



PROPORTIONAL VOTING: BETTER REPRESENTATION FOR CALIFORNIA

OVERVIEW

California's representative government is plagued by an unprecedented number of noncompetitive elections. The Legislature is highly partisan because over 90 percent of legislative districts strongly favor one political party over the other. Incumbents are not accountable to voters and act without fear of losing re-election.

In the past, states like Arizona, Iowa and elsewhere have attempted to increase competition with independent redistricting commissions. But in recent years these commissions have proven to be less effective, as Democratic and Republican voters have become increasingly segregated into regional partisan strongholds (known as "red and blue America").

Consequently, a declining number of moderate legislators have not been able to perform their historic bridge-building role to shape a bipartisan consensus around needed policies. Not surprisingly, California's voter turnout is one of the lowest in the nation and near the lowest in the state's history.

THE SOLUTION: PROPORTIONAL REPRESENTATION

A proportional representation system is designed to introduce greater competition into legislative elections, decrease regional partisan balkanization, eliminate partisan gerrymanders, increase voter participation, encourage moderate and third party candidates, and produce a legislature that better reflects the breadth of political opinion in our state. Proportional voting systems have been in use around the world and in local U.S. jurisdictions for decades. They have proven to be particularly effective at producing representative bodies from areas with broadly diverse or divided populations. Today, there is no better system

to enfranchise the wide range of views that make up California.

There are many ways to design a system using proportional voting methods. Briefly, the method would use *multi-seat districts*, *ranked ballots* and *proportional tallies*. For example, one model for the California Assembly might convert the state's 80 single-member districts into 16 districts with five representatives each. Voters would *rank* five selections in each district and any candidate who gained about 17 percent of the vote would be elected.

Professor Arend Lijphart from the University of California-San Diego, an internationally recognized expert in the field of electoral systems, recommends this sort of "moderate proportional system" for California. Moderate proportional representation uses a moderately-high threshold to elect winners -- about 17 percent (five seats per district), as opposed to extremely low thresholds like 1 or 2 percent that have led to some instability in certain democracies. The benefits of moderate proportional representation include:

- making all parts of the state competitive for both major parties
- Republican candidates could win seats in coastal areas ("blue California"), and Democrats could win in rural areas ("red California")
- Moderates, independents and third parties could be elected.

BENEFITS OF PROPORTIONAL VOTING

End political balkanization: Today's Legislature reflects California's balkanized politics with urban Democrats and rural Republicans dominating. Barely 50 percent

of Los Angeles County voters today are registered Democrat, but Democrats have a lock on representation for all of the electorate. Other parts of the state with significant numbers of Democratic voters elect nearly all Republican representatives. Proportional voting would dramatically alter that dynamic, electing rural Democrats and urban Republicans in addition to the traditional representation.

Independent and minor party winners:

Nearly one quarter of California voters are registered outside of the two major parties and more than 40 percent of young voters affiliate with minor parties or independent registration. Proportional voting would improve chances for independent and minor party candidates to win office, better reflecting the vast political diversity of the California electorate.

Encourage moderates: Proportional voting systems would encourage moderates who could appeal to an electorate much more broadly than today's single-seat districts with party primaries.

Eliminate partisan gerrymanders: Proportional voting using multi-seat districts make it unnecessary to gerrymander a district to protect a party or incumbent.

Encourage participation: By offering more viable choices for voters and encouraging better quality candidates, proportional voting improves political participation and restores public trust in government by electing a legislative body that better reflects the population.

Compliance with Voting Rights Act:

Proportional voting better allows racial minorities to win fair representation in

competitive elections without the divisive practice of racially gerrymandered districts.

Representation in Multi-racial Cities:

Proportional voting systems are particularly well-suited for cities, where four major racial groups compete for representation. Currently the drawing of race-conscious district lines usually is contentious and can reinforce some of the worst aspects of race and segregation. Proportional voting provides flexible and fairer methods to facilitate competitive elections and diverse representation for multiracial cities.

Background

Proportional voting systems have been used for decades in the United States and throughout the world. It was made possible in Amarillo, Tex. by a bill signed by then-Gov. George W. Bush. It is also used in Peoria, Ill., Cambridge, Mass., Hartford, Ct., several Pennsylvania counties and dozens of other local jurisdictions. Most established democracies in the world use some form of proportional voting. Troubled countries like South Africa, Afghanistan and Iraq have adopted proportional voting methods to elect a government that best reflects a divided and diverse population. Elsewhere, the Republic of Ireland and Australia have used proportional voting systems for decades to elect their national parliaments.

The New America Foundation in conjunction with FairVote has developed plans for candidate-based proportional elections to the California Assembly, Senate and U.S. House. The U.S. House plan, including predicted outcomes, may be viewed at www.fairvote.org/pr/super/2004/california.htm. The state Assembly plan may be viewed at www.fairvote.org/ca/?page=855.