



## Factsheet # 7: Choice Voting and Multi-Racial Electorates

Choice voting is often a sensible electoral system for politically and/or racially diverse urban areas because it promotes representation of citywide perspectives, more cooperative politics, and fairer representation for constituencies that might be too geographically dispersed to benefit from drawing single-member districts.

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Choice voting is often particularly appropriate for elections in diverse urban areas because it smoothly combines geographic / neighborhood - based representation with representation based on non-geographic communities of interest.

Choice voting promotes the proportional representation of a city's diversity, allowing any like-minded grouping of voters -- no matter where these voters live -- to win its fair share of seats in proportion to its voting strength. Allowing significant communities of interest to participate in the decision-making fosters a more inclusive climate in cities and other areas where there is an obvious need for diverse communities to work together to address that community's needs. Choice voting was a natural choice for electing the newly-created legislature in Northern Ireland in 1998, given its track record in local elections over the previous two decades had helped Protestants and Catholics to work together in localities. Similarly, a 1983 New York Times article credited the use of choice voting in local elections in Cambridge (MA) as a key reason why the race riots that plagued other cities in the 1960s never occurred there. In Cincinnati, the 1968 Kerner commission report determined that the repeal of choice voting in a 1957 referendum contributed to that city's riots in the following decade.

- Choice voting promotes cross-racial/ethnic coalitions. In choice voting, voters rank their preferred candidates in order of choice: 1, 2, 3 etc. If the first choice of a voter has too little support to win, that voter's ballot counts toward his or her second choice candidate. Recognizing the importance of voters' second and subsequent choices, parties and candidates have incentives to build coalitions and run cooperatively across lines of race and policy. And because casting a vote for a lower choice candidate cannot help defeat that voter's higher-choice candidates, there is no disadvantage for a voter who ranks candidates beyond those of their own race or ethnicity. As a result, it is in a candidate's self-interest to have a cross-racial appeal in order to gain more votes as a count progresses.
- Choice voting encourages voter participation and a more diverse slate of candidates. Choice voting is a fully proportional voting system – one in which like-minded groupings of voters are likely to win seats in proportion to their share of the vote. As a result, winning a seat requires a lower share of votes than in "winner-take-all" elections, which facilitates broad representation of diverse communities of interest. Also, because supporters of losing candidates have their votes count toward their next choice candidates, voters are free to vote for their favorite candidates without fear of



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"wasting" their vote on a "spoiler." These two factors combine to encourage more diverse candidates to run, campaigns to be more issue-based and voters to perceive they have better choices. Additionally, both campaign organizers and voters know that votes count, fostering a clear incentive to increase voter turnout. This is especially true among traditionally under-represented constituencies who now have better choices.

- Choice voting promotes a mixture of neighborhood and citywide representation. Choice voting puts the power to earn fair representation with the voters, not with insiders who draw the boundaries of single-member districts. Since choice voting elects candidates with lower victory thresholds than a "winner-take-all" system, a candidate can win her/his votes by focusing on one section or neighborhood of the city if they want (as in district elections), or on particular communities of interest that are more geographically dispersed. Candidates don't need to spend excessive amounts of money to win, instead they can target their campaigns to certain parts of the city or certain communities of interest; it is difficult to buy "first-choice" loyalty from a voter. This feature typically results in effective representation of neighborhoods. In Cambridge, Massachusetts, where choice voting is used to elect their city council, support for winning candidates is strongly based in specific neighborhoods. Thus, choice voting has many of the advantages of a district system without having to rely on a "fair" process of drawing district lines.