

Modified At-Large Voting Systems

A voting system translates people's votes into seats in a legislative assembly. Many different voting systems exist. Because the same votes in different systems can produce different results, the selection of a voting system has a powerful impact on governance, representation, and participation.

Full representation systems are one-person, one-vote systems in which groupings of voters – as defined by how they vote – are likely to win seats in proportion to that grouping's share of the popular vote. A majority of voters will elect a majority of seats, but not all seats. The result is that most voters consistently elect at least one candidate of their choice. Candidates are elected at-large or in multi-seat districts (constituencies electing more than one representative.)

Nearly all democracies use versions of full representation (also called proportional representation.) limited voting, cumulative voting, and choice voting are full representation systems based on voting for candidates (not parties) and already are used in an increasing number of local elections in the United States. Of the three, choice voting is most likely to provide fair results to minority and majority populations, but may require the most changes in how elections are administered.

"It [election reform] is about how power itself is exercised and shared. It is about opening up a different kind of conversation, during and following elections, because elections become a forum for voters choosing their representatives and expressing their ideas. It is about giving people in motion an incentive to stay in motion. It is about giving citizens their due. "

- Lani Guinier, *Lift Every Voice*

Limited Voting

In limited voting, voters either cast fewer votes than the number of seats or parties nominate fewer candidates than there are seats. The greater the difference between the number of seats and the number of votes, the greater the opportunities for fair representation.

Versions of limited voting are used in Washington, D.C., Philadelphia (PA) and Hartford (CT). It has been used as a means to meet Voting Rights Act requirements.

Example: In a race to elect five candidates voters might be given only two votes. Winners are determined by a simple plurality (whichever five candidates get the most votes).

Cumulative Voting

In cumulative voting, voters cast as many votes as there are seats. But unlike winner-take-all systems, voters are not limited to one vote per candidate. Instead, they can concentrate their votes on one or more candidates. Voting rights scholar Lani Guinier has promoted cumulative voting as a colorblind means to provide fair minority representation.

Perhaps the simplest version of cumulative voting is to allow voters to vote for up to as many candidates as there are seats (as with winner-take-all), then allocate votes equally among the candidates selected by the voter. In a five-seat race, voters selecting two candidates would provide each candidate with 2.5 votes.

Cumulative voting was used to elect the Illinois state legislature from 1870 to 1980 and is, Peoria (IL), Chilton County (AL), and various Texas municipalities. It has been successful in resolving Voting Rights Act lawsuits.

Example: In a race to elect five candidates, voters could cast one vote for five candidates,

five votes for one candidate or some combination in between. Winning candidates are determined by a simple plurality of votes.

Choice Voting

Choice voting (also called the "single transferable vote") is a form of limited voting in which voters maximize their one vote's effectiveness through ranking preferences. As preference voting is nearly guaranteed to provide fair results, it is recommended as the best system for local government elections.

To vote, voters simply rank as many candidates as they wish, knowing that lower choices will not count against higher choices.

To determine winners, the minimum number of votes necessary for a candidate to earn office is established based on the numbers of seats and ballots (this threshold is comparable to the number of voters who would live in a single member district if districts were drawn). After counting first choices, candidates reaching the threshold are elected. To avoid wasting votes, "surplus" ballots beyond the threshold are transferred to the remaining candidates according to voters' preferences: in the best method, every ballot is transferred to the next listed candidate at a reduced value.

When no candidate reaches the threshold, the candidate with the fewest votes is eliminated and all his/her ballots are distributed among the remaining candidates according to the voters' preferences listed on ballots. This process continues until all the seats are filled.

Choice voting is used in Cambridge (MA). The count can be done by computer.

Example: In a race to elect nine seats, voters rank as many candidates as they choose. The threshold of votes necessary to win is just over 10%; 90% of voters will help elect a candidate.

The Center for Voting and Democracy studies and provides information on how voting systems affect participation, governance, and representation. We specialize in redistricting and the broad range of proportional representation systems that allow more voters to elect candidates of their choice. We also advocate reforming elections for one-seat offices to promote majority rule and more participation.

We Provide the Following:

- *Comprehensive website & library*
- *Legal assistance in voting rights cases*
- *Assistance in drafting legislation*
- *Analysis of alternative voting plans*
- *Amicus Curiae briefs*
- *Voter education & community workshops*

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Key Terms

At-Large Election – Candidates are elected from the entire area, not districts.

Constituent – Citizens residing in a particular candidate's area or district.

District Election/Single-Member District – Candidates run for office representing certain districts. Only one candidate can be elected from the district.

Full Representation System – Alternative election systems like cumulative voting, limited voting, and choice voting where groupings of voters are likely to win seats in proportion to that grouping's share of the popular vote; also called "proportional representation."

Multi-Seat Election – More than one candidate is elected from a particular area.

One-Person, One-Vote Principle – Law stipulating that everyone's vote must be counted equally.

Plurality – The person, or persons with the most votes win.

Threshold – The percentage of the vote a group must obtain in order to have a certain chance of electing someone of their own choosing.

Voting Rights Act – 1965 federal law ensuring equal opportunity and fairness in the voting process. **Section 2** prohibits minority vote dilution which is basically tactics, legislation, situations, etc. that weaken the voting strength of minorities. **Section 5** requires that certain areas obtain approval before enacting any voting changes.

Winner-Take-All System – Generally, our American election system where 51 percent of voters can win 100 percent of representation; unlike a system where seats are distributed according to a proportion or percentage of the vote.