

UPDATE FROM YOUR REDISTRICTING STUDY COMMITTEE

The piece below was written by a California League member after the recent defeat of the Governor's redistricting reform ballot measure. It clearly shows the dilemma of Redistricting reform.

by Steve Chessin

People say that non-competitive districts are neither accountable nor responsive. But competitive districts, by definition, are not representative, since they deny representation to almost half the voters.

It is my opinion that arguing over who should draw district lines is like arguing over who should rearrange the deck chairs on the Titanic; it does not address the fundamental problem. While it may seem egregious to have legislators draw their own districts, having someone else do it won't bring the results proponents of redistricting reform seek to achieve.

Consider the results in states that have taken redistricting out of the hands of their legislators.

Arizona has had an independent redistricting commission since 2001. It now has some of the least competitive races in the nation. All eight congressional incumbents won reelection last year by landslide margins, an average of 34 percent. In the state Senate, none of the 30 seats were competitive, and more than half of the seats were uncontested by one of the two major parties. And 97 percent of all incumbents won reelection, whether they had publicly financed or privately financed races.

Iowa has long been held up as the poster child for the effectiveness of redistricting commissions, yet in 2004 all congressional incumbents easily won reelection, and the average margin of victory was a landslide of 18 percent. In the state Legislature, 61 percent of seats in the House were won by landslide margins, 85 percent by noncompetitive margins of 10 points or more. Only four seats out of 100 were won by less than a five-point margin, and the average margin of victory was a whopping 47 percent. Also, in lower house, the Democrats won a majority of the vote but the Republicans won a majority of seats. Thirty-two seats were uncontested, with another six contested by just one major party.

In Washington State, where the bipartisan redistricting commission produced some of the most competitive races of the 1990s, only one of nine congressional races was close in 2004; the average margin of victory was 28 percent. In the state Legislature, huge numbers of races went uncontested. Republicans dominate almost every legislative district east of the Cascade Mountains and Democrats win almost every district in King County, the most populous, with Seattle as its seat.

Other states with redistricting commissions have had similarly disappointing results.

The fundamental problem is that single-member districts pit competitiveness and representativeness against each other in a zero-sum game. In districts that are evenly divided between opposing points of view, elections are hotly contested and the margins of victory are small, but fewer voters have their views represented by the winners. Conversely, in districts that strongly favor one point of view, where elections are often won by landslides, the winners represent more voters but only at the expense of competitiveness.

Since I live in California, I'll use it as an example. About 65% of California's voters saw their candidate elected in 2004; that was true for the Assembly, the State Senate, and the Congressional delegation. Yet if these legislative districts are made more competitive, that representation index can only drop towards 50%.

There is a solution to the redistricting problem, however, and that solution is proportional representation (PR). The principle behind PR is simple: majority rule, with representation for electoral minorities, in direct proportion to the way people vote. That is, 60% of the vote gets you 60% of the seats, not all of them. And 10% of the vote gets you 10% of the seats, not none of them. Carrie Chapman Catt was a supporter of proportional representation, and LWVUS supported it in its early years. The position supporting PR was dropped from the agenda during the years of World War II.

There are many systems of PR, but they all share two key ingredients: at least some of the districts elect more than one person, and the winners are allocated in proportion to the vote.

The benefits of PR are increased voter turnout, conformity of government policies with public opinion, and better representation of women and minorities.

How does it work? Instead of voting for just one candidate, you vote for several. In some systems, parties make up the lists presented to voters. In others, each voter makes up his or her own list by ranking the candidates in order of choice. Either way, the more votes a list gets, the more candidates from that list get elected.

For example, the California Assembly has 80 members, currently elected from single-member districts using a winner-take-all system (first past the post). Suppose we divided California into sixteen districts, each of which elected five members to the Assembly. By using a system of ranking candidates similar to that used in San Francisco to elect their city government, it would only take about seventeen percent of the vote to win a seat, making more seats competitive, while the representation index would simultaneously jump to at least 83%.

Another benefit of PR is that it renders gerrymandering much less effective, so that it really doesn't matter who draws the lines. With single-member districts, it takes only slightly more than half the vote in slightly more than half the districts to control a legislature. This means that as few as 26% of the voters, properly arranged, can rule over the other 74%. However, using my five-member district PR example, a gerrymander would have to control at least 42% of the voters and carefully arrange them in order to rule over the other 58%.

I'm not wedded to any particular system of PR. But I think the League should include PR in multi-member districts when re-examining its position on redistricting.