



Factsheet # 10: Analysis- The Case for Proportional Voting Systems & Majority Rule

Our increasingly diverse cities need voting systems that facilitate the representation of all points of view and all groups of interests, thereby promoting real majority rule. In most cases, full voting systems are the best vehicle for achieving these goals.

The present "winner-take-all" electoral system used in most elections in the United States typically divides representation into districts or wards, with each district electing one representative. In other places, voters elect several seats at large, with 50.1% of voters having the power to win all seats. These winner-take-all systems were implemented at a time when no other systems had been developed, when the electorate of most states was relatively homogeneous, and when communication and transportation were slow, making geographic-based representation more logical. To early Americans, any method of election was a vast improvement over being ruled by a king.

But winner-take-all systems do a poor job of representing political minorities that are geographically dispersed. The problem with winner-take-all voting in the 21st century is that many cities and states are composed of an increasingly diverse population with a variety of political views. Particularly in urban areas, people are from varying race, class, ethnic and religious backgrounds. Yet they all must share the same representative in the House of Representatives and in most state legislatures. What about the 49.9% of voters who did not vote for a winning candidate? What about those on the winning side who had to settle on a "lesser of two evils"? What about the majority of adults who no longer vote in most elections? They all too likely are "represented" by someone with whom they feel little affinity. This poor representation calls into question the effectiveness of a single representative speaking for increasingly diverse populations.

Fortunately, there are tried and true alternatives. Proportional representation systems of voting (such as choice voting and party list voting, limited voting and cumulative voting) are designed to promote fair representation. This means that various political constituencies within the majority and the minority can win representation while still maintaining majority rule.

In our society, "minority" often has the connotation of a racial or ethnic minority, but proportional voting systems allow representation of any type of minority: Republicans in a Democrat area, liberal black voters in a white-majority area in the South, pro-life voters in a pro-choice stronghold, independent voters everywhere, and so on. With proportional representation, more voters get a seat at the table. And more voters get a piece of the pie.

Choice voting, limited voting, and cumulative voting are candidate-based systems already used in local elections in the United States. Each system uses different methods to achieve proportional representation, and, not surprisingly, result in different outcomes. Limited voting and cumulative voting are particularly successful in creating representation for a cohesive



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political minority by allowing its members to express a strong preference for particular candidates. Because of their particular rules, both limited and cumulative voting sometimes fail to achieve the broader goal of proportional representation, but both result in more representative assemblies than winner-take-all systems.

Choice voting comes closer to achieving proportional representation. When compared to winner-take-all systems, choice voting sharply reduces the percentage of votes it takes to win a legislative seat. This lower victory threshold allows various "minority" constituencies to win representation without having to be a local majority. It allows them to elect a candidate to represent their shared values and interests -- in a sense, choice voting allows individual voters to "district" themselves with political allies.

At the same time, choice voting encourages coalition-building and majority representation, because it values a candidate's ability to be the second and third choice of supporters of other candidates. Choice voting promotes coalition-building and organizing across racial, ethnic and partisan lines.

When its potential is fully realized, choice voting combines the best of local district elections and at-large citywide elections. On one hand, neighborhoods tend to win representation because candidates often decide they can best earn strong support from voters in their geographic area. However, other candidates will win by appealing to a geographically dispersed community of interest due to their ability to form coalitions. The end result is a legislature that is a "gorgeous mosaic" of the community, and more fully representative of the wishes of the electorate.

Our diverse, modern society requires a modern voting system that will facilitate adequate representation of this growing diversity. The need to represent more communities of interest while promoting coalitions is especially pressing in our cities, where the "majority" is increasingly composed of a collection of minorities. City planners should take great care in choosing an electoral system, as the ability to bring all groups to the table of representation may be the only glue in the future that will hold our major cities and surrounding suburbs together.