Proportional Representation

Pentel/Wallace for Governor and Lt. Governor mandates Proportional Representation for the Minnesota State House of Representatives to ensure fair and equitable representation of the electorate.

What is a Proportional Representation Voting System?

Proportional representation (PR) is a democracy based voting system that ensures the right of fair and equitable representation of voters in proportion to the percentage of votes received. So, if the Minnesota House of Representatives were a 150 member body with 10 seats assigned to one of 15 voting regions and your political party received 10% of the vote in your voting region your party would win 1 seat in the House. In essence, PR assures that political parties or candidates will have the percent of legislative seats that reflects their public support through a fair and equitable voice of the electorate. A party or candidate need not come in first to win seats as in a "Winner-Takes-All" voting system, which only allows for 1 seat per district. In a Proportional Representation voting system, a voter selects a candidate to represent them without fear of "wasting" a vote regardless of whether or not their candidate comes in first. Their electoral voice is fairly and equitably represented in the legislature by a representative number of seats in proportion to the votes received (PR Voting systems are discussed in more detail as found below). This democracy based electoral system is successfully implemented by a majority of the world's successful democracies (i.e. Denmark, Holland, Switzerland, Australia, Germany, Sweden, Spain and Austria.). And in proportional representative systems there is generally a 75-95% voter turn-out.

What is a "Winner-Takes- All" voting system?

We currently vote in a "winner-takes-all" voting system where the candidate that receives a majority of the vote "wins" and those in the minority lose. For example, if the electorate votes 49.999% for candidate A and 50.001% for candidate B in a given district, candidate B wins. In other words, the voters representing 49.999% of the electorate receive no representation in the legislature as the representative acquiring 50.001% becomes your elected "voice" of majority. Because of this engineered voting system phenomenon, we are often forced to vote for the "best of the worse" (we vote for a candidate that we do not fully support) in fear that our vote may be "wasted" or, worse yet, we refuse to vote as we do not feel represented by the candidates. As a result, of all the world's democracies, the United States has one of the lowest percentages of voters participating in elections and we do not have fair and equitable representation of the people in our legislature. The existing system of "winner-takes-all" is obsolete. Proportional Representation resolves this by ensuring fair and equitable representation of the electorate.

I know Proportional Representation ensures fair and equitable representation of the electorate, but how does it work?

Of the many PR voting systems, the following briefly discusses the most common and how they work:

List System - The most widely used form of PR, a voter selects one party and its slate of candidates to represent them. Party slates can be either "closed" or "open," allowing voters to indicate a preference for individual candidates. If a party receives 25% of the vote, they receive 25% of the seats in the legislature, 9% of the vote receives 9% of the seats, and so on. A minimum share of the votes may be required to earn representation; typically a 5% threshold is used. This type of PR is ideal for large legislatures on state and national levels.

Mixed Member System (MM) - This PR hybrid elects half the legislature from single-seat, "winner-take-all" districts and the other half by the List System.

Preference Voting (PV) is also known as Ranked Choice Voting (RCV). A voter simply ranks candidates in an order of preference (1,2,3,4, etc…). Once a voter's first choice is elected or eliminated, excess votes are "transferred" to subsequent preferences until all positions are filled. Voters can vote for their favorite candidate(s), knowing that if that candidate doesn't receive enough votes their vote will "transfer" to their next preference. Preference voting is ideal for non-partisan elections (i.e. city councils.).

How might PR be of use to us?

PR is proven to assist in the breaking of political impasse on important yet difficult issues (i.e. Environmental health, health care, and social security.) through the inclusion of full electorate representation (small party representation) which allows new ideas and views to be heard. In essence, PR does not allow for ideological bias as small parties are allowed to be represented and, as a result, are capable of facilitating a greater and more informed discussion on policy issues and options thereby enhancing the ability to reach sound, equitable consensus; your electoral voice is heard and decisions are made "all for one and one for all". For example, Germany's PR voting system resulted in representation from the "German Greens". The German Greens, never winning a single district election and receiving less than 10% of the electoral vote, raised numerous perspectives and positions that, initially in the minority, received national consensus.

So How Do We Change From "Winner-Take-All" to PR, fulfilling a democratic promise of "one person, one vote"?

PR is implemented through a simple vote of the legislature and/or through voter initiative in Charter or Home Rule Cities. For example, Minneapolis, which is now electing local officials using Ranked Choice Voting, and St. Paul, where the voters have approved the use of Ranked Choice Voting for future municipal elections. By building, supporting, and voting for Ecology Democracy Party representatives, such as Ken Pentel and Erin Wallace, political will is immediately mobilized to elect the Minnesota House of Representatives through a voting system of proportional representation ensuring democracy through fair and equitable representation.

Where Can I Learn More About Proportional Representation?

Real Choices, New Voices. Douglas Amy; Columbia University Press, 1993.

Tyranny of the Majority. Lani Guinier, 1994.

Electoral Systems and Party Systems Professor Arend Lijphart; Oxford University Press, 1994.

United States Electoral Systems: Their Impact on Women and Minorities. editors Dr.

Wilma Rule and Dr. Joseph Zimmerman; Praeger Publishers, 1992.

Voting and Democracy Report, 1995. CVD's survey of electoral reforms.

Dubious Democracy: 1994 U.S. House Elections. CVD's ground-breaking statistical analysis showing reasons for low voter turnout

A Radical Plan to Change American Politics by Michael Lind, Atlantic Monthly, August 1992.

Choosing an Electoral System, edited by Arend Lijphart and Bernard Grofman, Praeger Press, 1984.

The Power to Elect, Enid Lakeman, Heinemann Press, 1982.

Seats and Votes, Rein Taagepera and Matthew Shugart; Yale Univ Press, 1989.

PR: The Key to Democracy, George Hallett; National Municipal League, 1940.

Considerations on Representative Government, John Stuart Mill; Park, Son and Bourn, 1861.

Women, Elections and Representation, by Robert Darcy, Susan Welch and Janet Clark; Longman Press, 1987.

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