# How Our Cities Can Constructively Resolve Their Critical Problems

BY SOL ERDMAN

Many cities are in crisis. Tax revenues have plunged, while economically stressed city residents need more government services than they have in decades, forcing cities to make painful choices. How can cities bridge their ideological differences to find intelligent, cost-effective solutions to their severest problems?

Cities can learn valuable lessons from ideological adversaries *outside* of government who have negotiated fair, pragmatic agreements on highly divisive issues. These episodes suggest how cities could manage their critical problems more constructively. A key step would be for cities to substantially enhance the relationship between each city council member and his or her constituents.

## Making Optimal Decisions

To see what that stronger bond would entail, consider some ideological adversaries who have crafted unusually cost-effective policy decisions. One case potentially affecting the entire country occurred in the mid-1990s when the heads of seven major environmental groups, the CEOs of six top corporations, and five members of President Bill Clinton's cabinet met repeatedly over two and a half years to try to thrash out their long-standing differences over environmental policy. Despite their history of animosity and conflict, the members of this group—called the Council on Sustainable Development—unanimously agreed on a long-range plan that would resolve the major environmental controversies of their day, at an equitable cost to all parties. Their plan's main theme was that the government should require industries to clean up the environment far more thoroughly than to date, while also letting the companies largely decide *how* to meet those tougher standards. Businesses could then use their ingenuity to find the most efficient ways to cut pollution, saving the economy an estimated $250 billion per decade.

Each council member then pitched the plan to his or her allies in the outside world. The CEOs won the support of the relevant industry associations. The environmental members obtained endorsements from nearly every environmental group. And the government officials secured backing from the appropriate regulatory agencies.

Even so, Congress never adopted the council's plan as a blueprint for environmental policy. Most lawmakers continue to fight over environmental issues as heatedly as ever.

Another such episode drew nationwide publicity. In June 1997, representatives for attorneys general from forty states, the tobacco companies, and major antismoking groups—all fierce partisans for their own interests—agreed unanimously on a measure to curb teenage smoking. Yet Congress deadlocked over the very same issue.

Other creative problem solvers have met the same fate. Twenty-four representatives from across the political spectrum—assembled by the Center for Strategic and International Studies—developed a comprehensive plan for saving Social Security from bankruptcy while spelling out how the vast majority of Americans could retire with some financial security. More recently, sixteen politically diverse advocates, called the National Commission on Energy Policy, devised a plan for reducing our consumption of foreign oil, at minimal cost. And the Consensus Group consisting of eighteen representatives from the Cato Institute, the Progressive Policy Institute, and other ideologically driven organizations (most on the right, but some clearly from the left and the center), unanimously agreed on a plan for restraining health care costs while boosting quality.

Yet Congress has repeatedly failed to reach agreement on every one of these issues.

At the local level, representatives for stakeholder groups have resolved many issues that politicians

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could not. For instance, in early 1995 Oregon's lawmakers could not resolve a dispute between two state agencies. The Department of Transportation wanted to give counties ample leeway to make rural roads safer, but the Department of Land Conservation and Development insisted on strictly regulating modifications to rural roads.

Unable to iron out their differences, the two agencies approached the groups with the biggest stake in the issue—including the state's environmentalists, its farmers, major businesses, county engineers, and planning directors. The agencies asked each group to pick a spokesperson. These representatives, meeting five times, were able to hammer out a proposal that all of them supported. Their respective groups endorsed the plan as well. Both state agencies gladly accepted the recommendations. So did the Oregon legislature.

Congress itself has admitted that political adversaries outside government can solve problems that officials on the inside cannot. In the Negotiated Rulemaking Act of 1990, Congress allowed representatives for opposing interest groups to draft certain federal regulations. For instance, a federal agency tackling a particularly controversial issue may fear that any proposal the agency comes up with will anger some interest groups enough to file lawsuits blocking the plan. To avoid this kind of fight, the agency can invite every relevant interest group to appoint a spokesperson. If those representatives can agree on a regulation, the agency can adopt it, knowing that all the concerned parties support the decision.

Long-time opponents have used this process to craft cost-effective regulations on nuclear waste, student loans, food safety, public housing, and Medicare payments.

In hundreds of similar stories, politicians could not or would not reconcile their differences. Yet representatives from outside the government tackled the very same issue and negotiated a practical solution that every side accepted.

What is it about these ideological opponents that enabled them to resolve problems that politicians wouldn't?

In most cases, each successful negotiator had a large group of people counting on him or her personally to advance a cause they *all* shared. Each environmental leader at the Council on Sustainable Development spoke for dozens of colleagues and thousands of contributors to their organizations, all intent on protecting the environment. Meanwhile, each corporate CEO spoke for thousands of executives in his industry, all intent on boosting their companies' performance. As a result:

> Each representative felt unrelenting pressure to advance his or her own camp's agenda.
>
> Each spokesperson realized that to make real progress for his or her own camp, he or she had to strike a deal with their long-standing opponents, a deal that would give the other camps involved significant benefits at a cost they could accept.
>
> The representatives collectively realized (eventually) that their best chance to succeed was to negotiate a deal that would yield the greatest total benefits at a justifiable cost, and then parcel out the costs and benefits in a way that all sides could support.
>
> Each representative was then ideally positioned to explain to all the people in his or her camp—in terms compelling to them—how that deal with their long-time enemies would advance their own cause further than any other strategy would.

### A Sharp Contrast with Elected Officials

A typical city council member is in a far more difficult position than the representatives portrayed above. Each lawmaker has to represent thousands of people who *disagree* over nearly every issue. Each legislator speaks for young adults, the middle-aged and senior citizens; blue-collar workers, white-collar workers, business owners, and the unemployed; singles, couples, families, and one-parent households; liberals, conservatives, and most points in between. Each of these groups has its own concerns and interests—which often collide head-on with other groups' concerns and interests.

So, if a lawmaker advocates a detailed solution to a controversial issue, several large blocs of his or her voters are likely to oppose him. Many voters may even want to throw him out of office. The typical lawmaker therefore has strong incentives to avoid proposing intricate solutions to the most divisive issues.

There are, after all, safer strategies for staying in office:

1) A legislator can emphasize uncontroversial issues that residents of his or her district *can* have in common, such as improving the district's parks and roads.
2) To address the city's long-term problems, a lawmaker can advocate measures that seem to handle the subject but that put off the hard decisions into the future.
3) A legislator can also blame the city's severest problems on political opponents—including powerful interest groups, the other party, or the mayor.

These strategies succeed so often because a typical legislator can win reelection just by convincing most voters that his main election opponent is less to be trusted or competent than himself. And it is relatively easy to make that case in vivid terms that voters will remember.

By contrast, imagine any lawmaker trying to convince his district's many thousands of voters—from various age groups, income levels, and family situations—that his scores of decisions on the hardest issues were serving their best interests. To each kind of voter, the legislator would need to justify his major decisions with different reasoning. It would be an impossible task.

So if a lawmaker tries to work out cost-effective solutions to complex local problems, he or she may reap little benefit from it. But if a legislator can pin the blame for the community's long-term problems on his political opponents, he benefits a great deal.

In effect, the prevailing election process often pushes lawmakers to sidestep their community's toughest problems. One former lawmaker, an especially conscientious one, even confided to this writer—in despair—that "we often had an incentive to structure a problem so as to assure failure and, therefore, a good campaign issue [for all of us]."

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### The Role of Voters

Many people accuse U.S. voters of being lazy or irresponsible. But Americans work longer hours than citizens in any other developed country, which suggests most Americans are far from lazy.

Studies in fact show that how voters participate in political life depends on how elections are structured. In his book *Civic Literacy: How Informed Citizens Make Democracy Work* (2002), political scientist Henry Milner observed that, in countries using proportional representation, voters know measurably more about where candidates stand on the issues than American voters do. How has this happened? With most forms of proportional representation, each region ends up electing several representatives covering the political spectrum. A typical voter is therefore virtually guaranteed to obtain at least one representative who shares his or her own political values.

A typical American, however, *cannot* get a representative who shares his or her political values. In each district, after all, every resident—every young single, middle-aged parent, senior citizen, blue-collar worker, teacher, salesperson, manager, conservative, liberal, and moderate—has to share the same representative. Each of these groups has its own needs and expectations. Yet they all have to share the identical spokesperson in local government.

So a typical American cannot possibly get a spokesperson who shares her outlook on the issues that most concern her. A typical voter therefore has little incentive to learn where candidates stand on those issues. For instance, in their 2007 book *Congress and Its Members* Roger Davidson, Walter Oleszek, and Francis Lee note that only one


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voter in ten can cite how his or her representative in Congress has cast a vote on any legislation in the preceeding two years.

Just as troubling, an in-depth survey early in this decade by Northwestern's Medill School of Journalism revealed that only 11 percent of American voters went to the polls mainly because they cared about the candidates one way or the other. The vast majority—more than 80 percent—of Americans who voted said they did so primarily to exercise their civic rights, out of obligation or mere habit. That can explain why most voters know almost nothing about any candidate's track record, including the incumbent's.

A typical incumbent therefore has strong incentives to favor the groups that keep closest track of how he votes. Many lawmakers have, for instance, given public employees lavish pension benefits that their community cannot afford.

How did our cities get into this bind? When the United States began two centuries ago, 80 percent of Americans were farmers, while most of the rest sold goods and services to nearby farmers. The residents of a typical district thus shared very similar concerns. Each town councilman could therefore explain to his voters how his actions were serving their interests, if in fact his actions were. If voters didn't believe him, they could toss him out of office.

But our elections no longer work this way. Voters in any district have divergent views on how their representative should handle the most critical issues. Practically speaking, then, what can voters in any district hold their representative to account for?

## Alternatives to Date

Many cities have tried other types of elections. But the results have not included markedly better policy decisions. Cities have tried three types of change.

### Instant Runoff Voting

San Francisco, Oakland, Minneapolis, and several other cities have adopted instant runoff voting (IRV), whereby each voter gets a preferential ballot on which to rank the candidates—a first choice, second choice, and so on. As a result, most voters feel they have more choices than in standard elections. Also, with IRV, third-party candidates and independents can more easily win seats, while incumbents can more easily lose them.

However, one person still represents all the diverse residents of each district. IRV thereby retains many of the same drawbacks as standard one-winner elections. In the U.S. city that has used IRV the longest, the *San Francisco Chronicle* (2010) has condemned the board of supervisors (equivalent to a city council) for "producing too much small-time drama" while lacking "the thought, expertise . . . vision [or] . . . leadership" necessary to resolve the city's long-term problems.

### At-Large Plurality

Many communities use at-large plurality (ALP) elections, in which candidates run citywide. Each voter then gets as many votes as there are council seats to fill—but has to cast each vote for a different candidate. ALP's supposed advantage is that each council member is more likely to weigh the needs of the whole community, not just one neighborhood.

But each council member still represents scores of interest groups that he or she cannot possibly satisfy. So each legislator still has incentives to avoid hard decisions, and blame major problems on political opponents.

Furthermore, with ALP elections a voter cannot point to one specific person as his or her representative. So if a city council does a poor job, who does the voter hold responsible? The voter might have to scrutinize every council member's track record, which few voters ever do. A typical ALP lawmaker therefore still has incentives to favor the interest groups that pay closest attention to how he votes.

### Single Transferable Vote

In the early 1900s, twenty-two U.S. cities tried a proportional system called the "single transferable vote" (STV), which Cambridge, Massachusetts, still uses. Voters in the twenty-one other cities, though, ended up repealing it. Scholars differ over why. They also disagree over whether STV improved governance. But most voters clearly did not believe it had yielded better government. In Toledo, for instance, the local newspaper blamed STV for "lax

administration." This may be because with STV, as in other at-large elections, a voter does not get a specific representative to hold accountable for policy decisions. (For more detailed analysis, see www.genuinerepresentation.org/stv.)

Yet despite all of the above, some cities have thrived. How? It's often because the mayor gets far more press coverage than any lawmaker, so voters hold the mayor accountable for the city's condition, which spurs the mayor to tackle the hard problems responsibly. Still, even skillful mayors cannot overcome all the negative effects of a city council with incentives to duck or battle endlessly over the hardest issues. Many of the best-run cities have thus neglected long-term problems that will plague them in the years ahead.

### A New Alternative

The environmental leaders and corporate executives who met at the Council on Sustainable Development had clashed over environmental policy for years, yet they negotiated a comprehensive agreement that would have produced substantial benefits for all sides at a reasonable cost.

So, what if each lawmaker were in a similar position as each member of that council? What if each lawmaker had exclusively constituents who shared his or her political agenda?

Each lawmaker would then presumably want to advance the causes that he and his constituents shared. He would therefore need to negotiate practical agreements on the major issues with lawmakers from other camps. Each lawmaker could then explain to his own constituents how those deals were the most realistic way to benefit their own cause.

This scenario may sound overly optimistic, but it is how nearly all of the representatives cited early in this article worked with one another: Each one realized that to make the most progress for his or her cause, he had to negotiate a mutually beneficial deal with his counterparts.

So, would lawmakers do the same if each one got exclusively constituents who shared his or her political priorities?

To help answer this question, suppose we shrink the situation down to a small scale. Say a very small town decides to organize its town council so that each resident will get a representative who shares his or her concerns as closely as possible. For this purpose, the whole town meets in a large hall. Each person who wants a seat on the council hands out copies of his or her platform. Each candidate then moves to a different point in the room. Next, everyone present gather around their favorite candidate. The person running the meeting then turns to the candidate with the smallest group and says something like, "Of the eighteen candidates running for the seven council seats, you have the fewest backers. So I'm going to ask you to drop out of the race. Then, would you and each person gathered around you please make a second choice?" Once all of those people get to their second choices, the moderator turns to the next candidate with the fewest backers and asks her to drop out. She and her supporters go on to their next choices. This process continues until seven candidates are left to fill the seven council seats.

Each townsperson would thereby get a representative closer to him or her politically than in other kinds of elections now in use. Each council member would, in turn, share her constituents' concerns more closely than representatives elected by other methods.

Suppose also that each representative asked her constituents to write down their names and addresses, so she could send them regular reports about her work on the council.

Once the council began to meet, what then? Some members might refuse to budge from their initial positions. But they would then make little headway with the rest of the council and thereby make little progress on their own agendas. So they would have little to report to their constituents.

What then would happen at the next election, when eighteen or so candidates would again be running? Some of those candidates would be able to make a case to voters that they could achieve far more than the council members who had been inflexible. Who, then, would most voters pick as a first choice: (1) a council member who had produced negligible results, or (2) a candidate who spelled out how he or she would make progress on the issues that mattered to those voters?


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That's somewhat like asking, Would workers prefer a union leader who provokes a strike or one who presents a credible plan for negotiating a good contract? Labor-management negotiations, in fact, lead to a strike only 4 percent of the time, according to a Bureau of Labor Statistics survey by Joel Cutcher-Gershenfeld, Thomas A. Kochan, and John Calhoun Wells (1998). Clearly, a vast majority of workers prefer a contract to a strike.

Suppose, then, that each voter could choose a representative as freely as described above. A typical voter would also prefer a spokesperson who could produce solid results on the issues that mattered to the voter—rather than a representative who produced mostly angry rhetoric.

Some representatives might in fact be tempted to shower their voters with government benefits while trying to conceal the costs—as many lawmakers do today.

But voters would be in a very different situation than they are today. If a voter today weighs the pros and cons of a lawmaker's decisions and ends up disapproving, what are the voter's odds of getting a representative more aligned with himself? Very low. Or what if a voter takes the time to figure out how much government programs will eventually cost his or her family and is horrified by what he or she finds? Is the voter likely to get a more responsible representative? Unfortunately not. Understandably, most voters never keep track of what their representative does.

In the election proposed here, though, each voter would get a representative who shared the voter's priorities as closely as was practical. So each voter would have far more reason than now to weigh his or her lawmaker's actions against what other candidates proposed to do. For instance, voters who feared that excessive government spending could harm their future and their children's future would likely elect representatives who vowed to restrain the council's spending and monitor whether they did indeed restrain it.

Some lawmakers might, on the other hand, try to spend tax dollars on their own voters, at the whole community's expense. But lawmakers from other camps would surely push back.

The representatives could even end up squabbling about how to spend the community's money. But if so, most voters would likely be dissatisfied with their own council member. Therefore, at the next election, most voters would pick other candidates as their first choice. In effect, if the council made little progress on the issues that concerned most voters, every council member could be risking his or her seat.

What then would be the incumbents' most reliable strategy for staying in office?

What if they strived to resolve local problems in ways that yielded the most benefits for the most townspeople at the most reasonable cost? Each council member would then be in the best position to show her own voters how those solutions would benefit them as much as they could realistically hope for. Each council member could therefore make a solid case to her constituents that at the next election they should vote for her again.

Would voters accurately assess which solutions were most beneficial? Some voters would have unrealistic expectations that their representative could never fulfill. Some people are built that way, and no election system would change them.

But if elections were organized so that as many voters as possible got a representative they saw as being on their side, what then? Far more voters than now would take the time to evaluate their representative's proposals. Just look at other situations in which people rely on representatives to speak for them, as when labor union leaders bargain with management spokespeople. They craft an agreement that meets both sides' needs at an acceptable cost *and* sell the deal to their respective sides 96 percent of the time. How do they succeed at that task so often?

It's largely because labor and management representatives start out confident that if they can put together a deal that makes sense to the two of them, each will be able to spell out the costs and benefits to his or her own camp. Each can say something like: "This contract isn't what we set out to get, but it's better than our alternatives. Here's how it meets our needs. . . ." And since the people in each camp believe that their spokesperson is on their side, they listen to his evaluation of the costs and benefits.

Likewise, what if each lawmaker shared the same political outlook as his or her constituents? Each lawmaker would have far more confidence than now that if he struck intelligent agreements, most of his constituents would listen to him explain what he'd done and why. And if voters had good reason to believe that their lawmaker shared their concerns, they'd be far more likely to evaluate the costs and benefits of his decisions.

### Real-World Implementation

Still, to make this scenario a reality, we would need to translate the process of voters gathering around candidates into a formal election that any community could use. The goal is for each representative to get constituents who share his or her political values as closely as practical, and vice versa. Here's how any community can create this connection between its citizens and its lawmakers:

1. If a city council has seven or fewer members, the community schedules an election in which all candidates will compete for all council seats in one combined election. If a council has more than seven members, the community is divided into districts with at least four members in each.
2. Candidates get on the ballot by persuading enough voters to sign a petition. The number of signatures required should be set low enough that the total number of candidates running will be at least twice the number of seats. In cities with partisan elections, candidates can also get on the ballot by winning a party's nomination. Each party can nominate several candidates.
3. The election board mails basic information about all the candidates to all registered voters.
4. On Election Day, each voter chooses which candidate is his or her first choice. Since that candidate may not draw enough votes to win a seat, the voter also picks a second choice. In case this candidate doesn't win either, the voter picks a third choice and more if the voter would like. To make those choices, each voter gets a preferential ballot (as in IRV or STV, but the following steps are quite different from those methods). Filled out, a typical ballot might look like the one below.

**BALLOT FOR CITY COUNCIL**

*Please choose which candidate is your first choice, and put a "1" in the box next to his or her name.*

*Then choose which candidate is your second choice, and put a "2" in the box next to his or her name.*

*For your third choice, put the number "3." And so on. You may rank as many candidates as you like.*

| | |
|---|---|
| Robert Adams | [ ] |
| Shana Pierce | [ ***3*** ] |
| Robert Green | [ ***1*** ] |
| Lois Kaplan | [ ] |
| Norman Chen | [ ] |
| Thomas Washington | [ ] |
| Sylvia Hernandez | [ ***2*** ] |
| Steven Gross | [ ] |
| Arthur Houseman | [ ***4*** ] |
| Cynthia Gray | [ ] |
| Philip Kowalski | [ ] |


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5. As in the small town, when the votes are tallied the candidate who drew the fewest first-choice votes is out of the race. All the votes for that candidate go to his voters' second choices. Then the next candidate with the fewest votes is dropped. The votes for her go to her voters' next choices. And so on, until the number of candidates left equals the number of council seats.
6. Each council member then needs a direct line of communication to his or her voters. For this purpose, the election board mails every voter a card that lists the winners. Each voter is asked (but not required) to check off the name of the person he wants to represent him and then mail the card back. Each representative thereby receives her constituents' names and addresses. She can then send them regular reports about her work on the council.
7. Because each voter has substantial freedom to choose his or her representative (in steps 4 and 5), each winner is bound to attract a different number of voters. So, for the process to be fair, each lawmaker's voting power on the council should be proportional to the number of his or her voters. This feature is already in use on several county boards of supervisors in New York State, where each member gets voting power proportional to the number of his or her constituents. More about this feature later.

The potential advantages of this whole process over other election methods include:

- Each voter would get a representative as politically close to himself or herself as is practical.
- Each citizen would thus have far stronger incentives to scrutinize the candidates, to vote and then to hold his or her representative to account for his actions.
- At election time, any voter dissatisfied with his or her representative would have every reason to rank other candidates ahead of that incumbent.
- Each lawmaker would therefore feel more pressure to produce useful results than with other kinds of elections.
- Each lawmaker would thus have a strong incentive to reach constructive agreements with opponents.
- Each lawmaker would understand his or her constituents' needs and concerns better than with other kinds of elections.
- Each lawmaker could therefore explain to her constituents—in terms they could relate to—why she had struck the agreements she did.
- Each lawmaker could in effect be an agent of reality to voters. He could say, "You elected me to do A, B, C, etc. And here's how these agreements meet as many of those objectives as we can realistically get. . . ."

Granted, nowhere in the world does politics work in this way. But nowhere yet does each *individual* representative get constituents who nearly all share his or her political agenda. And nowhere yet does nearly every representative's bid for reelection depend on competing mainly against candidates *near* himself on the political spectrum. So with the above process, both lawmakers and voters would have significantly different incentives than they do elsewhere.

We call this entire process Personally Accountable Representation, or PAR. (For details on how PAR differs from other systems now in use, see www.GenuineRepresentation.org/other-systems.)

One caveat: PAR will not always produce representatives with the most *total* support. Suppose, for instance, that liberal voters somewhat prefer liberal candidate A over liberal candidate B, while conservative voters greatly prefer B over A. With PAR, A would still likely win a seat representing the liberals. To yield winners with the most overall support, some mathematicians advocate systems that would essentially give conservatives equal say with liberals as to who represents the liberals, and so on. But those systems would thereby deprive many voters of the representative who best reflects *their* concerns, undercutting the connection between each lawmaker and his or her constituents. Those systems thus lack the key advantages of PAR. (For more on this issue, see www.GenuineRepresentation.org/preferential.)

### Questions, Doubts, and Answers

*To put PAR into practice, cities with large populations would need to be divided into districts. What number of representatives per district would be optimal?*

The larger the number of representatives, the larger the number of voters who would be satisfied with

their own spokesperson, but also the more extreme some representatives might be.

To see how that would work, suppose that each district had only three lawmakers. Many districts might elect a liberal, a conservative, and a centrist. But some districts might elect two liberals, while others might elect two conservatives. In each case, one of the three main camps would be unrepresented.

And even in districts where all three camps had a spokesperson, some voters would be dissatisfied. For instance, many Republicans who backed John McCain in the 2008 presidential primaries might be discontent if someone like Mike Huckabee ended up being their district's representative on the right. Many backing Huckabee could be dissatisfied with someone like McCain.

So imagine if, instead, each district had as many as nine representatives. The winners could include the equivalent of a McCain, a Huckabee, a Mitt Romney, a Ron Paul, a Michael Bloomberg, a Christy Todd Whitman, a Barack Obama, a Hillary Clinton, and a Dennis Kucinich. The vast majority of voters would likely be content to have a representative among that

However, it would not play out quite that way, because in a preferential election for nine seats it would take less than one-ninth of the votes to win a seat. So the winners would include candidates further on the right and left than any lawmakers are now. Many Americans might consider some of those winners as extremists.

So the right balance may be somewhere in between three and nine representatives per district. Any city that adopts PAR will have to decide for itself.

*No matter how many representatives there were per district, could a typical voter get a representative who shared his or her outlook on most major issues?*

Among Americans who are politically engaged now, most have a favorite columnist or commentator—someone they feel speaks to them and for them—even though they surely disagree with some of his or her stands.

How does this happen? A typical columnist articulates a philosophy or way of thinking that appeals to his or her audience so strongly that they stay loyal, despite some disagreements with him.

A PAR lawmaker would likewise need to articulate a coherent set of values or priorities that would attract a large bloc of voters. He or she would then need to do a good job of advancing those priorities. If so, most of his voters would likely feel that he had represented them well—even if they disagreed with him on some issues.

*If voters could more freely choose their representatives, would most voters choose wisely?*

The following story may help answer that question. In the early 1980s, workers at the Ford Motor Company were known to be the most demoralized in their industry and were producing cars with a reputation for poor quality. So the managers at one plant tried an experiment. They installed a switch at every workstation that let any employee stop the whole assembly line. If a worker saw a defect on any car going by, he or she could halt the line to

> If voters could truly choose who represents them, most voters would put far more thought into that job.

fix the problem. The workers were soon stopping the line more than twenty times a day, far more often than the managers had expected. But most of the halts lasted under thirty seconds. Employee morale soared. Car quality climbed along with it. So the managers deemed the experiment a big success.

The connection to politics? A typical American voter today is like a worker on the *old* Ford assembly line. Whatever a voter does in the polling booth makes no difference that he or she can see. Whatever a typical voter does, he cannot get a representative who shares his strongest beliefs. Understandably, most American voters don't bother to find out where candidates stand on the major issues.


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We need to learn from the Ford experiment by giving voters a real choice. If voters could truly choose who represents them, most voters would put far more thought into that job.

*Most voters will never grasp complex issues in enough depth to be able to evaluate their representative's justification for a deal that requires them to make sacrifices. So wouldn't PAR representatives refuse to sign on to such deals?*

If a representative has constituents who share her values, she is in the best position to explain to them the trade-offs in complex deals. For instance, a union representative is in an ideal position to show workers at a company in trouble how they would benefit by forgoing a wage hike and instead accepting bonuses based on profits. A PAR representative would likewise be in a far better position than representatives today to explain to constituents how they could benefit from creative deals.

*Incumbents will always have the advantages of name recognition, access to campaign contributors, and a government-paid staff. So even with PAR, wouldn't incumbents consistently win reelection?*

With PAR, each voter would have a preferential ballot. The voter would also have many more candidates to choose from than today. So any voter who thought an incumbent had done a mediocre job would have every reason to rank other candidates ahead of incumbents. In cities that have adopted IRV, the incumbent reelection rate has dropped.

*Wouldn't politicians still cater to lobbyists who gave them money?*

Politicians value votes more than money. Most politicians, after all, don't pocket the money from lobbyists. Politicians spend it on campaign advertising that will drum their names into voters' heads. Meanwhile, more than 80 percent of voters know almost nothing about the candidates' track records, including which lobbyists have given them money and how much, even though the data are publicly available. So a politician who sells out to lobbyists has greatly boosted his or her odds of winning reelection.

The most realistic solution is to reverse those odds, by (1) giving voters far more incentives to scrutinize politicians' track records, including whom they have taken campaign contributions from; and (2) enabling voters to easily replace any politician who has sold out to lobbyists.

*With PAR lawmakers having different voting power, wouldn't the most powerful dominate the others?*

Given how PAR ballots are counted (recall the voters in the small town moving from candidate to candidate), lawmakers who won the most votes would usually be on different sides. They wouldn't form a united bloc. Backers of any bill would still have to build a coalition from various camps. Council members adept at building coalitions could wield more influence than the representatives with the most voting power.

*On a five-member city council, couldn't one member obtain majority power?*

It's very unlikely. For instance, if the five most popular presidential candidates in 2008—Obama, Clinton, McCain, Romney, and Huckabee—had all been on the ballot on Election Day, none of them would have won even one-third of the votes. So, in an election with five winners, it's improbable that any winner could amass half the votes. In any event, to ensure that one lawmaker cannot obtain majority power, the candidate elimination process should stop if and when the top-drawing candidate gets close to a majority, say 45 percent. The council could thereby end up larger than originally planned.

*On a seven member council, if two members had a majority, would that be acceptable?*

It would occur rarely. If it did, how would the effects be any different than if the same voters had elected four members of a traditionally elected seven-member council? Nonetheless, if a community wanted to ensure that two lawmakers could not obtain majority power, the candidate elimination process could stop if the two top candidates got close to a majority.

*Has the issue of weighted voting been litigated?*

Multiple times in state and federal courts. Nearly every decision has upheld weighted voting based on population. Some courts have required technical modifications of the process. (For details, see www.GenuineRepresentation.org/litigation.)

*Even with PAR, wouldn't lawmakers still gerrymander districts?*

They'd have far less incentive to. Today, with each district having only one winner, how districts are drawn can largely determine who wins and which groups get power. But if each district had multiple winners and each group of voters got power proportional to its size, how districts were drawn would have much less effect on who won and how power was distributed.

*Even if PAR changed lawmakers' incentives, could they craft intelligent agreements on all the complex issues they have to deal with?*

They could, by using the approach proven to work in other contexts. On some issues, for instance, a council could ask the interest groups most involved to pick representatives who would try to work out a solution. If they succeeded, the council could consider whether to enact the proposals into law.

On other issues, a city council would need to assemble the appropriate representatives from within its own ranks. For instance, to craft tax policy that best served the community, the council could form a committee consisting of one representative from each faction of the council with a particular agenda on taxes.

However, it may often be unclear who belongs in which faction, or who would best represent some factions. In either case, the council could find the most appropriate representatives by holding its own PAR election. The first step would be for each lawmaker who wanted a seat on the committee to publicly post his or her agenda on taxes. Each lawmaker could then fill out a preferential ballot indicating which candidates for the committee he favored first, second, and so on. If the committee chosen in this way hammered out an agreement on taxes, each member would be ideally positioned to win support for the measure from the colleagues who preferred him or her as spokesperson.

*PAR will supposedly motivate voters to keep closer track of their representative. Is that expectation realistic?*

Nearly every person wants to be heard and to matter. The election system that best meets those needs will most strongly motivate voters to participate.

*Can a change as ambitious as PAR actually happen?*

Voters in more than two dozen U.S. cities have opted to try other preferential systems. So if the citizens backing PAR were sufficiently motivated and well organized, they would have good odds of winning their community's support.

*Won't a change as big as PAR have unforeseen effects?*

Probably. So any city that wants PAR's potential benefits will have to take some risk. But in many cities, the current elections virtually guarantee mediocre governance and public disdain for elected officials. A city that adopts PAR, though, could significantly strengthen the bonds between its policymakers and its citizens. Those bonds are essential if our cities are to surmount the growing challenges of these times.

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