



## Factsheet # 9: Limited Voting, Cumulative Voting and Choice Voting: A Comparison

This sheet examines the pros and cons associated with the three most commonly used proportional representation systems in the United States: limited voting, cumulative voting (in its two major variations) and choice voting.

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**Summary:** Choice voting promotes fair representation, allowing minority and majority perspectives to win representation in proportion to their relative voting strengths. Although best accompanied by a straightforward voter education effort, choice voting is easy for voters while reducing demand for complex voting strategies, like bullet-voting. Limited voting and cumulative voting are not as certain to represent voters fairly, but still have clear advantages over the winner-take-all election system.

**Limited Voting**, similar to other systems described in this factsheet, limited voting uses multi-seat electoral districts, which are districts that elect two or more representatives to a legislature. With limited voting, voters have fewer votes than seats. For example, in a five-seat district, each voter might be allowed to cast two votes, and the winners are the five candidates who receive the highest totals of votes. With limited voting, the fewer votes each voter has, the more likely political minorities will win fair representation – when voters are limited to one vote, the victory threshold is as low as it is with cumulative voting and choice voting.

### Pros

- Both casting and counting ballots in limited voting is simple and easy
- Permits majority rule and includes more minority representation than "winner take all"

### Cons

- Can fall short of proportional representation due to vote-splitting
- Constituencies or parties must limit the number of candidates they run or risk splitting their vote, leading to under-representation
- The nominating process can be open to manipulation by party leaders and a primary may be necessary to ensure fair representation
- More difficult to form electoral coalitions, both among like-minded candidates and among different political groupings, than with choice voting

In **free cumulative voting**, voters have the same number of votes as there are seats in a multi-seat district. Voters can allocate their votes in any manner they choose, be it one vote each to several candidates, or multiple votes to one highly favored candidate. Pooling votes on one candidate allows voters in a political minority to express a strong preference for their candidate. Winners are the highest vote-getters (plurality).

### Pros

- Relatively simple for voters to understand.
- Ballot counting is straightforward on most voting equipment
- Permits majority rule and more minority representation than "winner take all"

### Cons

- Vote-splitting can distort representation – for example, like-minded voters might split their



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votes among two candidates, causing both to lose, or they might concentrate their ballots on only one candidate even though they had enough votes to elect two candidates

- The problem of vote splitting encourages parties/organizations to limit their nominations
- Strategic voting becomes important, and it is necessary to manage voters to make sure they allocate their ballots correctly
- It is more difficult to form electoral coalitions than with either choice voting or equal and even cumulative voting

The **equal and even form of cumulative voting** – also known as the Peoria model -- acts much like free cumulative voting with one important difference: votes are allocated equally among the candidates chosen by a voter. For instance, if a voter has five votes and votes for two candidates, each candidate receives 2.5 votes. Winners are the highest vote-getters (plurality).

### Pros

- Shares most of the advantages of free cumulative voting system, including relative ease of use and of administration and more minority representation than with "winner take all"
- Allows voters to limit number of candidates they support without losing voting power
- Easier for parties/organizations to run slates of candidates than free cumulative voting

### Cons

- Is more complex to explain than either limited voting or free cumulative voting
- The problem of split votes still exists, and parties/organizations must still be careful to limit the number of candidates they nominate/support
- More difficult to form coalitions than with choice voting

**Choice voting** (also known as preference voting, the single transferable vote and the Hare system) allows voters to rank candidates in order of preference: one for their favorite candidate, two for their second favorite, and so on. Candidates are elected once they reach the victory threshold. For instance, in a nine-seat district, a candidate must earn about 10% of the vote to earn one seat and a political party / slate needs more than 50% of the vote to win a five-seat majority.

To determine winners, ballots are counted in a series of rounds of elections. When first-choices are counted, any candidate who reaches the victory threshold is elected. In the next round, "surplus votes" – those votes beyond the victory threshold obtained by any winning candidate – are counted for the second choices of voters as indicated by their ballots (for fairness, all ballots are counted for second choice candidates at an equally reduced value). If not all seats are filled at this point, as is typical, then the candidate with the fewest votes is eliminated, and ballots cast for that candidate are counted for the candidate listed next on each voter's ballot. These rounds of election continue until all seats are filled or the number of remaining candidates equals the number of seats.



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### Pros

- Choice is a fully proportional voting system and likely to ensure both majority rule and fair representation of political minorities.
- Voters' ballots are used efficiently, with most voters having the same number of effective votes (votes that elect someone)
- Designed to ensure that as many voters as possible elect a preferred candidate.
- The role for the voter is simple -- ranking candidates in order of preference, 1, 2, 3 etc.
- Encourages coalition-building among allied groupings hoping to be ranked highly by supporters of the other grouping
- Most adaptable of alternative systems to demographic shifts in the electorate
- Since a lower ranking can never defeat a higher ranking, there is no incentive to limit the number of candidates, to bullet-vote, or to manipulate the order of rankings
- No need for primary elections or runoffs

### Cons

- Vote counting mechanism is difficult to explain -- voter education is necessary to ensure that voters understand the importance of ranking candidates
- Complexity of count can lead to perceptions of manipulation of the system that can taint the process, even if based on misconceptions
- Ballot counting often requires the modification of current election administration, possibly including the purchase of new voting systems and ballot-counting software
- Requires like-minded candidates to compete amongst one another for first-choice votes – essentially combining primary election competition and general election competition in a single round of voting