

Inquiring Minds

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Voting, Part II: How Should We Pick the Winners?

In the US, our elections are (mostly—let’s not talk about the Presidency!) winner-take-all affairs in which the winner is the person who receives the most votes (not necessarily a majority of votes). This type of system leaves many (sometimes even most) people feeling that their votes were wasted and that they are unrepresented. There are other ways to arrange things so that the proportion of seats allotted more closely mirrors the percentage of votes received. In our system, states set most of the rules for voting and some states and localities have experimented with different ways of structuring voters’ choices and determining who wins. For example, there are many variations in how candidates are selected in primaries: there are “closed primaries” where Democrats vote for Democrats and Republicans vote for Republicans; and, “open primaries,” where voters can decide on election day whether to take a Republican ballot or a Democratic ballot. California introduced the “top two primary” (aka “jungle primary”) where, (regardless of party), the top two vote-getters in the primary face off in the general election. In 2016, Maine approved a system of “ranked choice voting” that had its first test in June. The first article below explains that system and some of the pros and cons associated with it. The second looks at pros and cons of proportional representation.

How should we organize our elections? Would we be better served by adopting a system that more closely reflected voters’ preferences?

Ranked Choice Voting

Ranked-choice voting, also known as instant-runoff voting, allows electors to select their top three choices for each position in order of preference.

Ballots that use ranked-choice voting are designed with side-by-side columns listing the names of the candidates running three times. Voters choose their first-choice for the position in the initial column, their second-choice in the middle and their third-choice in the final.

Like all elections, if a candidate receives more than 50 percent of the votes, he or she will be elected. If they do not, however, using the instant-runoff voting, an elimination process begins. The candidate receiving the least amount of votes will no longer be included.

Those who voted for the eliminated candidate will have their votes transferred to their second-choice candidate. The process continues until one person receives the majority of the votes.

Voters are not required to select a second-choice or third-choice candidate. They may vote for the same individual on all three occasions, but it will not benefit that candidate.

Ranked-choice voting may also be used for multi-seat elections, according to **FairVote**. Using a specified threshold of votes, candidates who obtain that threshold will be elected. Excess votes are counted toward a voters' second choice, and the candidate with the least votes is eliminated. Those who voted for that candidate will have their votes moved to their second-choice candidate, and the process will continue until all seats are filled.

Pros and Cons of Ranked-Choice Voting

By Breana Noble Friday, 03 July 2015 04:19 PM

A growing trend in cities has been using ranked-choice voting, also known as instant-runoff voting, for local elections as they weigh the pros and cons of different modes of voting.

Memphis, Tennessee, and Santa Fe, New Mexico, are scheduled to use ranked-choice voting for local elections in the next two years, according to FairVote.

Ranked-choice voting is when electors choose their top three candidates for positions in order of preference. It is done in case no candidate receives more than 50 percent of the votes. Here are the pros and cons of this voting method.

Pros

1. No need for expensive runoff elections.

Last year, Alabama had a runoff election for several partisan positions, and it cost the state \$3 million, according to The Associated Press. Ranked-choice voting includes a solution to elections that results in no majority winner through an elimination process and having electors select their second- and third-choice candidates.

2. Politicians tend to adopt a more civil tone in campaigns.

According to the Twin Cities Daily Planet, candidates are less likely to use attack ads and bash their competitors when a ranked-choice voting election used. This is partly the result of having more than one competitor, but ranked-choice voting also places emphasis on which candidates are the most liked.

3. Enough with the strategy games.

Advocates argue ranked-choice voting allows voters to elect their favorite

candidate no matter the party, according to TwinCities.com. Third parties are less likely to spoil elections with the process of elimination. Electors may be able to worry less about helping their least preferred candidate by choosing their favorite person running.

4. Majority wins.

Proponents of ranked-choice voting argue it is a more democratic process, TwinCities.com reported. Some elections have plurality elections in which the candidate who receives the most votes is the winner, even if they do not obtain a majority. Ranked-choice voting allows the person placed into office to have some sort of support from most of the community that voted.

Cons

1. Many cities do not have the proper equipment to count the ballots.

Some voting machines are only programmed to count the number of votes for each candidate and cannot reallocate votes, according to TwinCities.com. This would mean purchasing new voting machines, an additional expense to communities.

2. It's confusing.

A ticket where electors vote for only one candidate is pretty straightforward. Voting for the same position three times and having to transfer votes complicates the process. Spur noted that in San Francisco, 1.2 percent of ballots in 2011 had errors and could not be counted. This is more errors than normal ballots typically obtain.

3. Elections for multiple positions become complex.

While it is possible to perform ranked-choice voting elections when more than one position is up for grabs, it involves setting a threshold for candidates to obtain, complicating the process. Additionally, FairVote reported, candidates reaching the threshold would have their excess votes transferred to voters' second choices. The website, however, does not describe how excess electors are determined, providing certain voters more of a say in an election by voting for their favorite candidate as well as their second-choice politician.

4. Voters need to know their stuff.

With ranked-choice voting, electors have to be able to list all the candidates in order of their preference. This requires extensive research, especially in less prominent races, something many voters do not take the time to do.

What are the Advantages and Disadvantages of Using A Proportional Representation, (PR) Electoral System?

by [UK Engage](#) | Aug 5, 2013 |

Proportional representation (PR) is a term used to describe a range of electoral systems in which the distribution of seats corresponds closely with the proportion of the total votes cast for each party or individual candidate. PR offers

alternatives to first past the post and other majoritarian voting systems based on single-member electoral areas, which tend to produce disproportionate outcomes and to have a bias in favour of larger political groups. PR systems by contrast tend to offer a better chance of representation to smaller parties and groups. There are many different forms of proportional representation. Some are focused solely on achieving the proportional representation of different political parties (such as list PR) while others permit the voter to choose between individual candidates (such as STV-PR). The degree of proportionality also varies; it is determined by factors such as the precise formula used to allocate seats, the number of seats in each constituency or in the elected body as a whole, and the level of any minimum threshold for election.

The advantages of a PR electoral system

- Moving to proportional representation (PR) in the UK may offer would give minority parties and independent candidates a better chance of winning seats in Parliament.
- The current First Past the Post electoral system is considered unrepresentative, as candidates can be elected with a very small share of the votes while all other votes cast in the constituency are wasted.
- PR ensures that the parties would have to appeal to their core supporters, rather than a small number of so called 'swing voters' in marginal seats.
- It could be argued that PR delivers fairer treatment of minority parties and independent candidates
- Under PR fewer votes are 'wasted' as more people's preferences are taken into account
- PR potentially offers greater and more-representative choice for voters.
- PR may encourage turn-out and reduce apathy.
- PR rarely produces an absolute majority for one party, however, it could be argued that PR ensures greater continuity of government and requires greater consensus in policy-making.

The disadvantages of a PR electoral system

- Under FPTP, MPs serve the constituency they campaign in. This makes them more inclined to tackle important local issues.
- PR can potentially provide a route for extremists to force their way into the political mainstream: under a FPTP electoral system this would be unlikely to happen.
- Some would say that PR produces 'weak' coalition governments rather than 'strong' majority governments, which arguably can lead to indecision, compromise and even legislative paralysis.
- PR can also reduce accountability to voters, as an ousted party of government can retain office by finding new coalition partners after an election.
- The adoption of PR list systems weakens the link between the elected representative and his or her constituency.
- The greater complexity and choice that PR allows can put voters off voting, by requiring them to have a greater knowledge of individual and party positions.