

VOTING AND DEMOCRACY REVIEW

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"Making Your Vote Count"

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Full and Fair Representation

The Promise of Proportional Voting For Local U.S. Elections

There are some half million elected public offices in the USA, along with countless elected offices in private organizations. Winner-take-all voting systems are used for most of these elections, but that need not be the case.

Many city councils and school boards could be elected by proportional and semi-proportional voting systems (see glossary, page 3) by a simple action of the local or state legislature. Indeed, there is an important history of localities rejecting winner-take-all voting -- ranging from New York City's city council elections by choice voting in its "golden age" from 1937-1947 to the adoption of cumulative voting in nearly fifty Texas localities in the 1990s.

This year, charter commissions in Kalamazoo (MI) and Pasadena (CA) have recommended proportional voting; commissions in Multnomah County (OR) and Santa Clara County (CA) have recommended "instant runoff voting" as an option for one-winner elections.

The Center's executive director Rob Richie addressed these issues in the Spring 1998 National Civic Review. Following is a version of his article.

President Bill Clinton in 1997 urged Americans to "keep our old democracy forever young." A challenge, he warned, will be "the divide of race," but that: "Our rich texture of racial, religious and political diversity will be a godsend in the 21st century. Great rewards will come to those who can live together, learn together, work together, forge new ties that bind together."

Few Americans would dispute this vision, but it is not only individual attitudes that must be addressed. Institutions and their rules play a major

role in relations among people. One of the most significant rules is determining how citizens win and sustain legislative representation in a competitive electoral environment. Just as consumer choice and buying power are the foundation of a free market economy, citizen choices and voting power are at the foundation of a responsive and inclusive democracy. The rules governing citizens' choices and voting power have a great impact on who runs, who votes and who wins.

Unfortunately, most American cities use antiquated "winner-take-all" voting that too often divides us and undercuts accountability. In contrast, proportional representation systems -- perhaps better understood as "full representation" -- promote a modern, cosmopolitan vision of a city. Representatives are more likely to emerge from communities of interest than personal ambition, and the major political groupings are more likely to support candidates from these different communities. A slate of candidates thus is more likely to represent the "big tent" of voters from whom it seeks support.

With proportional systems, city councils could represent a "gorgeous mosaic" of overlapping interests and groups that is bound together by broad political bonds. Cities would become all the stronger by giving communities real incentives to participate and realistic access to the making of public policy.

What is Proportional Representation?

Proportional representation (PR) is a principle of representative democracy, not a particular system. The principle is that like-minded groupings of voters should win seats in proportion to their share of the vote. With PR, the majority wins its right to decide, but a minority

wins its fair share of representation.

Most mature democracies use forms of PR. They vary in the percentage of votes necessary to win seats and the role of political parties (some systems are non-partisan). These differences mean that PR cannot be judged by its performance in any one nation or city.

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"Empowering The Voter"

CVD Holds Fall Conferences on PR and Political Reform

The Center for Voting and Democracy (CVD) is organizing two major conferences this fall on "Empowering the Voter."

- **September 12-13, in San Francisco:** Joining with VOTE and Northern California Citizens for PR, CVD has an impressive line-up of speakers in more than 20 panels.

- **November 13-15, in Minneapolis:** CVD is working with FairVote Minnesota for a midwest conference on creating fair elections.

Both conferences will include plenary hearings on redistricting, chaired by CVD president John Anderson, and a mix of educational panels and hands-on workshops. The conferences have a regional focus, but include many national figures. *(To register for the conferences, please visit our web site or contact CVD. See page 2 for information.)*

CVD is planning to help organize similar conferences in 1999 in Maine, Massachusetts, North Carolina and Washington, D.C.

The Center for Voting and Democracy (CVD) is a non-profit, non-partisan organization. It researches and provides information on the impact of voting systems on governance, representation and voter participation.

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Voting System Reform Update

➤ **Voters' Choice Act Gains Support:**

The Voters' Choice Act (HR 3068) is gaining attention and support. The bill -- which would allow states to use proportional systems for U.S. House elections -- has thirteen House sponsors. Strong articles in its support appeared in the newsletter of the National Women's Political Caucus and *Legal Times*.

➤ **Charter Commissions Recommend PR:**

A charter commission in Kalamazoo (MI) has recommended choice voting for city council elections, while a charter commission in Pasadena (CA) has voted to create a task force to choose a PR system for school board elections. Referenda are possible in the coming year. Two Los Angeles commissions heard testimony from representatives of CVD and may urge further study of PR.

➤ **PR Book Shelf Gets Heavier:**

Several major books and articles touting and explaining PR have been published recently. Books include: Lani Guinier's *Lift Every Voice*; K. C. Cole's *The Universe and the Teacup*; Sam Smith's *Great American Repair Manual*; David Farrell's *Comparing Electoral Systems*; and *The Law of Democracy* textbook.

Michael Lind made a strong case for PR in *Mother Jones* (March-April 1998). Series of articles on PR appeared in *Political Science* (March 1998) and the *Boston Review* (February-March 1998). The latter featured a cover article by CVD's Rob Richie and Steven Hill.

➤ **"IRV" for President -- and County Commissioner:**

Bills to implement instant runoff voting (IRV) for statewide elections were introduced this year in Vermont and New Mexico; the Vermont bill would also have adopted "IRV" for presidential elections. Both bills won the support of senior lawmakers and state affiliates of Common Cause and PIRG and will be considered again in 1999.

Two county charter commissions in Oregon and California likely will recommend putting IRV in charters as

an option to replace current runoffs.

➤ **Northern Ireland's PR Elections:** PR was a key part of the peace accord in Northern Ireland. Choice voting was used in June in elections that, the *Irish Times* wrote, resulted in an assembly "representative of the community in all its shades and variations." The *Times* also editorialized that winner-take-all would have been "disastrous." Forms of PR will be used for regional elections in Scotland, Wales and London.

GLOSSARY OF TERMS

• **Proportional representation (PR):** Voting systems in which voters win representation in proportion to the voting preferences of the electorate. 20% of votes means two (20%) of 10 seats, 50% of votes means five (50%) of 10 seats.

• **Multi-seat districts:** An electoral constituency with more than one representative, in contrast to **single-seat districts**, where one winner "represents" all. If the size of a legislature remains constant, conversion to a PR system leads to fewer, but bigger districts.

• **Choice voting:** A proportional system also known as "single transferable vote" and "preference voting." Voters rank the candidates they like in order. Ballots are allocated to first choices, but may be transferred to next choices to assure as many effective votes as possible. Because all seats are weighted equally, candidates win by reaching a "threshold" that is roughly equal to the number of votes cast divided by the number of seats elected.

• **Cumulative voting:** A semi-proportional system in which voters have as many votes as seats in a multi-seat district, but can concentrate their votes on one or more candidates. The candidates with the most votes win.

• **Instant runoff voting:** A winner-take-all system in which voters rank candidates: 1, 2, 3. If no candidate has more than half of first-choices, the last-place finisher loses. Ballots for that candidate move to the next choice candidate. This process continues until a candidate wins with a majority of votes.

Notable Quotes

"I join Michael Lind in urging those living in states that allow ballot initiatives to start grassroots efforts in support of proportional voting. Developing a record at county, municipal and school board elections offers the best opportunity we have to begin the creation of an electoral system that is truly representative."

Rep. James E. Clyburn (D-SC), in May-June 1998 *Mother Jones*

"[Proportional voting] makes interparty cooperation not just possible, but almost necessary, because it allows for the co-existence of Republicans and Democrats in the same constituency....The system, applied to congressional elections, might go a long way toward promoting cooperation across party, racial and other lines."

William Raspberry, in 4/17/98 *Washington Post* commentary

"[State legislators] might look beyond the single-member districts that are at the root of the current fight....[Proportional voting plans] might give voters a much better way to speak up....[They are] worth studying before the 2000 Census starts the fight all over again."

Editorial in 4/24/98 *Charlotte Observer* (on North Carolina's latest round of congressional redistricting)

"There are several distinct advantages to a system of regionwide cumulative voting for local office. In particular, rather than using race as a proxy for voting system preference, such a system allows voters to "draw their own jurisdictional boundaries".... All minority groups may potentially benefit from such a system -- not just racial minorities."

Federal judge David H. Coar, in 5/28/98 opinion (ordering use of

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"Making Your Vote Count"

Rob Richie on the Case for PR in Cities (from page 1)

Thus, in a city council election for nine seats, a political grouping with the support of more than ten percent of voters throughout the city should earn one seat. A grouping with 51% support should earn five of nine seats rather than all seats, and so on. Another way to understand PR is that most voters elect a candidate of their choice. Evidence shows that PR systems tend to: increase voter participation; generate fair representation of racial and ideological diversity; elect more women; curtail gerrymandering; and widen and improve public discourse.

Winner-take-all elections allow a majority (or even a mere plurality) of voters in a given geographically-defined area (one usually gerrymandered to achieve certain political results) to win all representation for that area. In an at-large, winner-take-all election, one group of voters can elect all the winners. Adoption of single-member ward elections may break up a city-wide majority, but merely shifts distorted representation down to a neighborhood level. When one winner "takes all" in a ward election, 51% of voters (and less when there are more than two strong candidates) win the right to speak for the other 49%.

Most U.S. elections use winner-take-all systems for the simple reason that the United States instituted elections before any voting system to provide PR had been developed. Most states at first used statewide elections for U.S. House members, then gradually moved to district elections -- usually to improve representation of partisan diversity. Congress went to all-district elections the same decade (the 1840s) that the very first articles detailing workable mechanisms of PR were published.

John Stuart Mill focused much attention on PR in the 1860s, but this was too late to overcome the institutional inertia that often leads to keeping the same old rules. Even though many cities have swung back and forth between at-large and ward elections in a search for better representation, the idea of winner-take-all has been difficult to replace -- although many leading Americans have advocated PR for cities over the years, including Walter Lippman, A. Philip Randolph, Richard Childs, Fiorello La Guardia, Robert Kennedy and Carrie Chapman Catt.

PR would give cities the best of ward elections and at-large elections. In contrast to at-large elections, diverse communities of voters can win their fair share of representation. Campaigns are less expensive because it takes fewer votes to win, and

candidates can choose to focus on particular constituencies. In contrast to ward elections, those seeking representation are not required to be geographically concentrated. Representatives all share the same constituents and can work together on citywide policy rather than leaving it to mayors and city managers.

PR holds the promise of representing existing diversity while at the same time encouraging new political forces to develop, voice their interests and earn a place at the table. PR is a way out of the legal and political battles over redistricting, but more fundamentally, PR provides "universal coverage" for minority representation. "Everybody wins" sounds too good to be true, but it is the logic of PR. With all substantial political groupings winning a fair share of seats and with those in power likely to reach out to include candidates from these groupings, policy-making will more naturally reflect the united will of the community. Any efforts to bring people together to solve problems will be reinforced by ensuring that most of these people have strong representation in elected government.

New rules are never the answer in themselves. But they create the foundation from which to build. As cities confront sinking participation, struggles over a shrinking tax base and controversies over fair representation, they have a great opportunity going into a new century: the opportunity to consider a full range of democratic reforms to enable their people to debate and make policy to build healthy communities. The fairer level playing field of full and proportional representation will be an essential part of any reform package.

Catch the CVD News On-Line!

The Center sends out regular e-mail updates about the latest news on elections and electoral system reform. To receive updates, send a note to: fairvote@compuserve.com. Visit the Center's award-winning web site for past updates and full-length reports: <http://www.fairvote.org>.

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