

COMING TO AMERICA: AN ANALYSIS OF PROPORTIONAL REPRESENTATION IN THE STATES

KEITH ZIMMERMAN

Abstract

The political tensions of the last decade have caused citizens to question the dominance of the American two-party system and criticize the current method of electing political leaders. The United States is one of the only democracies in the world to resist the adoption of proportional representation systems, which are used around the world to elect legislators and statesman. However, proportional systems—especially the Single Transferable Vote method of casting ballots—have been used in states to varying degrees. This study examines the history of proportional representation around the world and in America, examining its effectiveness as an alternative voting system. The research tentatively suggests that, despite legitimate criticisms, proportional representation could be a viable alternative to the deficient American electoral system.

Introduction

A common complaint among voters in recent elections is the domination of the political process by the two major parties: Democrats and Republicans. A recent Gallup poll asked over a thousand Americans whether the current party system was doing an adequate job, and only 37% agreed with the statement. Over half of those polled suggested that a third party would be a good idea. This is a drastic change from 2012 and 2008, when voters were equally split between the two opinions. In 2003, when the poll was first run, over half of those polled considered the current party system adequate (Jeffrey, 2016). These worrying trends of distrust for the two party system are joined by concern that the electoral system meets the needs of political leaders without requiring them to be responsive to the people, and Congressmen are incentivized to position themselves for re-election rather than fighting for meaningful change (Mayhew, 1974).

These concerns could lead to a reconsideration of our election system. One potential change that some scholars have proposed entails introducing an electoral system of proportional representation. While this system is used ubiquitously across the democratic world, it has never gained significant traction in the United States. However, a proportional representation system known as the Single Transferable Vote has been used in American municipalities since the beginning of the 20th century. This study will discuss how proportional representation differs from other voting systems, its history in the United States, the statistical results of its history, and the benefits and drawbacks of the system. This study will attempt to answer the research question: could proportional representation systems provide fair and accurate representation in America? Analysis of the use of Single Transferable Voting in Ohio combined with other historical evidence suggests that, if implemented correctly, proportional systems could be both effective and accepted in American politics.

Research

Background: Comparing and Contrasting Voting Systems

Generally, there are three types of electoral systems employed by democratic governments: plurality electoral systems, majority electoral systems, and proportional representation systems (King, 2000). Plurality electoral systems are “first-past-the-post”—or “winner-take-all”—systems that award the seats of single-member constituencies to the candidate that gets the most votes, regardless of whether or nor that candidate receives a majority. A majority electoral system is a “second ballot” system that is similar to the plurality electoral system, except that it

requires candidates to receive a majority of the vote to win a seat. If no candidate achieves a majority, a second round of voting is necessary, with the candidates that received the least number of votes dropping out (King, 2000). The final electoral system is proportional representation, which is an “electoral system that seeks to create a representative body that reflects the overall distribution of public support for each political party” (“Proportional Representation,” n.d., para. 1).

Proportional representation differs greatly from the other two electoral systems. Instead of single-member districts, it has multi-member constituencies. In a single-member district, voting is done on a regional basis, with candidates pandering to the specific needs of an area. In multi-member constituencies, on the other hand, voting is done on a broader basis, with candidates and parties appealing to the needs of the area as a whole, since they represent a larger geographic area. As a result, instead of voting for one representative, constituents often vote for a party or rank candidates (King, 2000).

Contrary to what many Americans may believe, proportional representation is the most widely used electoral system in the world. The least used of the three systems is the majority electoral system, which is used to elect legislators in France and presidents in some European states such as Russia, Portugal, and France (King, 2000). The plurality electoral system is only slightly more widespread than the majority system. The only countries that use this are the United States, Great Britain, and a number of former British and American colonies. Proportional representation, on the other hand, is the system of choice for the grand majority of other democratic countries in the world, including major world powers such as Germany and Japan (Hertzberg, 2004). Forms of proportional representation can be found at some level in practically every democratic country, even if only on the city or county level (King, 2000).

The two most widely-used forms of proportional representation are party list systems and Single Transferable Vote (STV). In party list forms of proportional representation, voters vote for parties rather than individual candidates. This is done in either a closed party list system, in which parties choose the individuals who will fill their seats, or an open party list system, in which voters have some ability to choose who the parties will select. To allocate seats to the parties, most party list systems use the “highest average method using the D’Hondt formula,” named after the Belgian mathematician Victor D’Hondt (King, 2000, para. 10).

Take Loudoun County, for example, a county in Northern Virginia with 312,311 people living within its borders as of 2010 (“Frequently Asked Questions,” n.d.). Assume for the sake of argument that there is 100% voter turnout and that 115,000 people voted Republican, 100,000 people voted Democrat, 70,000 people voted Libertarian, and 27,311 people voted for the Green party. There are seven

state representatives from Loudoun County (“State & Federal Legislators,” n.d.), and the seats would be chosen in such a manner: the number of votes are placed in a table and divided by numbers starting at one and increasing by intervals of one. The highest quotient in the list awards a seat to its party, and further quotients are selected until all seven seats are allocated. The bolded numbers below represent the seats given to each party, with three Republican seats, two Democrat seats, two Libertarian seats, and zero Green seats (Figure 1).

	Green	Libertarian	Democrat	Republican
Divide by 1	27,311	70,000	100,000	115,000
Divide by 2	13,655.5	35,000	50,000	57,500
Divide by 3	6,827.75	17,500	25,000	28,750
Divide by 4	3,413.875	8,750	12,500	14,375

Figure 1. Example of STV vote allocation using data from Loudon County, Virginia.

The Single Transferable Vote (STV) system is perhaps a bit more complicated than the party list system. In this system, originally created by British politician Thomas Hare, citizens cast votes for individuals instead of parties (King, 2000). The important part is that the voters rank candidates rather than simply voting for a single candidate. Awarding seats is done using a mathematical formula, the most popular of those being the Droop Quota, expressed by the formula: $[V/(S+1)] + 1$. In this formula, ‘V’ is number of votes and ‘S’ is number of seats up for election. The resulting number is the ‘quota,’ or the minimum number of votes necessary to win a chair (King, 2000). For example, in the Loudoun County example used above, in which 312,311 valid votes are cast for seven seats, the quota (rounded up) is 39,040. This is achieved through the formula: $[312,311/(7+1)]+1$. Ballots are initially sorted by the voters’ first preference. As soon as a candidate reaches the quota of 39,040 votes, they are declared elected. Any more votes for this candidates are now considered surplus, meaning that they are redistributed to the candidate marked as the next choice on the ballot. Those handling the votes continue counting until all the votes are distributed or redistributed. If the seats are not all filled, then all candidates who received less than fifty votes are removed and their votes are also redistributed to the next choice on the ballot. After each redistribution, the candidate with the lowest number of votes is eliminated, redistributing their next indicated choice among the remaining unelected candidates (“Proportional Representation - Cambridge,” 2008). Once seven candidates pass the quota, the election is over. Supporters of the

Single Transferable Vote system concede that it is a rather complicated system, but they believe it is a fairer one.

History of Proportional Representation in America

Despite its worldwide use, many Americans do not understand much about proportional representation. King commented that “since few Americans could even explain how the Electoral College works, they are probably not going to learn STV any time soon” (King, 2000, para. 26). These are relatively bleak assessments of the American ability to change its voting system. However, there should be some cause for optimism when it comes to proportional representation in the United States, because it has already been done.

Proportional representation first appeared in the United States in the early twentieth century. While the Progressive Movement primarily focused on issues such as women’s suffrage and child labour laws, the movement also highlighted the need for government reform. During that time period, party machines like Tammany Hall were very powerful, winning almost all the seats on city councils with only 50-60 % of the vote. One of the changes that Progressives pushed to reduce the power of those political machines was proportional representation (Amy, 1996).

The main group promoting proportional representation, the Proportional Representation League of the United States, was founded in 1893. They endorsed the Single Transferable Vote system and, in 1912, shifted their focus from adopting proportional representation on the national level to adopting it on the city level. At the city level there were fewer legal obstacles to the new system because proportional representation could be established through popular referenda instead of through a long and arduous constitutional amendment process. In 1915, Ashtabula, Ohio became the first American city to adopt STV. Ashtabula was followed by a few other small cities before Cleveland and Cincinnati followed in the 1920s. In 1936, New York City voted to adopt STV, increasing national interest in the concept. At its peak, twenty-four cities were using proportional representation for their elections (Amy, 1996).

Despite initial success implementing STV, the voting systems in all of these cities except Cambridge, Massachusetts, eventually shifted back to plurality electoral systems. Opponents of STV are quick to point to this abandonment as evidence of failure. However, Amy (1996) argued that there were four explanations for the fall of STV in the United States that had nothing to do with the effectiveness of the system.

First, politicians and parties who had been ousted by the effects of proportional representation fought to see it overturned. As will be discussed later, proportional representation resulted in many politicians and parties losing power. In Michigan and California specifically, political parties convinced the courts to rule that STV was against the state constitutions. In other cities, the very same popular referenda that

were initially used to establish STV were used to remove proportional representation. If the first referendum failed, the well-funded opposition would finance more referenda until STV was overturned. A good example of this is Cleveland, where five referenda were sponsored until STV was finally repealed (Amy, 1996).

Second, the supporters of proportional representation were poorly funded and incapable of defending STV, especially in contrast to the well-funded and motivated opponents of proportional representation. The Proportional Representation League of the United States lost support and funding over the years until, in 1932, it had to merge with the National Municipal League, an organization that worked to get rid of corrupt political machines. As a result, each of the political coalitions pushing for STV in individual cities were on their own. Over the years, the leaders of these coalitions died or lost interest, meaning that there was not much opposition to the referendum to repeal STV. Only two such political coalitions remained: the Charter Committee in Cincinnati and the Cambridge Civic Association. The city of Cincinnati eventually fell despite the efforts of the Charter Committee, but the city of Cambridge, as mentioned previously, remains the only city in the United States still using STV (Amy, 1996).

Third, many groups were opposed to the minority representation that came as a result of STV and therefore supported the repeal efforts. In the early to mid 1900's, minority representation was a contentious issue, since many white Americans were not ready to have African Americans representing them. In Cincinnati, for example, two African Americans were elected to the city council in the 1950s as a direct result of their adoption of STV. In a backlash to this event, STV opponents brought up a new repeal campaign, asking voters if they wanted a "Negro mayor" (Amy, 1996, para. 21). That argument resonated with the voters, and the resolution to repeal the STV system was passed by a large margin (Amy, 1996).

Fourth, STV allowed for more representation from fringe groups, including Communist groups, that Americans were fearful of during the Cold War. In New York City, several Communists were elected to the city council after the city switched to STV. When the Cold War began, opponents used their election to campaign against STV, claiming that it was a "political importation from the Kremlin" and "the first beachhead of Communist infiltration in this country" (Amy, 1996, para. 22). Despite the lack of any institutional connection between STV and Communism, the smear campaign worked, and proportional representation was swiftly repealed in New York City. The well-publicized defeat of STV in New York City led many other cities to follow suit. By the turn of the century, Cambridge, Massachusetts, was the only city still using the Single Transferable Vote in America (Amy, 1996).

Many claim that the systematic repeal of STV only decades after its adoption proves that it has failed. Amy (1996) disagreed, arguing that the repeals actually

prove it succeeded. It succeeded at ousting corrupt political machines. It also succeeded at providing representation to people groups that were previously underrepresented. The ousted party bosses and politicians fought for STV's repeal because it was successful, and the racists and fear mongers fought for its repeal because it was successful at increasing diversity in legislatures (Amy, 1996).

Statistical Results of Proportional Representation in the United States

Proportional representation in the United States was relatively limited in scope. As previously noted, there were only twenty-four American cities with an STV election system adopted at the height of the movement. No government higher than the city level has adopted STV, although New York City's brief adoption of the system was a highlight (Amy, 1996). As a result, there have not been many studies concerning proportional representation.

Barber (1995) conducted an extensive case study of five Ohio cities that adopted STV in the early 1900s: Ashtabula, Cleveland, Cincinnati, Hamilton, and Toledo. This study takes many different sources into account, including daily newspapers from the cities, biographies of reform leaders, surviving campaign pamphlets, journals and magazines such as the *Proportional Representation Review*, encyclopedias of the period, and interviews with former participants. Most importantly, Barber studied official voting records of proportional representation elections in Ohio. In her study, Barber examined STV's impact on representation, political machines, the party system, political stability effective votes, and voter turnout.

First, Barber (1995) found that STV provided much more accurate representation than single-member district systems. She found that single-member districts tended to give more seats to the largest party and fewer seats to the smaller parties, while STV tended to more divide the seats among the parties more equitably based on the actual distribution of the votes. Examples of these trends can be seen in the cities of Cincinnati and New York (Figures 2 and 3).

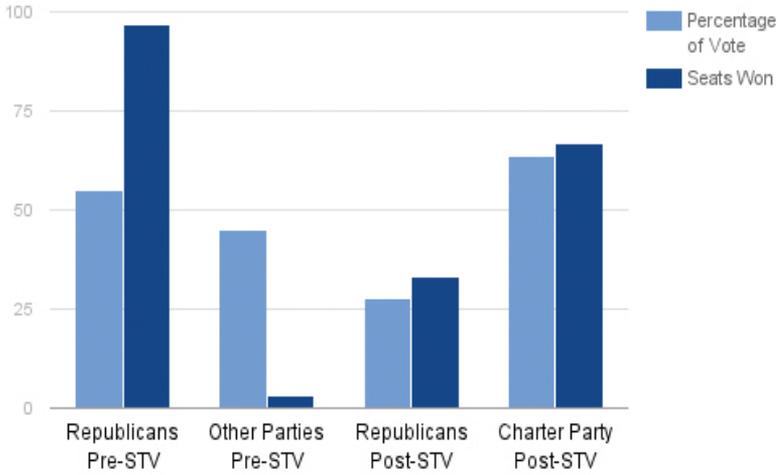


Figure 2. Effects of STV on representation in Cincinnati (Barber, 1995).

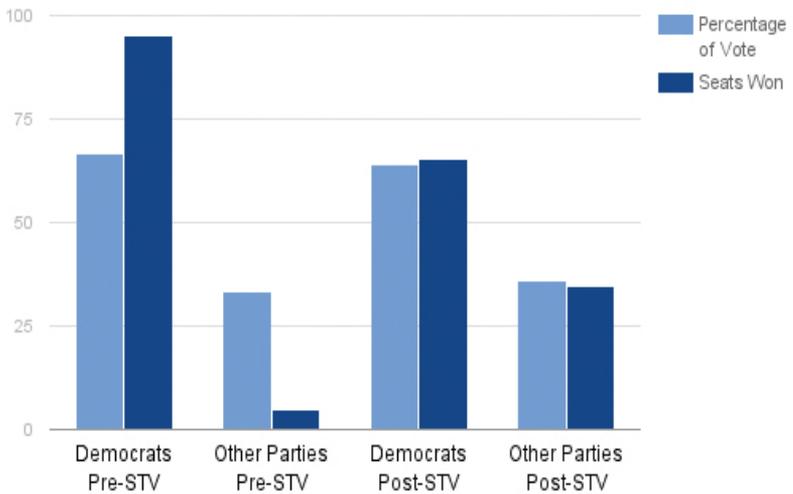


Figure 3. Effects of STV on representation in New York City (Barber, 1995).

As can be seen in the above graphs, STV led to more accurate representation on party lines. It also led to greater racial and ethnic representation. Irish Catholics and Polish Americans were elected in Ashtabula and Toledo, respectively, for the first time. In Cincinnati, Hamilton, and Toledo, African Americans were elected to city councils during their years of STV. African Americans had not been elected in these cities before the adoption of STV and would not be elected for many decades after STV was repealed (Barber, 1995).

Second, Barber discovered that STV had some impact on taking power away from political machines. Cincinnati especially transformed from a city known for corruption to one with integrity and little control by political machines. In many cities, STV did not take away the majority of seats from the dominant party. However, even those cities saw their political machines weakened as independent candidates were able to run for their parties on principle and not beholden to party leaders (Barber, 1995).

Third, Barber (1995) analyzed the effects of STV on the American party system in the cities. In the five Ohio cities studied, stable two-party systems remained intact. In most cities, the Democrats and Republicans were the two major parties, while Cincinnati elections were contested by the Republicans and the Charter Committee. Only one city, Ashtabula, had one minor party candidate win an election: a Socialist in 1915. New York City, on the other hand, had a multi-party system under STV. In this system, the Democrats and Republicans were joined by the American Labor Party, the Fusion Party, and the Communist Party. In the end, Barber concluded that STV did not favor a two-party or multi-party system but instead produced one that reflected the makeup of the individual cities.

Fourth, Barber (1995) studied the effects of STV on political stability in the cities. The same people who feared that STV would undermine the two-party system also argued that it would lead to a fractured political system because it would lead to bloc voting and political pluralism. As a result, they argued, city councils would be crippled by conflict. Barber did note more diversity and some bloc voting (but not significantly more than before STV was implemented). However, she found “no systematic evidence of greater dissension on PR elected councils compared with councils elected by other means” (Barber, 1995, p. 305).

Fifth, Barber (1995) found that STV increases the number of effective votes and reduces the number of wasted votes. Effective votes are ones that actually elect a candidate to office, and the increase of these votes due to STV can be seen in Cincinnati and Cleveland (Figure 4).

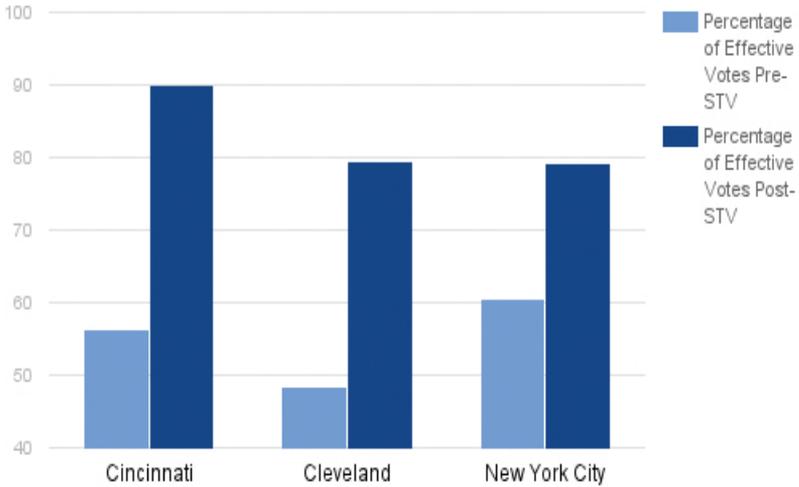


Figure 4. Effects of STV on effective votes in select cities.

Sixth, Barber (1995) looked into STV’s effects on voter turnout, expecting it to result in higher voter participation. Surprisingly, despite the much higher amounts of representation and effective votes, there seemed to be little correlation between the adoption of STV and voter turnout. Some may argue that the benefits were countered by confusing ballots and vote counting procedures, but Barber concluded that “the emergence and disappearance of local issues and candidates appear to have had more to do with the act of voting than did the form of the ballot” (Barber, 1995, p. 295). Another possible reason for the lack of change could be the fact that city elections are not very popular to begin with. Those who vote in city elections may be devoted enough to the system to vote no matter what electoral system is used. It would be interesting to see if voter turnout is influenced by adopting proportional representation on a larger stage.

Barber’s conclusions from her research of Ashtabula, Cleveland, Cincinnati, Hamilton, and Toledo were generally in favor of the use of STV. The system led to more accurate representation for parties and minorities. It took power away from political machines while not unduly influencing the party system or destabilizing the city councils. In addition, it reduced the number of wasted votes by increasing effective votes. Surprisingly, all this had little to no effect on voter turnout.

Criticisms of Proportional Representation

The concept of proportional representation is not without its detractors,

especially in the United States. Intellectual figures such as Thernstrom (1999), a Senior Fellow at the Manhattan Institute, and Norton (1997), Professor of Government at the University of Hull, and many others have vehemently opposed proportional representation over the years. As time has passed, many familiar arguments have been used to criticize this electoral system. These criticisms include the fact that proportional representation gives an undue amount of representation to extremist groups, it takes away from the idea of local representation, allows a minority party too much power through coalitions, and balkanizes American politics. They also proffered specific reasons to reject party list and Single Transferable Vote systems. However, the research indicates that many of these arguments are ill-founded and the supposed difficulties of proportional representation are surmountable.

First, proportional representation is criticized because it gives an undue amount of representation to extremist groups like Communists and socialists. Opponents argue that under a single-member constituency, these groups are never given the opportunity to elect representatives. Hallett and Hoag (1940) disagreed: “If an extremist group does have a substantial part of the votes, denying it representation is as silly as an ostrich’s sticking his head in the sand” (para. 19). They went on to argue that “the best way to discredit a fool is to hire him a hall” (Hallett & Hoag, 1940, para. 22). Either way the people win, because if he is actually a fool, he will be discredited. But if the “extremist” is a wise man ahead of his time, the best thing to do is to elect him (Hallett & Hoag, 1940). Amy agreed with Hallett and Hoag. Amy (n.d.) stated that historical evidence provides no cause for concern. A large portion of European countries have been using proportional representation for fifty years, and due to threshold levels for participation (5% in Germany, for example), many fringe groups have difficulty winning seats. In addition to this, Amy (n.d.) argued that allowing a few members of extreme groups into the legislature has a moderating effect on those groups without granting them too much political power.

Second, people criticize proportional representation for taking away from the idea of local representation. For them, the link between constituents and representatives in single-member districts is important and will be destroyed by any form of proportional representation. John Stuart Mill (1861) responded to this argument in *Representative Government*:

Towns and counties, it may be presumed, are represented when the human beings who inhabit them are represented. Local feelings cannot exist without somebody who feels them; nor local interests without somebody interested in them. If the human beings whose feelings and interests these are have their proper share of representation, these feelings and interests are represented in common with all other feelings and interests of those persons. But I cannot see

why the feelings and interests which arrange mankind according to localities should be the only one thought worthy of being represented; or why people who have other feelings and interests, which they value more than they do their geographical ones, should be restricted to these as the sole principle of their political classification. (p. 97)

Third, it is argued that proportional representation will give a minority party too much power through coalitions. Amy (n.d.) gave the following example: “if one large party wins 42% of the seats and another 38%, and a small party wins 20%, that gives the small party the balance of power and puts it in the position of ‘king-maker’” (para. 9). In this situation, the small party chooses the winner of the election rather than the people. Amy (n.d.) argued that this is not as much of an issue as opponents to proportional representation say, since the minority party only forms coalitions with a party other than the majority party 12% of the time. Hallett and Hoag (1940) agreed with Amy, pointing out that in single-member constituencies, the minorities do their bargaining before the election through preventing certain pet-issues from being raised at all. Instead of having issues ruled out of discussion before the representatives are elected, Hallett and Hoag (1940) preferred the compromise and bargaining done by elected individuals who accurately represent the people.

Fourth, many argue that proportional representation would balkanize American politics, fragmenting society into warring political factions. They argue that our society already has huge political, racial, religious, and economic divisions. Due to this, we need a political system that brings us together, rather than tearing us apart. Amy (n.d.) disagreed, saying that proportional representation encourages dialogue and negotiation, just at a different part of the process. Amy (n.d.) said:

In a two-party system, negotiations usually take place before the elections. During party conventions and primaries, the various groups in umbrella parties try to settle their differences and build an electoral coalition. In a multiparty PR system, the political bargaining takes place in the legislature after the election. After the various political groups elect their representatives, then they engage in negotiation and coalition building.” (para. 14)

As mentioned previously, there was no systematic evidence of greater dissension in the city councils elected via proportional representation in the Ohioan cities that Barber (1995) studied.

The main criticism of the party list system is that people vote for party slates rather than for individual candidates. Opponents argue that Americans are used to choosing individuals rather than parties because it allows them direct control over who is elected and gives them the chance to oust individual candidates that

are not following the public's wishes. This would be true if the parties picked the candidates rather than having a primary, but expecting there to be no primary in the parties for party list systems is just as ridiculous as expecting the parties to choose the candidates for single-member constituencies (Amy, n.d.).

The main criticism specific to the Single Transferable Vote system is that a portion of peoples' secondary votes are not considered. If one considers the quota system carefully, it becomes immediately apparent that all the voters that vote for a candidate before they reach the quota do not have their second choice vote counted. However, those who voted for the same candidate and were counted after the candidate reached the quota do have their second choice vote counted. In the example used when explaining STV, if 60,000 people voted for a certain candidate, then only the first 39,040 votes would count toward the candidate while the remaining 20,960 votes would contribute to the election of another candidate as well. Effectively, the first half of the voters would not be able to influence the election as much based off pure chance. Proponents of proportional representation may counter that, in any election of such a size, the randomly selected votes will tend to support the same secondary candidates before and after the quota.

However, there is a solution for those those that still struggle to support a voting system based on such an element of randomness. After the quota is surpassed, the counters could simply count the remaining number of votes for the candidate that passed the quota and then apply the proportions of second choices for all his votes to that number. For example, in the case previously mentioned, in which 60,000 people vote for Candidate 1 and the quota is 39,040, this would be the number of votes distributed to secondary candidates:

	Candidate 2	Candidate 3	Candidate 4
Number of secondary votes from Candidate 1	30,000	20,000	10,000
Number of votes transferred to secondary candidates	10,480	6,987 (rounded up)	3,493 (rounded down)

Figure 5. Proportional allocation of secondary votes in an STV system using the example from Loudon County.

Here, the number of votes transferred to each of the secondary candidates adds up to 20,960, which is the remaining number of votes that Candidate 1 had to distribute. Using this system, the votes can be transferred fairly and accurately.

These academic criticisms are joined by a widely held belief that proportional representation is too complicated and confusing for American voters to understand.

King (2000) agreed with this assessment. John Stuart Mill (1861) disagreed, arguing, “Among the ostensible objectors...some profess to think the plan unworkable; but these, it will be found, are generally people who have barely heard of it, or have given it a very slight and cursory examination” (p. 97). Statistics must win out over speculative arguments, and Barber’s (1995) study of the five cities in Ohio indicated that Americans were not confused by the new STV ballots since there was little correlation between the adoption of STV and voter turnout.

Conclusion

Would proportional representation solve the problems that American voters have with the current system? Would it solve issues like the inadequacy of a two-party system or the self-serving congressional electoral system? Barber’s (1995) study of cities in Ohio is strong evidence that proportional representation gave more representation to minorities and other parties. In addition to this, the STV system frequently ousted the corrupt political machines and institutions that controlled many cities. But would this work on the national level as well? Or would the problems that critics of the system raise become more apparent at a larger scale? Obviously, it is difficult to make national conclusions based on the data from a few small cities. The experiments with proportional representation in the United States have been localized and small-scale. More research should be done to provide policymakers with a complete picture. However, the successes of STV on a small scale should encourage other municipalities to adopt proportional voting systems, which will give researchers more examples and datasets to work with. Perhaps, over time, researchers will be able to make more sweeping conclusions about the prospects of European voting systems in state and national American elections.

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