



GET INVOLVED

Eight Steps to a Representative Government

STEP 1: RESEARCH

Before beginning a campaign to bring proportional voting to your city, it is critical to understand the various deficits that the current electoral system faces (ie: under-representation of women and communities of color, uncompetitive elections and uncontested seats, wasted votes, skewed political party representation, or perhaps simply divisive elections with little focus on issues). Studying the problems will help you understand how to sell the benefits of proportional voting solution. Likewise, it is important to understand and be able to explain how the proposed voting system would work and how it would impact local representation. Plan for and predict the skeptics' criticisms by becoming an expert on these issues.

STEP 2: EDUCATE

Once you have established the base of critical research and knowledge necessary to discuss electoral reform, it is time to build a core of supporters and educate your neighbors. Start by assembling literature to explain proportional voting. Then, make presentations at local civic organizations, churches, political committees, or any other gathering of people. Conducting sample elections is a good start. This will spread information about the benefits of proportional voting systems, while helping you locate likeminded citizens who also seek fair representation. If support exists, it may be worth forming a group that meets regularly to advocate for reform.

STEP 3: BUILD MODELS

A key component to selling a community on a new voting system is helping them understand it is not untested or radical. There are a number of cities and nations using proportional voting systems that provide valuable lessons. Nonetheless, it is always helpful to have local examples to breed familiarity and acceptance of reform. A good way to do this is to convince local organizations to use proportional voting systems to elect their leadership or board, including your church board, union committee, PTA, neighborhood association, local party committee, or a non-profit organization. Around the country, students have also been converting student government elections to proportional voting systems. All of these reforms help build trusted models for advocates to point to when trying to reform city elections.

STEP 4: OFFICIAL RECOMMENDATION

Another key step towards building momentum and legitimacy for proportional voting systems is to gain an official recommendation for their use in your city. If you live in a "charter" city, your city likely forms commissions to conduct periodic reviews of the city charter. Joining the commission can be a key step to generating a positive recommendation for reforming city elections, but even from outside the body, it is critical to use these reviews to highlight flaws in the current electoral system. Ask to make a presentation or provide educational materials to the commission. If you do not live in a charter city, you may nonetheless be able to convince a skeptical city council to form a study commission to issue recommendations for improving elections.

STEP 5: POLITICAL SUPPORT

Local political leaders and elected officials oftentimes serve as the gatekeepers to electoral reforms. As a result, it is usually critical to try and build support amongst this key group of people, and to keep consistent constituent pressure on them. At this stage, all of the prior work comes in handy. A core group of supporters, armed with extensive research and examples from the community, along with the recommendation of an official body can go a long way towards persuading political leaders to support proportional voting. Part of this process, however, should involve doing active outreach to the local media through op. ed's and letters to the editor.

STEP 6: LEGISLATIVE ADOPTION AND OTHER OPTIONS

If all the above steps have been taken, and you've determined that there is community interest and political support for bringing proportional voting to your community, it may be time to seek council passage. The best way to achieve this is to find local city council members who are willing to sponsor legislation to have the council adopt proportional voting as its method of election. Your sponsors can help you to identify how best to persuade the other councilors, as well as to identify potential obstacles to reform and counter-arguments that are likely to be presented. Should the council decline to pass proportional voting, ask your council sponsors to take the matter directly to the voters and instead vote to put proportional voting on the ballot. Public perception is aided greatly when these elected officials themselves support the reforms in question. Citizen-initiated ballot initiatives are also a possibility, but should be conducted only after seeking a council-backed measure. Citizen-initiated drives are time and labor-intensive, but signature gathering can also be a good way to educate voters while moving the initiative forward.

STEP 7: BALLOT INITIATIVE

If your efforts paid off and proportional voting will be put before the voters, the hard work is about to begin! It is time to assemble a team of canvassing volunteers who will distribute easy-to-understand literature to educate voters. You should also re-double efforts to gain the endorsements of key political leaders and organizations for your initiative. Literature and ads cost money though, so having a financial base will be key to your success. Plan on inviting likely supporters to attend fundraisers. Also, aggressively seek support from local editorial boards.

STEP 8: IMPLEMENTATION

If your campaign for proportional voting is successful, congratulations! ... But the work is not over yet! Stay in touch with city officials to develop a timetable for implementation. Most importantly, make sure steps are taken immediately to bring voting equipment into compliance with your proportional voting system. Lastly, make sure that adequate voter education is conducted on the new system and that the ballot design is sufficiently clear.

For more information on how to bring fair representation to your city, please contact us at:

FairVote – The Center for Voting and Democracy
6930 Carroll Avenue, Suite 610
Takoma Park, MD 20912
Phone: (301) 270-4616
Fax: (301) 270-4133
Email: info@fairvote.org

www.fairvote.org