

When one man's vote is worth more than another's

Legislature again faces touchy chore of redistricting

WHEN voters in the 41st Legislative District went to the polls last month, probably few of them were aware that their votes were worth substantially less than ballots cast for legislative candidates in the 37th District, only a few miles away.

Similarly, voter-values in the 30th District were considerably lower than in the 37th, 33rd and other districts in King County.

This condition stems from the fact that while each district elects a state senator and two representatives, the number of voters varies widely from district to district.

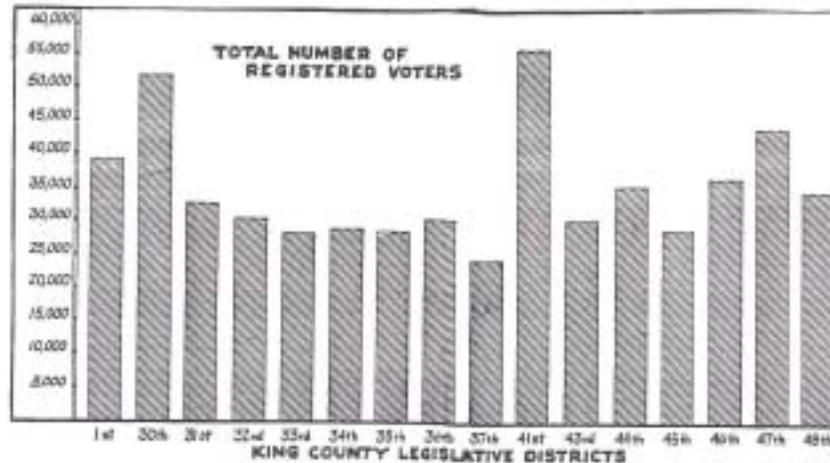
The imbalances in voter registration (see graph) reflect disproportionate population groupings among the various districts and explain why the average citizen has a heavy stake in an issue that too often receives attention only from politicians.

NEXT MONTH THE 1971 Legislature will be faced with a constitutional mandate to redraw legislative-district boundaries—the Constitution prescribes redistricting at five-year intervals—so that vote-values will be substantially equal.

Obviously, they are not equal now.

Thirtieth District (Kent, Des Moines, Normandy Park, etc.) voters cast close to 37,000 ballots last month. The total in the 37th (the Central Area, downtown and part of Capitol Hill) was only about 14,500.

The huge 41st District (Bellevue, Mercer Island, Maple Valley, etc.) accounted for nearly 41,000 votes. But the 33rd (parts of Rainier Valley and Beacon Hill) and 35th (South Park, Rainier Beach, Riverton Heights, etc.) Districts reported fewer than 29,000 total votes apiece.



Yet when senators and representatives from these districts take their seats in Olympia next month, each will have equal voting powers. Similar imbalances occur among districts not only in King County, but throughout the state.

WITH TODAY'S MODERN DATA—retrieval gadgets and computers, it should be a fairly simple matter to organize district boundaries in such a way that each contains approximately the same number of inhabitants. That is what the United States Supreme Court has prescribed in a series of decisions based on the "one man, one-vote" principle.

But the court decisions and constitutional provisions take no account of how the districts are to be shaped. Ever since Massachusetts Gov. Elbridge Gerry got his state redistricted in favor of the Republicans in 1810, gerrymandering has been a time-honored political custom.

So the equalization process becomes an enormously complex political issue. The party

in control of the apportionment process strives to shape the districts in terms of political trends, juggling—or gerrymandering—the boundaries for maximum future election prospects and to minimize the opposition's chances.

C. MONTGOMERY JOHNSON, soon to retire as state Republican chairman, once gave this blunt description of the procedure: "whoever draws the lines get the votes. It's as simple as that."

Because of the heavy political stakes, redistricting is probably the most bruising issue of any legislative session. Partisan and personal conflicts are involved; incumbents drag their heels on boundary-line changes that might redistrict them out of office; vote-trading on issues unrelated to apportionment inevitably influences the conduct of the whole legislative process.

A deadlock on the most recent redistricting battle, in 1965, was resolved only by federal-

court intervention.

Already, a political head of steam is building up over whether legislative redistricting should be postponed from the 1971 regular session until an expected special session in 1972.

DEMOCRATS, WHO CONTROL THE Senate but neither the House nor the governor's office, want to press the issue in the regular session, figuring to use redistricting as a lever on other legislation affecting an incredible array of problems that will be before Legislature.

Republicans are saying redistricting cannot be accomplished until additional census data become available in late 1971. This is a dubious contention since reasonably accurate population information can be obtained from other sources—voter registrations, school enrollments, utility hook-ups and the like.

All in all, because of the pressures involved, redistricting too often is a crassly cynical business. And this in turn raises real doubt as to whether the Legislature has the capacity to eliminate the imbalances in vote-values mentioned earlier and to devise an apportionment plan fair to all citizens and all sections of the state.

A BETTER APPROACH WOULD be to turn redistricting over to a citizen commission representative of both parties and independent voters.

But that would require the governor and legislative leaders to rise to a level of statesmanship to which no one has aspired thus far.

—Herb Robinson