

Eron Lloyd  
fairelectionspa@gmail.com  
**Fair Elections PA**  
*PA Governor's Task Force on Election Reform Testimony*

*April 14, 2005*

### **Modernizing Our Electoral Methods**

To its credit, this commission has carefully examined almost every aspect of the action of voting with the hope of improving this fundamental citizen right. For that I sincerely commend you all. At the same time, I feel that I cannot allow this discussion of election reform to come to a close without bringing up the often ignored other half of the election process: counting the votes and distributing representation. Much of the effort to improve voting will ultimately fail if attention is not given to the methods used to count those votes and determine the results.

Here in PA, as in other states, we utilize an 18<sup>th</sup> century election method known as "Winner Take All" to determine the winners of public elections. It is the oldest and most basic method used in democratic elections: candidates with the highest vote totals (a plurality) win, while the rest simply lose. Of electoral methods, it is also the worst. It routinely fails to produce a majority winner, which is a fundamental criteria of a democracy. It causes nearly half of all votes to be wasted, and distorts representation of the political majority and minorities, including racial minorities, women, independents and third-party supporters. It reduces political competition in many contests, and where races are competitive, campaigning becomes terribly negative as well as expensive. The use of single member districts and Winner Take All leads to gerrymandering and ugly partisan battles. This negativity leads to further drops in voter participation and engagement. Winner Take All is the most dangerous threat to American democracy, and makes losers of us all.

The good news is that it doesn't have to be that way, and Pennsylvania should become a leader in the movement away from Winner Take All. Many other established democracies such as Ireland, Germany, and New Zealand benefit from use of more modern electoral methods. In fact, both Afghanistan and Iraq now have more democratically representative forms of government than the U.S. It is time for us Americans to boldly pursue a more democratic system for ourselves. Pennsylvania already has a little-known head-start that comes in the form of County Commissioner races. The PA Constitution already requires the use of Limited voting, a form of semi-proportional representation, where you vote for less than the number of available seats for an office. What this does is ensure that in each 3-seat district, the second-largest party is always ensured some representation. Because of this, the precedent for fair and representative electoral methods has already be established with the support of the public and political parties. What we need to do now is improve upon it.

For legislative bodies such as the General Assembly, city and borough councils, school boards and other multiseat offices, the state should move to Choice voting. Choice voting is a form of proportional representation that ensures the maximum amount of voters are effectively represented in the list of winning candidates by transferring votes of both candidates that cannot meet a threshold and candidates that exceed it. This is done by having voters rank the slate of candidates and then transferring their votes through the choices in order of preference, based on the success or failure of each candidate until the votes are exhausted. Choice voting is currently used in Cambridge, MA and was also used in New York City, Cincinnati, Cleveland, Toledo, and Boulder.

Offices currently using At-large forms of Winner Take All such as school board and township supervisors or commissioners are already prepared to move to Choice voting. Other offices such as city council and the General Assembly would have to convert to "superdistricts" to provide for Choice voting. The problem with our current form of single member districts is that while representation is

tightly coupled to geography, we group ourselves politically. All voters in the same district cannot possibly have their political—or even geographic—interests represented by the same person.

Superdistricts are the solution to ensuring proportional representation of more people in each district, and can be apportioned to sizes that still ensure some measure of geographic representation. For example, the General Assembly is comprised of 50 state Senate seats and 203 state Representative seats, all in single member districts. In a move to superdistricts and Choice voting, the state House could be segmented into 29 7-seat districts. Assuming each House superdistrict is based on an estimated voting-age population of 364,000, a candidate would need 45,501 votes (12.5%) to be elected using the standard threshold formula of  $(\text{potential votes} / (\text{number of seats} + 1) + 1)$ . If they either exceed or cannot reach this threshold their remaining votes are transferred to the voters' next preferences. This prevents wasted votes on both ends and ensures that votes are as effective as possible.

So what is all this complexity worth? First of all, it would ensure wider representation of various political groups in each superdistrict. No one would be stuck in a district where only one dominant group is represented, even if a majority of the people don't support that representative. This would increase competition for seats, make representatives more responsive to constituents while in office, improve campaigns, increase voter participation and encourage broader political coalitions. It would also completely eliminate gerrymandering, which is used by politicians to pick their constituents instead of vice-versa.

In addition to Choice voting, PA should consider the use of Instant Runoff Voting for single seat, executive offices such as Mayor and Governor. Candidates are ranked just like they are in Choice voting and votes are transferred if top preferences are defeated, in a similar way to championship sport tournaments. IRV is gaining steam across the country, recently being adopted in San Francisco, CA and Burlington, VT. It shares many of benefits of Choice voting while ensuring the winning candidate has a majority of the votes. IRV could especially improve candidate competition and voter participation through it's use in primaries, where we're seeing hardly any challenges to incumbents and single digit turnout levels.

I encourage the commission to call for further exploration of electoral method modernization in the final report. The State Department can also play an important role by supporting local implementations of Choice and Instant Runoff Voting for municipal elections and ensuring new election equipment and procedures are in place to support these methods. No changes to the Constitution are required for these local experiments, which could become the beginning of widespread support for local and state reform once successful small migrations are achieved. Remember, without careful examination of our electoral methods, no amount of election reform will stop the steadily decline of our democracy.

#### *Additional Information:*

- The Center for Voting and Democracy: <http://www.fairvote.org>
- Steven Hill, *Fixing Elections*. (New York: Routledge, 2002)
- Doug Amy, *Real Choices/New Voices*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002)
- Doug Amy, *Behind The Ballot Box*. (Westport: Praeger Publishers, 2000)
- Proportional Representation Library: <http://www.mtholyoke.edu/acad/polit/damy/prlib.htm>