Reclaiming Democracy in the 21st Century

Instant Runoffs, Proportional Representation, and Cumulative Voting

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It has been decades since control of both the White House and Capitol Hill was so furiously contested. The presidential polls were close right up to Election Day, producing the most competitive race in a generation. Yet once again more than 100 million American adults abstained from the November 2000 elections. This majority was disproportionately young, poor, less educated, and of color. Their absence provides the clearest evidence that we are becoming a post-electoral democracy: one where many civil institutions are strong and most rights reasonably well-protected, but where the elections at democracy's core are unobserved and their potential to mobilize, inform, and transform are deeply unrealized.

It doesn't have to be this way. In fact, most established democracies already provide their voters with better and more viable choices. In presidential elections, they have runoff elections that allow a sincere first choice rather than one for the "lesser of two evils." To elect legislatures, they use proportional representation systems that make every voter important, not just those fortunate few living in the handful of districts that are competitive in our system. Voters can cast meaningful choices not only between the major parties, but also within those parties and among smaller parties to the left, right, and center.

Reforms of the fundamental electoral rules can sometimes seem of secondary importance in the face of pressing issues like national health care, world trade inequities, a living wage, legalization of drugs, reparations for African Americans, campaign finance reform, and a laundry list of worthwhile but still-distant goals. But it may turn out that meaningful electoral reform is easier to achieve than fundamental policy changes. In fact, a closer examination reveals that only fundamental reform of our voting practices will liberate supporters of these goals to express themselves at the ballot box. Real support for these policies exist, but in our current system their proponents are virtually and sometime actually excluded from political debate and representation. With growing support among constituency organizations, voting system reform should be the cornerstone of the necessary movement to restore electoral democracy. Its value becomes obvious through imagining its impact on this year's elections.

Instant Runoff Voting to Elect the President

A debate over whether Green Party presidential candidate Ralph Nader was a savior or a spoiler raged for months among progressives in 2000. But neither argument satisfied because both were partly right and both partly wrong. Votes for Nader instead of Al Gore in a close election really could have elected George Bush, with negative consequences for women, people of color, workers, and the environment among others. Yet without Nader, centrist Democrats would have been able to bury progressive politics even deeper.

The debate revealed a serious flaw in our antiquated electoral rules: voting for your favorite candidate can lead to the election of your least favorite candidate. Why is it that we can unlock the human genetic code but we can't come up with a way to elect our President that allows us to vote for our favorite candidate and allows multiple candidates to run and present their issues

without producing distorted results? Encouraging people to vote for their favorite candidate and insuring majority rule are basic requirements of democracy. But our current system badly fails these tests.

The British, Australians, and Irish have a simple solution: instant runoff voting (IRV). They share our tradition of electing candidates by a plurality system whereby voters have one vote, and the top vote-getter wins but they now also use IRV for most important elections. Mary Robinson was elected President of Ireland by IRV. Labor Party maverick "Red Ken" Livingstone was elected mayor of London. The Australian legislature has been elected by IRV for decades. States could implement IRV right now for all federal elections, including the presidential race, without changing a single federal law or the US Constitution.

IRV simulates a series of runoff elections, but in a single round of voting that corrects the flaws of plurality voting the spoiler problem and lack of majority rule and runoff elections having to pay for two elections. At the polls, people vote for their favorite candidate, but they also indicate on the same ballot their second, "runoff" choice and subsequent choices. If a candidate receives a majority of first choices, the election is over. If not, the candidate with the fewest votes is eliminated, and a runoff round of counting occurs. In this round, your ballot counts for your top-ranked candidate still in the race. The eliminated candidate is no longer a "spoiler" because the votes of that candidate's supporters go to their runoff choices. Rounds of counting continue until there is a majority winner. It's like doing a runoff election, but you do it all with one vote.

Imagine this year's presidential race with IRV. Nader supporters worried about George Bush could have ranked Nader first and Gore second. Suppose Bush won 45 percent of first choices in a key state, Gore 44 percent, Nader 9 percent, and the rest 2 percent. Under current rules, Bush wins. But with IRV, after Nader loses in the instant runoff, his supporters would have propelled Gore above 50 percent and defeated Bush. Rather than contribute to Gore's defeat, Nader could have helped stop Bush while delivering an important message to Gore: Watch your step on trade, political reform, and environmental policies.

Freed from the spoiler stigma, Nader more easily could have gained access to the presidential debates, informed and mobilized a progressive constituency, and won more votes. Higher turnout and increased attention to progressive issues could have moved the political center and helped Democrats retake Capitol Hill. The fledgling Green Party could have gained a real foothold. In other words, his campaign would have been a win-win, rewarding the energy of young activists whose belief in electoral politics has been put at risk by a weak Nader performance.

Surveying 20th-century elections, it's intriguing to consider what might have been. What would have happened in 1968 with IRV, for example, when the anti-Vietnam War movement was left without a champion in the general election, and Richard Nixon narrowly edged out Hubert Humphrey? Might Jesse Jackson in 1996 have pursued his proposed independent candidacy, forcing Bill Clinton to justify his moves to the right? What might socialist Norman Thomas and progressive Henry Wallace have achieved in the thirties and forties?

Of course, IRV isn't only for liberals. In 2000 it could have encouraged John McCain to ride his Straight Talk Express over to the Reform Party, and in past years it could have boosted Ross

Perot. IRV has no ideological bias, as has been proven by its shifting partisan impact in eight decades of parliamentary elections in Australia. Its virtue for all sides is that it gives all voters incentive to vote for their favorite candidate, allows candidates to challenge the front runners (which forces debate on important issues), and ensures that, at the end of the day, the true majority rules.

Full Representation for All

Instant runoff voting remains a majoritarian system, however, and minor party candidates wouldn't be much more successful in winning office than under plurality rules. Fair representation in government demands proportional representation, as used in most established democracies. Proportional representation or, as we prefer to say in American political culture, "full representation" would have a dramatic impact on voter choice and representation in our congressional elections.

Under current winner-take-all rules, few House elections are competitive. Fewer than one in ten races were won by less than 10 percent in 1998 and 2000. Most congressional districts are inherently one-sided no surprise, given that redistricting gives legislators the power to choose their constituents with ever more powerful computers and precise data. Even when a race is competitive, voters' realistic choices are limited to one candidate from each major party; minor party winners are as rare as snow in Houston. Out of nearly 8,000 state legislative and congressional seats, third-party candidates won a grand total of four in 1998. Winner-take-all elections also make it extremely rare for racial minorities to win in white-majority districts. Not surprisingly, since no states are majority-Black or majority-Latino/a, none of our 100 US senators or 50 governors is Black or Latino/a.

Full proportional representation would break open political monopolies and give political and racial minorities realistic chances to run and win all across the country. Most people could support their favorite candidates and political party no matter where they lived, and often could help elect them. The fight for control of the House of Representatives in 2000 would have been a national election, rather than the piecemeal, money-driven campaign that took place in 20 or 30 close races in swing districts.

The potential of full representation can be glimpsed by looking at Illinois' experience with cumulative voting using three-seat districts. In a three-seat district with cumulative voting, any constituency that had 25 percent of the vote wins representation. In Illinois this had a number of positive results, including fuller representation for both major political parties and opening the door for political independents, as well as women and people of color. With Democratic strongholds like Chicago electing Republicans and conservative suburbs and rural areas electing Democrats, both major parties had a direct interest in serving the entire state. Former representative Harold Katz described the legislature as "a symphony, with not just two instruments playing, but a number of different instruments going at all times." Recurring themes heard in Illinois include ones that would resonate deeply when applied to concerns about national politics:

Filling out the spectrum. In a two-party system, the parties are supposed to be "big tents." But

winner-take-all leaves whole swathes of the electorate without strong representation be it Catholics who are both pro-life and pro-labor, union members opposed to gun control, or reform-minded independents drawn to John McCain. In contrast, Illinois' districts typically had three representatives from distinct parts of the political spectrum: two representing liberal and moderate wings of the majority party and one from that area's minority party. Political minorities in office included Chicago Republicans concerned with urban issues and independent reformers like Harold Washington willing to take on local machines. In 1995, the Chicago Tribune editorialized in support of cumulative voting's return, writing that "it produced some of the best and brightest in Illinois politics."

Less regional polarization. Contrary to their reputation, single-seat districts don't represent geographic interests very well. Across the nation, for example, Republicans represent most rural districts, while Democrats represent nearly all urban districts. When only one side represents a region, policy for that area is subject to the whims of the majority party in each state and in the US House. Cities can suffer under Republicans who don't rely on urban voters, but also can suffer under Democrats too quick to accept the local status quo. Setting environmental policy in the Rockies is far more problematic when those open to change are shut out of representation. And, indeed, Democrats and Republicans co-exist everywhere. Bill Clinton won at least 25 percent of the vote in every House district in 1996, meaning that a Democrat likely would be elected from every three-seat district in the nation.

Illinois' legislature today suffers from regional divides, but it was different with three-seat districts. The loss of full representation has undercut bipartisan support for key policies and greatly exacerbated urban/suburban fractures. Chicago has been a big loser in equitable funding of public schools, for example. Abner Mikva, the former Congressman and federal judge who got his political start in Chicago with cumulative voting and three-seat districts, has observed that this system "helped us synthesize some of our differences, made us realize that even though we were different from the down-staters, different from the suburbanites, we had a lot in common that held us together as a single state."

Less partisan rancor. The impeachment of President Bill Clinton was only the most pronounced example of the bitter partisanship that reigns in Washington. Nearly every major legislative initiative seems calculated for political advantage, and perhaps nothing turns the American people away from politics more than the sniping between party leaders. Yet voices of compromise are vanishing, in part because of the growing homogeneity of representation in districts that lean clearly toward one party of the other.

Republican Congressman John Porter, retiring this year, notes that in Illinois' three-seat districts, "We operated in a less partisan environment because both parties represented the entire state." Former state representative Giddy Dyer says that under single-seat districts, "it's gamesmanship, how can we beat the other one? Each party views the other one as an enemy. That lack of civility began when we did away with cumulative voting."

Cumulative voting also resulted in much better representation of African-American and women candidates over the course of the century than the winner-take-all state senate elections. It encouraged more grassroots campaigns where money was less of a factor, and more independent

candidacies that could buck the local machine because only 25 percent of the vote was needed to win a seat. Full representation plans would not do away with the problems of inequities in campaign finance, but it would give important new opportunities to lesser-funded candidates with strong support among constituency groups that can turn out voters without a lot of cash.

This aspect of full representation is particularly important given that the Congress remains overwhelmingly male and the US Senate has no Blacks or Latino/as. Under current rules, Blacks and Latino/as have only made significant advances when districts are drawn to produce a majority-minority constituency where their typical minority status has been turned into a geographic majority. Yet recent Supreme Court rulings have made such pro-active districting more difficult.

Full representation plans are particularly promising as an alternative means to enforce the Voting Rights Act. Combining adjoining districts into bigger districts with three to five representatives elected by cumulative voting (or the even-more-proportional choice voting) would almost certainly increase the number of Blacks elected to the US House in states such as Virginia, North and South Carolina, Alabama, Mississippi, Arkansas, and Louisiana. This would also avoid the costly and divisive legal challenges that have kept some states' redistricting plans in court for most of the last decade. Women also would likely increase their numbers (still stalled below 14 percent of Congress), as more women tend to run and win in multi-seat districts.

Learning from the Irish

Ireland has been having a remarkable run, with its economy the fastest growing in Europe for the last few years. It has achieved a higher per capita gross domestic product than the United Kingdom. But there haven't been any Thatcher-esque assaults on the safety net. And while Ireland is an overwhelmingly Catholic country that frowns on divorce and abortion, women steadily have increased their power to control their lives.

Electorally, the United States may have something to learn from our Anglo-Irish cousins. Ireland has a combination of instant runoff voting for executive elections and full representation for legislative elections. In 1990, Mary Robinson became Ireland's first woman president when the instant runoff voting system vaulted her to victory in the runoff round. She was succeeded by Mary McAleese in 1997, when McAleese won on the second round of counting among a field where the top four candidates were women.

Elections for the more powerful national parliament are also lively. Even as the economy has boomed, voters have kept legislators honest. No incumbent government has won re-election in more than two decades, although coalitions between elections have been reasonably strong and steady. Six parties from across the political spectrum have consistently won seats in the 1990s, and each party in that decade served as part of one governing coalition or another. Every Irish resident has at least one local representative from both of the major party alliances, meaning that no part of the country is left behind when political tides change. And the choice voting ballot method used in presidential and legislative elections ensures that voters never accept a lesser of two evils they can fearlessly vote for their favorite candidates.

Voting System Reform Is Politically Viable

It is increasingly clear that voting system reform can be won in the United States when the right opportunities are presented. IRV is proving a winning argument for both Democrats and Republicans when confronted with actual or potential spoilers. Worried by the fact that strong Green candidacies have split the Democratic vote in two of the state's three House seats, prominent New Mexico Democrats are backing IRV, and the State Senate voted in 1999 to give voters a chance to enact IRV for all state and federal offices. Ralph Nader's presidential candidacy, of course, upset the Democrats and made the case for allowing voters to rank their choices in an instant runoff. In the closing weeks of his campaign, Nader promised to find more progressive candidates to run against Democrats in congressional races, so IRV may start making more and more sense to the Democratic Party.

In Alaska, the Republican Party, also beset by split votes, has made a sweeping IRV bill for all state and federal offices its number-one legislative priority, and advocates have already turned in enough signatures to place IRV on the statewide ballot in 2002. Vermont may hold the most immediate promise for IRV at the state level. Boosted by public financing, a progressive third-party candidate mounted a strong challenge in the governor's race, and an impressive coalition from across the spectrum is supporting IRV for statewide elections. Public financing and IRV are indeed well matched with IRV, clean-money candidates could run from across the spectrum without inviting spoiler charges.

Cities are also good targets for IRV campaigns. A charter commission in Austin, Texas, has recommended replacing two-round runoffs with IRV. Voters in Santa Clara County, California, Vancouver, Washington, and San Leandro, California, recently approved ballot measures to make IRV an explicit option in their charters.

Full representation can be seen as a fundamental challenge to the status quo. But the current "drive to revive" cumulative voting in Illinois shows how obstacles can be overcome when people are familiar with the system. A prominent commission in the state is studying whether to call for its return, and thoughtful political leaders and activists from across the political spectrum now support its return. Leading players plan a state initiative.

Nationally, Congress probably won't order states to elect House members by proportional representation tomorrow, but it has the constitutional power to do so. More realistically, it could adopt the States' Choice of Voting Systems Act, a bill sponsored in 1999 by Rep. Mel Watt. This bill would return to states the option of using multi-seat districts to elect their congressional delegations. The bill attracted bipartisan support at a 1999 hearing.

City councils also could use full representation systems as indeed some do and have. Two such systems cumulative voting and limited voting have been adopted to settle more than 80 voting rights cases, and ballot measures to enact choice voting won some 45 percent of the vote in San Francisco in 1996 and Cincinnati in 1991.

The most dramatic recent example of the impact of full representation at a local level comes from Amarillo, Texas. In May 2000, Amarillo used cumulative voting for the first time to elect

members of its school board as a means to settle a voting rights lawsuit involving the Mexican-American Legal Defense and Education Fund (MALDEF), League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC), and the NAACP. Blacks and Latino/as in Amarillo together make up a quarter of the city's population, but no Black or Latino/a candidate had won a seat on the school board in decades. Cumulative voting had an immediate impact. Both a Black candidate and Latino candidate won seats with strong support in their respective communities, voter turnout increased sharply over the previous school board election, and all parties in the voting rights settlement expressed satisfaction with the new system.

Looking further back, choice voting was used to elect the New York City Council in the La Guardia era. Over the course of five elections, choice voting turned the Tammany Hall monopoly into a vibrant multi-party system that also elected the city's first black councilmember, Adam Clayton Powell. The Democratic Party machine eventually used anti-leftist sentiment to win repeal in 1947, and immediately restored control over the elections.

The elements of the pro-reform coalition are coming together. National groups recently endorsing proportional representation include the Sierra Club, US PIRG, Alliance for Democracy, and NOW, while state affiliates of Common Cause and the League of Women Voters support IRV legislation. The League of Women Voters is conducting national studies of voting system reform, as are four state League chapters. The NAACP, the ACLU, and other civil rights groups are studying alternative voting systems as a means to preserve minority representation in the upcoming round of redistricting.

This year’s presidential and congressional races have highlighted the need to reform our voting system. A record number of people abstained from voting, liberals and progressives bitterly attacked each other, few House races were competitive, and control of the House hinged on 20 or 30 seats on which the parties spent enormous sums of money. Full representation systems and instant runoff voting address all of these democratic maladies in profound ways that other reforms like campaign finance reform do not. Let’s hope the legacy of the 2000 election is further growth in the electoral reform coalition rather than growing resignation and declining voter turnout.