



Special Master Little and Members of the Legislative Apportionment Board:

Thank you for the opportunity to submit the findings of a survey we recently conducted using the questions you posed in your VTDigger commentary of June 24, 2021. Please find attached a summary of the over 500 responses we received.¹

Here are the topline results to your quantitative questions:

- **By a margin of more than 3-to-1, respondents prefer making sure the populations in each district are as close to equal as possible over larger districts that preserve the status quo.** This is the most definitive finding from the survey. When drawing legislative boundaries, if there is a debate between preserving the lines as they are now and drawing them in a way that creates more equal populations in each district, the Board should draw them in ways that create more equal populations.
- **Legislative district lines conforming to town boundaries are more important to respondents than legislative districts conforming to county boundaries.** When asked, *“How important is it to you that legislative district lines conform to town boundary lines?”* on a scale of 0 (Not At All Important) to 100 (Very Important), 67% of respondents ranked the importance at 51 or higher. The average of all responses was 62. The most frequent response was 100, with 7% of respondents indicating that conforming to town boundary lines was Very Important. When asked, *“How important is it to you that legislative district lines conform to county boundary lines?”* on the same 0-100 scale, 49% of respondents ranked the importance at 51 or higher. The average of all responses was 52 and the most frequent response was 0, with 11% of respondents indicating that conforming to county boundary lines was Not At All Important.
- **Respondents have a small preference (52%-48%) for 2-member House districts over single-member House districts.**
- **Respondents have a slightly larger preference (54%-46%) for single-member Senate districts over multi-member districts.**

Also included in the attached slide deck are over 200 responses to the open-ended question, *“What other considerations should the Legislative Apportionment Board, the General Assembly and the governor take into account when drafting, finalizing and approving the legislative boundaries that will be in place for the next decade?”* While each comment is a single data point, and there are conflicting opinions and some recommendations that would appear to be unconstitutional, there are some recurring themes that the Board should consider:

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- There is no appetite for gerrymandering. At least 30 respondents admonished the Board to be on the lookout for boundaries that hint at partisan favoritism.
- In general, there appears to be a desire for smaller, more compact districts that conform to local topography and geography.
- At least eight respondents indicated a desire that school district boundaries be considered throughout the reapportionment process.
- Several commentators feel that the existing boundaries have not served their communities well in the last decade. See the comments from Essex County, the Champlain Island communities and Milton, Huntington and Wilmington as examples.
- Many respondents want the Legislature to better reflect the growing diversity of the Vermont population and expressed a desire that the redistricting process consider the needs of BIPOC communities throughout the process.
- Finally – and this is beyond the Board’s authority – many respondents indicated an unease with the current redistricting process and recommended that Vermont move to a non-partisan process that does not allow incumbent politicians to draw the maps.

In consideration of the attached responses from VPIRG’s members, the organization further offers the following recommendations:

- Since making the populations in each district as equal as possible is a goal of more than three-quarters of respondents, VPIRG urges the Board to respect and prioritize those wishes. The easiest – and perhaps only – way to achieve this end is ensuring each district has an equal number of representatives or senators.

Vermont’s current apportionment plan in which the smallest Senate district, Orange (population approx. 20k), is dwarfed by the largest, Chittenden (population approx. 146k), is clearly out-of-line with the goal of districts of roughly equal population size – regardless of the number of legislators from each district. A map which produces a 7-to-1, or even a 2-to-1, disparity in district population should be rejected.

- **To achieve the goal of roughly equal population size across all districts, we recommend that the House be apportioned with 75 two-member districts or 150 single-member districts and that the Senate be apportioned with 10 three-member, 15 two-member or 30 single-member districts. As State House observers for nearly 50 years, VPIRG strongly encourages consideration of the single-member district approach. In our experience, smaller districts strengthen connections between legislators and constituents and provide for greater accountability.**

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- BIPOC Vermonters are under-represented in the General Assembly – and have been for years. A *Politico* analysis published earlier this year found that, while 7% of the Vermont population is nonwhite, just 3% of Vermont’s state legislators are nonwhite.² Further, the percentage of nonwhite legislators has fallen in recent years.

To rectify the historic under-representation of BIPOC Vermonters, VPIRG urges the Board to not draw legislative district lines through communities of color. Instead, wherever possible, the Board should endeavor to maintain BIPOC communities within districts that also conform to Board’s other considerations.

- While the Legislative Apportionment Board is authorized to do only so much, and it cannot change the redistricting process unilaterally, the Board has a unique authority to recommend amendments to the decennial exercise. You should do so.

As you know, whatever maps you propose to the General Assembly at the end of your process are just that – proposals. They are not binding once they enter the legislative process. Few, if any, Legislative Apportionment Board maps have been accepted without revision by either chamber over the course of the last 60 years.

While no fault of the Board, this does cause Vermonters to question the utility of the current process.

To address the weakness at the core of the current process, VPIRG requests that – along with its proposed maps – the Legislative Apportionment Board go beyond its assigned task and recommend to the General Assembly that this be the last time the state uses the current reapportionment process and that Vermont move to a true non-partisan redistricting process for the 2030 Census.

Thank you for your consideration of the above, and please let me know if you have any questions.

Sincerely,

Tom Hughes
Senior Strategist, VPIRG

1. VPIRG collected 515 Survey Monkey responses from July 22 through August 6, 2021. Respondents entered the survey instrument via email, social media and VPIRG’s homepage. The results are informative but should not be considered scientific.

2. <https://www.politico.com/interactives/2021/state-legislature-demographics/>