Choice voting was adopted in Cambridge in 1941, when African Americans made up less than 5% of the City's population. In 1959, with the African American population still under 6%, Gustave Solomons became the first African American elected to the school committee in decades. He was subsequently re-elected to five consecutive terms on the school committee.

Since Solomons' breakthrough, African Americans have consistently won seats on both bodies. Currently, __ African Americans represent the City even though Cambridge voters, like most others in the nation, generally show racially cohesive voting. While the development of more coalition-building in Cambridge has boosted the election of African-Americans and women, choice voting was instrumental in allowing these coalitions to form.

There have been five referenda (in 1952, 1953, 1957, 1961, and 1965) on whether to repeal or retain the choice voting system. Each time the vote was to retain it. Choice voting has also withstood legal challenges, as recently as 1996.

Summary

Even though African Americans for years were a small share of the city's population, Cambridge voters have consistently elected African Americans to their city council for decades. Choice voting also clearly empowered racial minorities when used to elect city councils in Cincinnati (where both parties elected African American candidates), New York, Toledo and several other cities. In local school board elections in New York, choice voting provided accurate representation to African Americans, Latinos and Asian Americans, leading to the Department of Justice to block an effort to replace the system with limited voting in 1999.

The Center for Voting and Democracy
The Center is dedicated to fair elections where every vote counts and all voters are represented. As a catalyst for reform, we conduct research, analysis, education and advocacy to build understanding of and support for more democratic voting systems. We promote full representation as an alternative to winner-take-all elections and instant runoff voting as an alternative to plurality and runoff elections.

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

A History of Effective Service
The Center for Voting and Democracy has a history of successful service to racial and ethnic minorities seeking fair representation. We worked closely with minority communities in Amarillo (TX) in preparation for cumulative voting elections in 2000 and 2002. We helped AALDEF defend choice voting in New York City before the Department of Justice in 1999 and have made numerous presentations to community groups, charter commissions and national organizations.
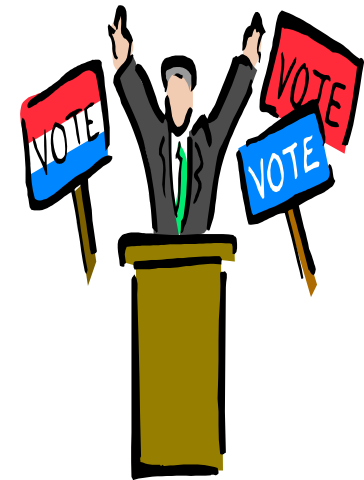
For more information, contact:
Rashad Robinson, Field Director
6930 Carroll Avenue, Suite 610
Takoma Park, MD 20912
(301) 270-4616   (301) 270-4133 [fax]
www.fairvote.org   robinson@fairvote.org

Choice Voting

**Prepared by
The Center for Voting
and Democracy**

Choice Voting

Choice voting is a system where voters maximize their vote's effectiveness through ranking candidates. Choice voting (also known as the "single transferable vote" and "preference voting") has two particularly important virtues. First, it ensures that as many voters as possible help elect a candidate they like. Second, it ensures that a given grouping of like-minded voters will win its fair share of seats no matter how many candidates seek its support because choice voting "heals" any fractures due to "splitting" the vote. In the first half of the 20th century, choice voting was used to elect city councils in two dozen American cities, including New York, Cleveland, Sacramento and Cincinnati. It consistently resulted in fair representation of racial minorities, as it has done so in recent elections in Cambridge (MA) and New York.

Voters have an easy job: they rank candidates in order of choice by indicating their first choice, second choice and so on. Voters can rank as many or as few candidates as they prefer.

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. After counting first choices, candidates reaching the threshold are elected. To avoid wasting votes, "surplus" ballots beyond the threshold are counted for the remaining candidates according to voters' preferences: in the best method, every surplus ballot is counted for the next listed candidate at a reduced value.

When no candidate reaches the victory threshold, the candidate with the fewest votes is eliminated and all his/her ballots are distributed among the remaining candidates according to the voters' next choices listed on ballots. This process of eliminating candidates and recounting votes continues until all seats are filled. Computers handle the count quickly.

Counting Ballots in Choice Voting

The chart below shows a sample choice voting election. The three winners (**in bold**) are candidates Brown and Garcia of the Yellow Party and candidate Charles of the Blue Party. More than 75% of voters elect a preferred candidate, and most remaining voters rank one of the winning candidates highly.

Having won 60% of voters' first choices, three Yellow Party candidates almost certainly would have swept all three seats with a traditional at-large, "winner take all" system. The Blue Party was boosted both because choice voting lowered the victory threshold and because it avoided "split votes." Based on the results after counting voters' first-choices, Yellows would have won all three seats even if voters had been limited to casting just one vote (as in the one-vote system, which also lowers the victory threshold to 25%). By allowing Blue Party voters to have their votes pool together behind their strongest candidate, choice voting better reflected voters' opinions.

Advantages of Choice Voting

* Encourages minority candidates to run and gain influence for their community even if may not win.

* Lowers threshold necessary to win seat

* Encourages cross-racial coalitions by creating incentives for voters to rank candidate outside their own racial group after they have ranked preferred candidates from their own race.

* Eliminates the danger of vote-splitting in minority communities, allowing more than one minority candidate to try to win.

Cambridge, Massachusetts

The Cambridge city council consists of nine members elected at-large, and the school committee consists of six members elected at-large. Both elections use choice voting. With nine representatives, a like-minded grouping of 10% of voters can be sure of electing one council member, while a grouping of approximately 14% can elect a school committee member.

Candidate	Party	1st Count	2nd Count (Distributing Garcia's surplus votes)	3rd Count (Distributing Wong's votes)	4th Count (Distributing Jackson's votes)	5th Count (Distributing Brown's surplus votes)
Brown	Yellow	175	+10=185	+10=195	+150=**345**	-94=**251**
Garcia	Yellow	**270**	-19=**251**	**251**	**251**	**251**
Jackson	Yellow	155	+6=161	+6=167	Loses (-167)	
Charles	Blue	130	+2=132	+75=207	+14=221	+30=**251**
Murphy	Blue	150	+0=150	+30=180	+3=183	+5=188
Wong	Blue	120	+1=121	Loses (-121)		
Exhausted	—	0	0	0	0	59

In the early 1900's, one African American served on the school committee, but no other racial minority was elected in the City for a half-century.