation increased in 14 cases after a switch to single-member districts, but it decreased in 11. Moreover, the decreases were larger than the increases, whether measured by the average change (+7.3 v. -9.8 percent) or the median (+5.6 v. -10.0 percent). By yet another measure, then, minority party representation is not inhibited by the use of multimember districts.

A more refined test using before-and-after comparisons is also possible. Despite our use of several elections before and after the change to single-member districts and despite adjustments for reapportionments, the results above might be affected by systematic change in party support across time. That is, minority party support might have been increasing or decreasing across these elections, quite apart from any change in electoral laws. It is unlikely that such changes would have affected all states the same way or that they would have affected only states that increased or only those that decreased minority representation. It is possible, in any event, to control for that possibility using yet another subset of the states.

In Table 6 we look at changes in minority party representation in states in which one chamber shifted from multimember to single-member districts but the other chamber maintained the type of districts it had used in the past. If systematic changes confounded the initial before-and-after comparison, it should be apparent in this new comparison. Consider Massachusetts, for example. Minority party strength in the House decreased by almost 10 percent after it began using single-member districts. But in the Senate, the same party lost almost 15 percent over the same time period. Thus, the relative change due to the switch to single-member districts was in favor of greater minority party representation (indicated by a "+" sign). Correspondingly, in some instances the uncontrolled change overstated the apparent effect of single-member districts (indicated by a "-" sign). In Arizona, for example, minority party strength in the Senate increased 6 percent after the change

TABLE 6
Chambers that Eliminated Multimember Districts
Compared to Unchanged Chambers^d
(in percentages)

| State | Changed Chamber | Change in Minority Party Strength ^b | Stable Chamber | Change in Minority Party Strength | Relative Difference (Changed Chamber-Stable Chamber) |
|----------------|-----------------|--|--------------------------|-----------------------------------|--|
| Arizona | Senate | + 6.00 | House (MMD) ^c | + 9.17 | - 3.17 |
| Arkansas | Senate | + 0.39 | House (MMD) | + 0.53 | - 0.14 |
| Georgia | Senate | - 2.52 | House (MMD) | - 0.72 | - 1.80 |
| Indiana | Senate | - 0.23 | House (MMD) | + 6.75 | - 6.98 |
| Kansas | Senate | +20.00 | House (SMD) | +10.72 | + 9.28 |
| Maryland | Senate | - 8.40 | House (MMD) | - 3.43 | + 4.97 |
| Massachusetts | House | - 9.76 | Senate (SMD) | -14.67 | + 4.91 |
| Nevada | House | -18.25 | Senate (SMD) | -18.95 | + 0.70 |
| New Jersey | Senate | +21.20 | House (MMD) | -12.12 | +33.32 |
| New Mexico | Senate | -18.22 | House (SMD) | - 0.31 | -17.91 |
| South Carolina | House | + 5.97 | Senate (MMD) | - 0.92 | + 6.89 |
| Tennessee | House | - 8.51 | Senate (SMD) | + 5.09 | -13.60 |
| Texas | House | + 9.80 | Senate (SMD) | + 9.38 | + 0.42 |
| Average | | - 0.19 | | - 0.73 | + 0.53 |

^aFigures were calculated by the authors from *The Book of the States*, various years. Redistricting and reapportionment times based on sources cited in Table 1.

^bComparisons are based on three elections before and three elections after the switch to single-member districts, except as explained in the text. Only changes that occurred after 1969 are included.

^cMMD stands for multimember district; SMD stands for single-member district.

to single-member districts. Minority party strength in the House, which continued to use multimember districts, increased by more than 9 percent. Thus, in the legislature as a whole there was a net decrease in minority party strength.

As with all of the previous comparisons, there are a few outliers in each direction. Collectively, however, the relative differences are split almost evenly between positive and negative results, and the average difference is a paltry one-half of one percent. Thus, our final test, like all of our previous ones, yields no support for the conclusion that multimember districts systematically underrepresent the minority party.

Conclusion

Multimember districts are a much maligned phenomenon—maligned especially, it would seem, by those who allege that such districts exaggerate the tendency of winner-take-all systems to overrepresent the majority party. What we have done in this paper is to show that, as a general proposition about minority party representation, this alleged effect is simply not true at the state legislative level. Every one of the tests we made was negative. Multimember districts did not overrepresent, nor did they underrepresent, the minority party.

We believe that the differences between the nonexistent (or at least minimal) effects of multimember districts on aggregate party representation and the strong effects of multimember districts on racial representation is due to four factors, three of which are closely related. First, few state legislative multimember districts are mostly black in population, while many of the districts that elected members of the statewide minority party are ones in which that party is in the majority. Second, to the extent that multimember districts are built of whole (or nearly whole) counties, as is the case in a number of states, the differences in party support between urban and rural counties create natural geographic bases in which the statewide minority party may dominate. Third, to the extent that bipartisan gerrymandering occurred, some multimember districts may have been “given to” the statewide minority party in order to enhance the safety of others under majority party control. Finally, a more idiosyncratic factor is that in the southern and border states that have a black population above 15 percent (and in which the possibility of substantial black representation is therefore greatest), the shift to single-member districts often came about because the courts or the Justice Department intervened to guarantee the formation of at least some black majority districts. In addition, in most of these states both Democrats and Republicans had previously acquiesced in a plan detrimental to black representation.

Does this completely alter conventional wisdom and support the general use of multimember districts? Not necessarily. For one thing, we cannot ignore the underrepresentation of racial minorities, even though there may be alternative ways that multimember districts could be drawn to alleviate this underrepresentation. Also, our results do not address other allegations about multimember districts, such as a tendency toward bloc voting by their representatives. Moreover, even if, on average, minority party representation is no different under single- and multimember schemes, the geographic areas from which minority representation comes may be somewhat different—that is, different voters will have to settle for being only “virtually” represented under the two types of schemes. Finally, different types of multimember districts—for example, consistently large ones, which were more common prior to the 1960s—or their use for electing a large proportion of legislators, could change the results.⁵

While caution is therefore required, we should not lose sight of the main point. Multimember districts do not invariably, or even generally, underrepresent the statewide minority party in state legislative elections. Nor, as indicated by the frequency of two-party multimember districts, do they entirely shut out the party that is in a minority in a given district. Rather, like most other electoral devices, they can have positive or negative effects depending on the circumstances. The best way to view them is as tools sometimes used to suppress minority party representation, but not as *prima facie* evidence of discrimination against the minority party. Any final judgment about their utility—and their constitutionality—must take that into account.

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NOTES

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1. In some multimember districts candidates must run for specific, numbered places. However, as of 1984, this was true at the state legislative level only in Idaho and in a small set of districts in Georgia.

2. Although the majority party would presumably not opt for multimember districts in the minority party's stronghold, such districts could occur there because of changes in party majorities or because in many states multimember districts tend to follow county lines, thus constraining gerrymandering.

3. These states are Arizona, Idaho, Maryland, New Hampshire, New Jersey, South Carolina, and Washington.

4. A few cases had to be excluded because reapportionment occurred just prior to or at the same time as the change to single-member districts.

5. A reviewer, for example, pointed out that minority-party voting strength varies with the number of members a multimember district elects.

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