BROOKHAVEN residents will go to the polls next Tuesday to vote on establishing a ward system that would divide the town into six council districts. Currently, all six town board members are elected at-large.

Those who back the movement to create a ward system contend that districts would improve citizen representation and reduce the power of political party machines. This does not seem likely.

For, whatever problems inhere in at-large elections, they do ensure that voters have a direct say over who holds elected office. By contrast, a ward system will leave Brookhaven vulnerable to the process of gerrymandering, which puts election outcomes into the hands of unelected party leaders who draw district boundaries. Some say the same factors prevail in at-large elections. Perhaps so, but an at-large system prevents the potential isolation of particular communities.

Gerrymandering is the manipulation of electoral boundaries to favor one faction over another. It is named for 19th-century Massachusetts Gov. Elbridge Gerry, who was said to have designed a district in the shape of a salamander to ensure his party's hold on power. In plain terms, gerrymandering means that those in a position to control the shape of electoral districts - usually political bosses - are also in a position to determine electoral results. Historically, gerrymandering has been used to dilute the strength of racial minorities. More recently, so-called benign gerrymandering has been used to create "majority minority" districts, a practice criticized by the U.S. Supreme Court.

Today, gerrymandering has its most dramatic impact on the U.S. House of Representatives, where districts drawn by legislatures have robbed voters of any real electoral choice. In 2000, more than 20 percent of House members had no major party challengers. This year, no more than 30 of 435 House seats are expected to be competitive. No wonder The Wall Street Journal recently opined that the "Senate is more open to popular opinion , despite six-year terms, because no one has yet figured out how to gerrymander an entire state."

The irony is that moving to wards might result in the disenfranchisement of the very groups in Brookhaven that appear to be most supportive of the change, including students at Stony Brook University. In Ann Arbor, Mich., where the University of Michigan is
situated, the student vote has been effectively diluted by five ward districts that begin in
the center of the city and radiate outward, distributing students evenly into all the wards.
"I don't think the students are given an equal voice in the city government of Ann Arbor.
The best answer for students would be to switch to an at- large vote," student activist
Nicholas Kirk complained after the 1996 municipal elections.

Small, mostly liberal and younger populations within Brookhaven could easily suffer the
same fate. Another possibility is that these populations will be consolidated into a single
district to ensure the defeat of their legislative concerns.

While some Democrats contend that a ward system will break the Republican hold on the
Brookhaven town board, evidence from other Long Island towns does not bear this out.
In the Town of Hempstead, Democrats managed to elect three of the six council members
at-large in 1999, the first Democrats to win town seats in 100 years. But, ironically, in the
2000 election, the first to take place after Democrats won a court decision dividing the
town into council districts, they proceeded to lose two of the three seats they won the
year before. In 2001, the Republicans continued to hold Democrats to only one council
seat.

In Babylon, another town that has heard whispers of councilmanic districts, the
Democrats clearly gain from at-large elections. That's because the intensely Democratic
minority communities of North Amityville, Wheatley Heights and Wyandanch more than
balance out the slight Republican lead in other parts of the town. These are communities
that could easily be split up or isolated if districts are drawn.

Gerrymandering is virtually guaranteed at the town government level by the New York
State Constitution. The boundaries of town wards are fixed by the county board of
elections if the proposition is successful. The board of elections is controlled by unelected
political party leaders.

Apart from the constitutional requirement that wards contain about the same number of
voters, Brookhaven voters have few assurances about how lines will be drawn. This
provision is likely why only 10 of 932 towns in New York use the ward system, and why
voters have defeated it wherever it has been on the ballot since the mid-1970s.

Brookhaven voters should note that at-large elections were designed in the early 20th
century to eliminate the political bossism that the ward system produced. It also
encouraged elected officials to act in the best interests of an entire city, rather than in the
best interests of individual wards.

While the Brookhaven town board is currently controlled by Republicans, vicious fights
between competing communities for town resources - in which some sections inevitably
end up losers - have largely been avoided. Note the impressively even distribution of
town parks and open space.
Like most local governments on Long Island, Brookhaven faces significant governmental challenges. But voters should think hard before they decide whether a ward system will advance the town's ability to deal with them.

[Illustration]
Caption: PHOTO - Seth Forman.