

Proportional Voting Gives More Fair Representation

BY JOHN B. ANDERSON

Guest Observer

I began my first term in the U.S. House of Representatives in 1961, 50 years ago and right before a new round of legislative redistricting.

Habits are hard to break, and I still find myself closely observing redistricting. With mapmakers again carving safe seats for one incumbent or another in state after state, it's increasingly clear to me that we must replace winner-take-all rules with proportional voting to put power over representation where it belongs — with voters.

My Congressional district in Illinois was solidly Republican. In 1980, I left not only the seat but the Republican Party to pursue my bid for president as an Independent. More Americans than ever have joined me in leaving the traditional parties.

We may not be affiliated with any party, but technology has created new forms of association. Where you live is important, but geography is rarely your dominant interest.

In our multifaceted, mobile and interconnected world, social networks can be as valid a community as one's neighborhood. But winner-take-all, single-Member districts make where we live more important than what we think —

and force us into increasingly rigid party boxes.

Multi-Member districts with proportional voting would better accommodate our new reality by allowing like-minded voters to pool votes together to win a fair share of representation. The concept is grounded in American history. Until 1980, for example, I voted in elections for the Illinois House of Representatives with cumulative voting.

On our ballot, voters had three votes to distribute among candidates for three seats. Voters using their option to give all three votes to one candidate were able to prevent majorities from winning all representation. As a result, nearly every district had both Democratic and Republican Representatives.

A more sophisticated system called choice voting is used in cities such as Minneapolis and allows voters to rank candidates in order of preference.

These American forms of proportional voting are candidate-based and require a higher threshold of support to win than party-based forms of proportional voting associated with small parties and parliamentary systems in Europe.

In addition to curbing the partisan excesses of winner-take-all democracy, proportional voting makes it easier to balance the goals of fair redistricting and mi-

Redistricting Maps Have More Effect Than Voters

ANDERSON, from Page 24

nority voting rights. It has been adopted by a growing number of cities, including Amarillo, Texas, and Peoria, Ill., to comply with the Voting Rights Act.

It represents well the spirit of the Voting Rights Act that I proudly voted for in 1965. The civil rights era was a time of

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broadening democracy for more Americans and ultimately resulted in changing electoral structures to provide more chances for racial minorities to win representation.

But within the confines of winner-take-all rules, politicians can twist the law's goals to help their party.

Regardless of where you live or your ethnicity, the single-Member district is indiscriminate in creating safe seats that drive away voters with uncompetitive or uncontested elections.

When going to proportional voting, however, racial minorities need not be geographically concentrated to elect Representatives. We can broaden fair representation, incentives to vote and voter choice for everyone.

I call on my former colleagues to institute proportional voting for Congress by statute, or at least to restore to states the power they once had to try proportional voting for U.S. House elections.

Without change, the disturbing reality is that political maps being drawn today will have more effect on most of our representation in 2020 than any votes we cast in the coming years.

If this sounds dismal, join me in backing proportional voting with its longstanding, constitutionally protected ability of using the ballot to give power to voters.

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