

The Center for Voting and Democracy studies and provides information on how voting systems affect participation, governance, and representation. We specialize in: 1) redistricting; 2) the broad range of voting systems that can be used for legislative elections; and 3) reforms of plurality elections for one-seat elections to expand participation and promote majority rule.

The Center's mission is founded on the belief that voting systems can and should be improved at all levels of American government in order to: increase vitality in our democracy; provide fair representation of our society's diversity in elected bodies; and assist local, state, and national governments in solving the complex and contentious issues facing our nation.

The Center's projects include:

- **Assisting communities, public interest organizations and elected officials in evaluating voting system reforms:** CVD staff have testified before charter commissions and legislative committees around the country. We have responded to inquiries from elected officials at all levels of government about legislation on proportional representation (PR) and instant runoff voting (IRV). We are assisting communities that have adopted alternative voting systems to enable their citizens to take full advantage of the new powers these systems provide. We regularly speak at national and regional conferences.
- **Collecting, interpreting and distributing material on voting systems:** CVD maintains an up-to-the-minute resource library and website of articles and educational materials on voting systems, elections and PR. We monitor local, national and international developments on PR and share this information with journalists, public interest

leaders, educators, community activists and political reformers. We produce many educational materials, including long reports, short factsheets and viewer-friendly videos.

- **Stimulating public debate and understanding through writing and media:** CV&D staff and members of its advisory board have written articles promoting voting system reform in the *Atlantic Monthly*, *Boston Globe*, *Los Angeles Times*, *New York Times*, *New Yorker*, *Roll Call*, *Utne Reader*, *Washington Post* and numerous other major publications. CVD staff writings on PR are featured in two books in 1999, while CVD and its associates regularly publish op-eds and letters to the editor. C-SPAN has covered several CVD events. CVD reports have been covered by a wide range of prominent media outlets.

What is Full Representation?

The principle of full representation voting systems -- also called "proportional representation" -- is a powerful one: the right of decision belongs to a majority, but the right of representation to all. Full representation allows groupings of voters to elect a fair share of candidates. Gaining more than half of the popular vote wins a majority of the seats, but not all. One-fifth of the vote wins one in five seats rather than none. Full representation means real representative democracy: most voters win a seat at the table.

Following are four alternative systems that have been used in American elections. The first three are full representation systems founded on voting for candidates in "super districts" with more than one representative. Instant runoff voting is designed for one-seat offices such as governor.

Limited Voting - Voters either cast fewer votes than

the number of seats, or parties nominate fewer candidates than there are seats. Winners are determined by totaling all votes cast. The greater the difference between the number of votes and the number of seats, the greater the opportunities for fair representation. Limited voting has been adopted recently in several North Carolina and Alabama localities and for decades has been used in many northeastern municipalities.

Cumulative Voting - Voters cast as many votes as there are seats, but are not limited to giving a candidate one vote. Instead, they can concentrate their votes on one or more candidates. Winning candidates are determined by a simple plurality of votes cast. Cumulative voting is used in Peoria (IL), Chilton County (AL) and more than fifty Texas localities, including Amarillo. It was used to elect the Illinois state assembly from 1870 to 1980.

Choice Voting - Voters rank (1st choice, 2nd choice, etc.) as many candidates as they wish. Candidates win by reaching a "victory threshold" of 1st-choice votes roughly equal to the number of votes divided by the number of seats. Ballots are transferred to next-choice candidates if a higher choice loses. These transfers facilitate coalition-building and participation. Used to elect the city council in Cambridge (MA) since 1941 and the national legislatures of Ireland and Australia, choice voting is also called "single transferable vote" and "preference voting."

Instant Runoff Voting – Like choice voting, but only one candidate wins. Voters rank as many candidates as they wish (1, 2, 3 and so on). The candidate with the fewest first-choice votes loses. Ballots from this candidate are transferred to the next choice indicated on each ballot. This process continues until one candidate has a majority. IRV is under serious consideration in several states.



The Center for Voting and Democracy also provides the following:

- *Comprehensive website & library*
- *Legal assistance in voting rights cases*
- *Assistance in drafting legislation*
- *Analysis of alternative voting plans*
- *Analysis of election systems*
- *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.

The Center

for

Voting

and

Democracy

Making Your Vote Count

