

# Proportional representation 1



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What exactly is proportional representation (PR), how does it work, and what are its advantages over our present system? The way it works is simple: proportional representation systems come in several varieties, but they all share two basic characteristics. The first way is they use multi-member districts. Instead of electing one member of the legislature in each small district, PR uses much larger districts that elect several members at one time, (about five or ten). Second, the proportion of votes a party receives determines which candidates win the seats in these multi-member districts. We are used to our single-member district system, in which we elect one candidate in each legislative district, with the winner being the candidate with the most votes. But while we view this winner-take-all system as normal, in reality our approach to elections is increasingly at odds with the rest of the world. The vast majority of Western democracies see American-style elections as outmoded and unfair and have rejected them in favor of proportional representation. Most of Western Europe uses PR and a large majority of the emerging democracies of Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union have chosen PR over our form of elections. The United States, Canada, and Great Britain are the only Western democracies that continue to cling to winner-take-all arrangements.

The single-member district voting system has been on the wane worldwide because it has a number of serious drawbacks. It routinely denies representation to large numbers of voters, produces legislatures that fail to accurately reflect the views of the public, discriminates against third parties, and discourages voter turnout. All of these problems can be traced to a fundamental flaw in our system: only those who vote for the winning candidate get any representation. Everyone else -- who may make up 49% of

the electorate in a district -- gets no representation.

We are all familiar with this problem. If you are a Democrat in a predominately Republican district or a Republican in a Democratic one, or an African-American in a white district, then you are shut out by our current election system. You might cast your vote, but it will be wasted on a candidate that can not win. In the 1994 elections for the U. S. House of Representatives, more than 26 million Americans wasted their votes on losing candidates, and so came away from the voting booth with no representation. Under single-member district rules we may have the right to vote, but we don't have the equally important right to be represented.

To make matters worse, this denial of representation on the district level often produces distortions in representation in Congress and our state and local legislatures. Parties often receive far more (or far fewer) seats than they deserve.

Proportional representation has been widely adopted because it avoids an outcome in which some people win representation and the rest are left out. Under proportional representation rules, no significant groups are denied representation. Even political minorities, who may constitute only 10-20 per cent of the voters, are able to win some seats in these multi-member districts. In PR systems, nearly everyone's vote counts, with 80-90 per cent of the voters actually electing someone, compared to 50-60 percent in most U. S. elections. Under PR, we can also be sure that our legislatures will accurately reflect the voting strength of the various parties. If a party receives 40 per cent of the vote, it will get 40 per cent of the seats, not 20 percent or 60 percent as can happen now with our system.

The unfairness of winner-take-all elections and the advantages of

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proportional representation are particularly obvious when we consider the situation of third parties in the U. S. Voters are increasingly dissatisfied with the offerings of the two-major parties and recent surveys indicate that over 60 per cent of Americans would now like to see other parties emerge to challenge the Democrats and Republicans.

Adopting PR would finally allow for free and fair competition between all political parties. Supporters of minor parties are forced to either waste their vote on a candidate who cannot win; vote for the lesser-of-two-evils among the major party candidates; or not vote at all. In short, single-member district elections are rigged against minor parties and serve to unfairly protect the major parties from competition. This problem would end under proportional representation, which is designed to ensure that all political groups, including minor party supporters, get their fair share of representation. Minor parties would need only 10 or 20 percent of the vote to elect a candidate. Under PR, many minor parties would quickly become viable and we would have a truly competitive multi-party system. This would give American voters what they say they want a much greater variety of choices at the polls. Offering voters more choices would also encourage higher levels of voting.

A multi-party system would also ensure that our city, state, and federal legislatures represented the variety of political perspectives that exist in the electorate. Our society is becoming more politically heterogeneous, and yet our legislatures are made up of the same old Republican and Democratic politicians. Some of our widespread political malaise might disappear if we had policy-making bodies that reflected the diverse perspectives in the electorate. More representative legislatures would foster more exciting and

wide-ranging political debate and inject new ideas into decision making.

Experts note that the clearest demonstration of the effect of voting systems on womens representation can be seen in countries like Germany and New Zealand that use the mixed-member form of proportional representation.

Under this system, half of the members of the parliament are elected in single-member plurality districts and the other half chosen by party list proportional representation.

In the U. S., proportional representation would be easiest to acquire on the local level, where modifying a city charter is usually all that is necessary. For that reason, much of the grassroots political activity promoting PR has taken place on the local level. For example, in the 1990s, two large cities -- Cincinnati and San Francisco -- voted on referendums to adopt PR. Both efforts were narrowly defeated, with PR garnering the support of almost 45% of the voters in both cases. Proportional representation also is feasible for congressional elections. The Center for Voting and Democracy in Washington, DC has developed plans for Georgia and North Carolina that demonstrate how easy it would be to create multi- member PR districts for U. S. House elections. Importantly, such plans would not require a constitutional amendment. All that would be needed is to repeal a 1967 federal law requiring single-member district elections for the House, and several bills have been introduced in Congress that would do just that. In fact, with the approval of the Department of Justice under the Voting Rights Act, some states already are using PR in local elections, and minorities are using this system to elect their fair share of representatives.

Bibliography:

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