



Factsheet # 1: Winner-Take-All vs. Proportional Representation

Winner-take-all vs. Proportional Representation

There are two basic families of voting systems. Winner-take-all systems elect the candidates who receive the most votes, thereby allowing 50.1% of voters to win 100% of seats and denying representation to minorities. Proportional representation systems allow like-minded groupings of voters to elect representatives in proportion to their share of the vote.

Winner-take-all voting systems (among which are plurality and two-round runoff systems) are based on the simple notion that seats should be awarded to the candidates who receive the most votes. That principle may seem fair enough: everyone gets to cast a ballot, and the top vote earner wins. Certainly, a candidate who wins will share many of the same ideas and values as the largest voting block in his or her constituency.

One clear downside to winner-take-all voting, however, is that losing candidates (and their supporters) win nothing, even if they win substantial numbers of votes. In a two-candidate race, it is possible for 49.9% of voters to receive no representation. In a three-candidate race, that number can climb to 66.6% - much more than half the electorate can actually oppose the candidate who has earned the right to "represent" it. Examples of such "plurality" victories are common. Richard Nixon and Bill Clinton earned less than 45% of the vote in their initial presidential victories, and several American governors have been elected with less than 40% in the 1990's. In some nations such as Russia and Papua New Guinea, candidacies have multiplied such that district elections regularly are won with less than 20% of votes (NB: Russia no longer elects Deputies by district, but by list vote).

Advocates of winner-take-all systems make a leap of faith, presuming that supporters of losing candidates will be duly represented by either the candidate who wins, even if the winner is ideologically opposed to the loser, or by candidates elected elsewhere. They also believe that voters' opinions can be neatly boiled into two basic options, as typically happens in competitive winner-take-all elections in the United States.

By contrast, proportional representation voting systems allow like-minded groupings of voters to elect representatives to a government in direct proportion to their relative support within a multi-seat constituency. Proportional systems are designed to allocate 10% of the seats to a parties or a slate of candidates that wins 10% of the vote, 25% of the seats to those taking 25% of the vote and a majority of the seats to those winning a majority of the vote. Contrast that last example with the winner-take-all system, in which a majority of the vote can win 100% of the representation, and one begins to understand the fundamental difference between the two types of system.

Advocates of proportional voting systems propose that the legislature should be more like a mirror of the population, with majority and minority viewpoints represented. Note that proportional representation advocates still believe in majority rule: because proportional systems accurately translate the popular vote into representation, candidates or parties with the greatest support should obtain the largest share of seats in a legislature.



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In fact, studies have shown that governments elected by proportional representation are more likely to produce policies that are in line with the "will of the majority." There are three major reasons for this tendency. First, more voters have representation at the policy-making table, a majority in the legislature is more likely to be grounded in a majority of the electorate than when many voters are cut out of representation. Second, political groupings can form and run candidates from across the spectrum, meaning voters can precisely define their representation. Third, increased diversity of viewpoints across the spectrum can lead to fuller discussion of important issues, thereby allowing majority interests to be better articulated and defined.