

**Douglas J. Amy. "Making Every Vote Count: The Case for Proportional Representation," in William Grover and Joseph Peschek eds., *Voices of Dissent* 4<sup>th</sup> ed., (New York: Longman, 2002), pp. 266-270.**

*In response to widespread voter apathy and disillusionment in the U.S., professor of politics Douglas Amy offers the alternative of proportional representation. P.R., as it is known, is a reform that would replace our current reliance on a single-member-district system with multimember districts where the candidates who win legislative seats are determined by the proportion of votes a party receives. Our current system is based on a winner-take-all arrangement, where representation is restricted to only those who voted for the winning candidate. For example, if a candidate wins 51 percent of the vote, the 49 percent who voted for someone else do not receive adequate representation. P.R. is by far the most widely used system in the democratic world. Indeed, only the U.S., Canada, and Great Britain cling to what many consider an outdated single-member-district system. Amy contends that the benefits of P.R. are many and include heightened voter interest, higher turnout rates, and a renewed sense that one's vote really counts. Perhaps more importantly, P.R. systems enhance the viability of minor parties whose vote total exceeds some minimum threshold, typically 5 percent of the vote. P.R. thus increases the likelihood that alternative ideas will be included in political debate. For Amy, this expansion of the range of debate would be a most welcome outcome in a nation where our two major parties have a stranglehold on our political lives. What do you make of P.R. as an antidote to this problem of a two-party monopoly? How much do you believe in real competition of ideas?*

Americans continue to be disillusioned with politics. Cynicism about candidates and parties runs high, and voter turnout is abysmally low. A number of proposals designed to *revitalize* our elections, including campaign-finance reform and term limits for officeholders, have some support. Another proposed reform also is beginning to win attention: replacing our present winner-take-all system with proportional representation. Political commentators writing in *The Washington Post*, *The New Republic*, *The New Yorker*, *The Christian Science Monitor*, and *USA Today* recently have endorsed this proposal. In our current system, voters in, say, a Congressional district within a state or a ward within a city elect only one representative. The candidate who wins the most votes is elected (except in the few close races that call for runoff elections). Political scientists refer to this as a "single-member-district system."

Proportional representation (p.r.), on the other hand, is based on multimember districts. Instead of one member's being elected from each district, p.r. (as its proponents refer to it) features much larger districts, from which several people—say, five or ten—are elected at one time. The proportion of votes that a party receives determines which candidates win the seats. For example, in a ten-member district, if the Democratic candidates won 50 percent of the vote, they would get five of the ten seats. If the Republican candidates won 30 percent, they would get three seats. And if candidates from Ross Perot's new Independence Party won the other 20 percent of the vote, they would get the remaining two seats.

Within each party, the candidates receiving the most votes would be elected. That is, the Democrats, the Republicans, and the Independence Party might each have nominated ten candidates, but only the five most-popular Democrats, the three most-popular Republicans, and the two most-popular Independence Party nominees would get seats.

Grassroots groups in several states now are organizing to ask voters to adopt proportional representation for local elections. Leaders of many alternative parties, including the Libertarians and various pro-environment parties, known collectively as "the Greens," also are pushing for a change to p.r. And experts specializing in voting rights, including the University of Pennsylvania law professor Lani Guinier—who lost her chance to be Assistant Attorney General for Civil Rights when controversy flared over her views on the issue—have concluded that proportional representation would be the best way to give voters from minority groups fair representation. Proportional representation might seem strange to many Americans. But, in fact, our system of single-member districts is at odds with those in the vast majority of Western democracies. They use proportional representation and see American-style elections as outmoded and unfair. Most of Western Europe uses p.r. and, except for Ukraine and Belarus, all of the emerging democracies in Eastern Europe and in the former Soviet Union have chosen p.r. over our form of elections. The United States, Canada, and Great Britain are the only Western democracies that continue to cling to winner-take-all arrangements.

Electoral scholars such as Arend Lijphart of the University of California at San Diego and Pippa Norris of the

University of Edinburgh have pointed out that the single-member-district system of elections has been on the wane worldwide because it is seen to have a number of serious drawbacks. It routinely denies representation to large numbers of voters, produces legislatures that fail to reflect accurately the views of the public, discriminates against third parties, and discourages voter turnout. All of those problems can be traced to a fundamental flaw in the system: Only those who vote for the winning candidate get any representation of their views. The other voters—who may make up 49 percent of the electorate in a district—get no representation. We are all familiar with this problem. If you are a Democrat in a predominantly Republican district or a Republican in a Democratic one, you are shut out by our current election system. Under the single-member-district system, we may have the right to vote—but we don't have the equally important right to be represented.

To make matters worse, this denial of representation at the district level often produces distortions in representation in state legislatures and in Congress. Parties often receive far more (or far fewer) seats than they deserve. For example, in the 1994 elections for the U.S. House of Representatives, the Democrats won 42 percent of the vote in Iowa but none of the state's five seats in the House. In Washington State, Democrats won almost 50 percent of the vote but received only 22 percent of the House seats. Americans have become used to this kind of political injustice, but citizens in most other democracies are not willing to put up with it.

Proportional representation has been widely adopted because it avoids an outcome in which some people win representation and the rest are left out. Recently, New Zealand and Japan joined the list of countries moving to a p.r. system, in large part because of the realization that their old system did not fairly represent all political groups. Under P.R., no significant groups are denied representation. Even member of political minorities, who may constitute only 10 to 20 percent of the voters, are able to win some seats in multi-member districts. (Most countries that use p.r. stipulate that a party must win at least 4 or 5 percent of the vote to receive any seats in the legislature. The goal is to prevent the election of representatives from very small, extremist parties, which could lead to legislative gridlock.)

In a p.r. system, nearly everyone's vote counts: From 80 to 90 percent of the voters actually elect someone, compared with 50 to 60 percent in most U.S. elections. The system also insures that legislatures will accurately reflect the popularity of the various parties. If a party receives 40 percent of the vote, it will get 40 percent of the seats.

The unfairness of winner-take-all elections and the advantages of proportional representation are particularly obvious when we consider the situation of third parties in the United States. Voters are increasingly dissatisfied with the offerings of the two major parties, and recent surveys indicate that more than 60 percent of Americans would like to see other parties emerge to challenge the Democrats and Republicans.

Some alternatives are already available: the new Independence Party and other minor parties, such as the Libertarians, the Greens, and the Rainbow Coalition. But under our current rules, none of them stands a realistic chance of electing any candidates at any level of government.

Winner-take-all elections require candidates to receive a majority or plurality of the vote to win, and minor-party candidates simply cannot overcome that barrier. Supporters of third parties know that they must either waste their vote by casting a ballot for a candidate who cannot win; vote for the lesser of two evils between the major-party candidates; or not vote at all. In short, single-member districts are rigged against minor parties, and unfairly protect the major parties from competition.

With proportional representation, minor parties would quickly become more viable—needing only 10 to 20 percent of the vote to elect candidates. A truly competitive multiparty system would give American voters what they want: a much greater variety of choices at the polls. Offering citizens more choices would encourage higher levels of voting, because people could more easily find a candidate or party they could support enthusiastically. Voters also would know that their votes will not be wasted. In countries using proportional representation, voters typically turn out at rates of 80 to 90 percent, compared with 50 percent or less in the United States. Some of this difference is attributable to easier registration procedures and weekend or holiday voting. However, as Andre Blais of the University of Montreal and R. K. Carty of the University of British Columbia have shown, p.r. is another significant cause of higher turnout in countries that use it.

A multiparty system also would insure that legislative bodies at the city, state, and national levels represent the variety of political perspectives that exist in the electorate. Our society is becoming more politically heterogenous, and yet our legislatures are made up of members of the same old Republican and Democratic Parties. Some of our widespread political malaise might disappear if we had policy-making bodies that reflected the diverse perspectives of the electorate. More-representative legislatures would foster more-exciting and

broader political debate and would inject new ideas into decision making.

Another major advantage of proportional representation is in the area of voting rights. Lani Guinier and other voting-rights experts have argued that p.r. would be the best solution to the continuing problem of insuring fair representation for racial and ethnic minorities in this country. Currently, supporters of voting rights are concerned because the Supreme Court recently cast doubt on the constitutionality of creating special minority-dominated districts. They have been the main avenue by which minorities have increased their representation in Congress over the past few decades. If we abandon this approach, how can we avoid going back to white-dominated districts, in which minority candidates have little or no chance of being elected?

The way out of this situation is to realize that it exists only if we must use single-member, winner-take-all districts, where the placement of district lines determines whether whites or members of minority groups will be elected in a particular district. The solution is to use proportional representation. Then it doesn't matter if African Americans are a minority in a white district—they can still elect their share of representatives. Proportional representation would insure fair representation for both whites and members of minority groups, without creating special districts.

But can we be sure that proportional representation would really result in these positive changes? The actual impact of political innovations is notoriously difficult to predict, of course. However, p.r. is not a new and untried idea; it has a long track record in other Western democracies. Vernon Bogdanor, a political scientist at Oxford University, has shown that virtually all of the countries using p.r. enjoy high voter-turnout rates, vigorous multiparty competition, and fair representation for political, ethnic, and religious minorities. And no movement exists in any of these countries to trade in p.r. for American-style elections.

Proportional representation's record in other countries also serves to dispel the myth that adopting such a system would result in legislatures racked by conflict and plagued by gridlock. Most legislatures in countries using proportional representation are ruled by a coalition of parties, and although some people fear that these coalitions are liable to be unstable and to lead to weak and unproductive government, the reality is that almost all countries using p.r. have enjoyed stable coalition governments—some lasting for decades. And these coalition governments commonly pass legislation far more efficiently than our Congress does.

A few countries, notably Italy and Israel, have had trouble with unstable coalitions. But both of these countries use extreme forms of proportional representation. Israel, for example, allows any party that gets more than about 1 percent of the vote to win seats in its parliament, which sometimes has meant that more than a dozen parties are represented in the Knesset. However, most other countries use more moderate forms of p.r., which set a higher threshold—often 5 percent—and result in fewer parties' electing representatives. Germany has a 5-percent threshold, producing a workable legislature of representatives from three to five parties. This moderate form of P.R. is what proponents are advocating for the United States.

In this country, proportional representation would be easiest to implement at the local level, where modifying a city charter is usually all that would be necessary. Citizens in several cities—including Seattle and Eugene, Ore.—recently have gathered signatures calling for referenda that, if approved by voters, would establish a p.r. system for their city-council elections. A similar referendum in Cincinnati nearly passed in 1991, receiving 45 percent of the vote.

Proportional representation also is feasible for Congressional elections. The Center for Voting and Democracy in Washington, D.C., has developed plans for Georgia and North Carolina that demonstrate how easy it would be to create multimember districts for U.S. House elections. Such plans would not require a constitutional amendment. All that would be needed is the repeal of a 1967 federal law requiring House members to be elected from single-member districts. This law originally was passed not to prevent elections using p.r., but to stop the growing use in the South of multimember districts that did *not* use proportional representation—which allowed the white majority to win all the states' Congressional seats. Rep. Cynthia McKinney, Democrat of Georgia, recently introduced a bill to repeal this law and allow states to use proportional representation in Congressional elections. In fact, with the approval of the Department of Justice under the Voting Rights Act, some states already are using p.r. in local elections; in most cases, minority groups then have been able to elect their fair share of representatives.

The debate about proportional representation is just beginning in this country, but it is an idea whose time has come. If we want our elections to be fairer and more democratic, and if we want voting to become a more powerful and meaningful political act, we should take a long and careful look at this proposed reform.