

Voice for Democracy

Newsletter of Californians for Electoral Reform

Feb. 2013

Why Republicans Need IRV... as We All Do!

A CONSERVATIVE VIEW

by Joe Kemece

Failed Presidential Elections

Bill Clinton became President of the United States after 57% of the voters voted *against* him in 1992.

It seemed undemocratic that such a thing could happen in the greatest democracy in the world.

That election sparked my interest in solutions to the problem. The use of Ranked Choice Ballots (RCB), combined with an Instant Runoff Vote (IRV) until a 50% majority is achieved is a solution that can help restore our democracy.

While the spoiler in 1992 was Ross Perot, with 19% of the vote, other recent presidential spoilers or potential spoilers have been John Anderson (7%) and Ralph Nader (2.7%). So the problem is truly bipartisan as it affects both major parties as well as third parties. Considering the effects of using plurality voting to award Electoral College votes at the state level, Pat Buchanan (0.42%) and Harry Browne (0.36%) were also potential spoilers in the 2000 presidential election.

Two years after the presidential election failure of 1992 and its immediate consequences, voters reacted by electing Republicans to control both houses of Congress for the first time in 40 years. As a result, Republicans were able to force Clinton to compromise on a balanced budget and welfare reform. But we must remember that it was the shortcomings of our current plurality voting system that created the problem in the first place.

Before 1996, no Democrat since Franklin Roosevelt had been elected to two presidential terms. Yet Ross Perot's third-party candidacy again helped Clinton win reelection with less than majority support from voters.

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Does Your Democracy Represent the Will of the People?

A PROGRESSIVE VIEW

by Cat Woods

Most people give some lip service to democracy – usually as an undefined virtue of a free society. Few people consider that democracy has *standards*. Holding an election does not in itself qualify as democratic. Not only can elections fail to accurately reflect the will of voters; they can be set up to actively prevent that possibility in myriad ways – from controlling access to the ballot, through unfair and unrepresentative voting systems, to fraudulent counting of votes.

When a popular candidate fails to win an election, activists will start to give attention to the latter possibility of fraud. What they tragically ignore are the more systemic ways that elections are rigged to prevent representative outcomes. This article addresses two ways that our current voting system prevents representative results by undermining two basic standards of a democratic system: fair representation and majority rule.

Fair representation means that different viewpoints “get a seat at the table.” It applies to legislative bodies of government such as Congress, state legislatures, or city councils. Different viewpoints should be represented in proportion to the support they have among the people. For example, if a decision-making body has five seats, a viewpoint that has 1/5 of the popular support should be represented in one seat; a view with 2/5 support should be represented in two seats; and so on. This is the basic principle of representation: a representative body should reflect the population it is purporting to represent. If representation is not proportional to the population, then it is not representative. In other words, without proportional representation, “elected representative” is a misnomer.

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This edition presents perspectives on proportional representation from various political viewpoints. The opinions expressed in these articles are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the positions of CfER.



PROGRESSIVE VIEW (CONTINUED)

Majority rule means that decisions should be supported by more than half of the people. If possible, a lot more than half, but definitely not less than half. Ensuring that decisions have widespread support is the very essence of democracy – its reason for being. To approve decisions made on behalf of a society, you check that most of the people agree with that decision. If not, you do not have a democracy or a free society; you have a society where most people are ruled by a few people, an oligarchy.

Democracy is a better system because it is supposed to serve more people. It is preferable not because it always results in the best decisions or because it can never be manipulated. It is preferable because it is the most *fair* system. We forfeit our individual ability to control larger decisions – and thus risk losing – in order to have a fair decision-making system accessible to everybody. We sometimes put up with poor decisions through such a system, because we know it also allows us to implement good choices that have majority support. To work towards any worthwhile goal, we then always have the same fair procedure: persuade a majority of the people.

Our current voting system purports to be democratic without ensuring either basic principle of democracy. Instead of fair representation – an equal chance for our views to have a seat at the table – we have legislatures composed of “representatives” from single-member districts through a system that represents geography instead of human beings, boundaries on maps instead of the will of the people. This failure encourages competitive gerrymandering between those who draw boundary lines to maximize representation of one view or another. The solution is proportional representation through simultaneous election of multiple representatives from larger districts. Proportional representation can be implemented through a variety of methods, but what is essential to remember is that it provides more accurate representation of the will of the people in the legislative bodies of government.

Instead of majority rule, most elections in the U.S. employ plurality voting – whoever gets the most votes wins. Candidates can therefore win with the support of less than half of the voters. Worse, this leads to widespread pressure to limit consideration to only two candidates out of fear of “spoiling” when a majority constituency splits its vote and loses. Two-round runoffs do not solve this problem. If the majority constituency splits between more candidates than a minority constituency, then the two candidates who make the runoff may, together, represent less than half of the voters. In a 2002 runoff election, French voters were forced to choose between a

conservative candidate and an ultra-right candidate who, together, represented little more than a third of the voters, prompting the bleak campaign slogan “Vote for the Crook, not the Fascist.”

Ranked voting ensures that the winner has majority support through a one-election solution. Voters simply rank the candidates in order of preference. Their ballots thus serve as instructions for casting their vote as one candidate at a time is eliminated until one candidate achieves majority support. This is equivalent to running a series of runoff elections within one election, coining the term “instant runoff voting” (IRV). It ensures majority rule without “spoilers” or risk of one’s vote serving one’s “greater evil.”

Californians for Electoral Reform (CfER) is dedicated to promoting proportional representation and ranked voting in public elections. The organization takes a neutral view on *why* these issues are important and welcomes supporters from the whole spectrum of political opinion. I personally have always considered fair representation, majority rule, and all democratic standards to be matters of justice and therefore progressive issues. I have even sometimes railed at CfER for failing to promote this line of argument to the public and neglecting possible alliances with progressive groups.

The greater tragedy by far is how few progressives recognize these democratic issues as central to all of their struggles. Although one can find thousands of activists to decry war, economic injustice, lack of adequate health care, loss of civil rights, and all manner of public policies where governments misrepresent the will of the people, precious few recognize the central mechanism by which these policies are set: subversion of fair representation and majority rule through restricted access to the ballot and unrepresentative voting systems. §



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CONSERVATIVE VIEW (CONTINUED)

The fact is that in a three-person race, it is possible for a president to be elected with just 34% of the vote, even though 66% of the country voted against the winner. Even worse, in our democracy most people think we have a majority voting system for president, so most don't think there is a problem at all.

House and Senate

The House and Senate races have often been impacted adversely when there were more than two candidates. Just like in the presidential contests, both Democrats and Republicans have lost races due to spoilers.

Of more recent concern for the Republican Party has been the advent of the Tea Party. When a viable Tea Party candidate competes against both a Republican and a Democrat, almost always the Democrat wins.

Third-party votes

The current system makes it virtually impossible for minor parties to ever win. Many feel that at worst they are only wasting their vote if their preferred third-party candidate does not win. But it is much worse than that. Their vote is in effect a vote for their opposite ideology. RCB + IRV allows such a person to vote their conscience with a first choice and still use a second or third choice to form a majority that best reflects that voter's ideology.

Primaries

Even the primaries are flawed. Often, the candidate that many think is the weakest survives, while the stronger candidates beat themselves up. Many Republicans felt John McCain and Mitt Romney were not the best choice. Indeed, if there are 11 candidates in a primary and 10 of them are similar and split 90% of the vote with 9% each, one oddball could win with only 10% of the vote.

Current Situation

While many local elections in the United States use runoff elections, those are also problematic. Often the runoff elections are extremely expensive, time consuming, and have a very low voter turnout that creates even more questions of true majority representation.

All this leads to a great deal of voter apathy, creating low voter turnout. So our current system gives us:

- 1) Low voter turnout for elections; 2) Spoiled elections, with the majority ideology losing to the opposite ideology; 3) No chance for a third party to win; and,
- 4) Expensive runoffs with lower voter participation.

Of course we also have the newly implemented top-two system, but that has so many problems that they cannot be addressed here.

The Answer

Using ranked choice ballots with IRV to produce majority winners will help solve these problems.

With ranked choice ballots, a voter can specify a first choice and two or more backup choices in order of preference. With IRV, a person's vote always counts for that person's most preferred candidate out of all the candidates that are still in the running.

Why Not?

This should not be a partisan issue, as it has impacted both major parties over time, and both parties should have a desire for fair voting. As a Republican, I am surprised that Republicans seem the most adverse and afraid of IRV, since it appears they have recently been negatively impacted more often than Democrats. One possible fear is that a third-party may emerge victorious. But any party should be confident enough in the strength of their ideology to ultimately win.

However, I am even more surprised that the press has also been very hostile to IRV. The press ignores that IRV gives more choice to voters to express their true conscience, without the danger of their vote going to their opposite ideology.

The press often states that IRV makes voting too complicated because voters have to make all available choices, and thus have to learn more about all the candidates in order to rank them. But this is not true, since a voter is free to mark only one choice. Also, the strategic voting that is encouraged by plurality elections can impose an even bigger informational burden on voters.

The press has also given misleading coverage about the problem of exhausted votes, votes that do not count for a candidate in every elimination round because all of the marked choices have been eliminated. Using voting equipment that allows voters to mark more backup choices can reduce this effect. However about half of IRV's exhausted votes occur because some voters choose not to mark all of the available choices, which is their option. Also, plurality elections typically have more exhausted votes and separate runoffs create exhausted voters. So even with a three-choice limit, IRV helps reduce the problem of exhausted votes rather than creating the problem.

Implementing IRV may mean that some counties will have to upgrade or replace voting equipment that was not designed for ranked ballots. However this one-time cost is offset by the lower costs of avoiding expensive runoffs and the fact that counties often have to purchase replacement equipment anyway. §



President's Letter

by Steve Chessin, President

I am going to keep this short because we have two excellent articles, from two different perspectives, on the importance of IRV and PR, and they need the room. Joe Nemece is active on the right and Cat Woods is active on the left. While they probably disagree on almost every other political issue, they agree on the need for the electoral reforms espoused by CfER.

The November elections in San Francisco and Oakland were successful for us in two respects. Because preliminary IRV/RCV tallies were run election night, the public immediately knew which elections were close and which ones weren't; there was no controversy attributed to the use of IRV itself. Secondly, it appears that we have retained our narrow pro-IRV majorities on the San Francisco Board of Supervisors and the Oakland City Council.

Sacramento voted against establishing an elected Charter Commission, which is too bad, because our own Paula Lee finished eighth and would have been on the 15-member commission.

I have been invited to give a talk on proportional representation and cumulative voting to the Anaheim Citizens Advisory Committee on Elections and Community Involvement. My talk will be the evening of January 31st; the video will be posted at www.anaheim.net/articlenuw2222.asp?id=4957.

Finally, I want to call your attention to the cartoon on this page. I hope you enjoy it as much as I did. §

Election Update

by Michael Latner

As CfER warned, despite the intent of recent reforms the general election results indicate that distortions caused by the existing system were unaffected (if not amplified) by the new districts created by the Citizens Redistricting Commission, and the new elections under the "Top-Two" primary system.

In state Assembly races, Democrats garnered 58% of the vote but won 69% of seats. In 25% of districts, voters were offered only one party's candidate(s). Only three of 80 districts had a minor party or independent candidate. Almost all incumbents were re-elected.

What these "reforms" accomplished was to clearly demonstrate the need for proportional representation. §



Women and PR

by Steve Chessin

The cartoon above (copyright Joel Pett, reprinted with permission) appeared in the November 13th, 2012, issue of the Lexington Herald-Leader, as well as many other papers owned by the McClatchy Company (including the Sacramento Bee, where Board member Paula Lee spotted it). According to Mr. Pett, it was inspired by the gains women made in the 2012 election, increasing their representation in the Senate to 20% (up from 17%) and in the House to 17.9% (up from 17.2%). (Compare with the so-called Year of the Woman elections in 1992, when women in the Senate went from 3% to 7% and in the House from 6.2% to 10.3%.)

While Mr. Pett was familiar with the phrase "proportional representation," he apparently did not realize that it applies to a family of electoral systems that produce that result. Almost every country that has a higher percentage of women in their legislatures uses a proportional representation (PR) electoral system. Indeed, Carrie Chapman Catt, the founder of the League of Women Voters, was a strong proponent of PR, and at the League's second annual convention in 1921 pointed to all the European countries that had women in their legislatures due to their use of PR.

Mr. Pett's cartoon helps bring the phrase "proportional representation" into the mainstream in the United States, making our work a little bit easier. For that, he is in the running for one of the 2013 Wilma Rule Memorial Awards. §

[Source of percentages
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Women_in_the_United_States_House_of_Representatives]



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About CfER . . .

Californians for Electoral Reform (CfER) is a statewide citizens' group promoting election reforms that ensure that our government fairly represents the voters. We are a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization with members from across the political spectrum. Since our founding in May of 1993, our numbers have grown from about two dozen to hundreds of members participating in local chapters across California.

OUR ELECTORAL SYSTEM IS IMPORTANT

The method by which we vote has dramatic consequences, and nearly one third of the state's electorate consistently goes without a representative that speaks for them in Sacramento. The choice of electoral system can determine whether there will be "spoilers" or vote-splitting effects, majority sweeps of representation on city councils, or pervasive negative campaigning. The choice of electoral system determines whether minority perspectives or racial and ethnic minority groups receive fair representation or get shut out of the process entirely.

CfER IS THE LEADING ADVOCACY GROUP FOR THESE REFORMS IN CALIFORNIA

CfER works for legislation that would allow cities and counties to adopt voting methods that allow people to rank their preferences when they vote. CfER also works with activists in its local chapters to enact fair election methods in cities and counties across the state.

For more information visit www.cfer.org/aboutus

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