

Multi-Seat Districts

The second step of my proposed plan involves breaking states up into multi-seat districts. This will obviously be easy to do, and to understand, in a small, densely populated state like New Jersey. New Jersey currently has a population of roughly 8.8 million people, and currently has 13 Representatives. Since it is so small and densely populated, it might be possible to break the state up into multi-seat districts without increasing the total number of Representatives. The state could easily be split into four districts, with three districts electing three representatives, and the fourth district electing Representatives to four seats.

FairVote has an interactive map that shows how each state would be broken up into multi-seat districts based on current representation. It is available here:

<http://www.fairvote.org/fair-voting-proportional-representation#.UgKjND-yy-g>

Since I am running for a seat in Kentucky, I'll use Kentucky as an example. Kentucky currently has a population of roughly 4.4 million people, and six congressional districts. Under the FairVote plan, Kentucky would have two districts with three seats each. But under my proposal, if there were one Representative for every 500,000 people, Kentucky would have 8 Representatives. This would go up to nine if the population increases to over 4.5 million people after the 2020 census. If there were one Representative for every 300,000 people, Kentucky would have 14 Representatives, and this would go up to 15 if the population increases to 4.5 million people.

If Kentucky had 8 Representatives the state could be split into three large electoral districts, two with three representatives and one with two representatives. The population, and size, of the districts would vary accordingly so that each representative would account for roughly 500,000 people.

Each electoral district would also be split into constituency districts, so each elected representative would directly represent the interests of a set group of people within his or her constituency district.

In an election there would be a slate of candidates. If there are three representatives then there should be something like 8 or 9 candidates on the slate. Under this scenario there are a couple of different possible voting systems. In one, the least preferred, each voter would get to choose one candidate, and the three candidates with the highest vote totals would be elected. A more preferred alternative would allow each voter to choose three candidates from the list (this is what most people are familiar with in many city council elections), and again the top three would be elected. In an alternate version of this system, each voter would be able allocate their three votes, giving one candidate all three, or one candidate two votes and another one vote. Again the top three would be elected. In a fourth version, the voter would rank their top three choices, choosing a first choice, a second choice, and a third choice. The first choice would receive three points, second two points, and third one point, and the three candidates with the most points would be elected. All four systems are used in different countries around the world, and each has strengths and weaknesses. But the main strength is that they all produce more representative legislative bodies than the current system.

FairVote has maps and graphics that show how different voting systems would work, and how they produce more representative democracies. See: <http://www.fairvote.org/fair-voting-proportional-representation#.UgKkgD-yy-g>

A multi-seat electoral system would also require a new process to set the slate of candidates standing for election. Under the system I'm proposing, the major parties would get more candidates than minor parties, but no more than the total number of seats at stake. So in a

three seat election each of the major parties would have no more than three candidates standing for election. The actual number would depend on the results in the previous election. So in a state almost totally dominated by Republicans, like South Carolina, the Republicans might get three candidates, and the Democrats only two. Smaller parties might get one each. In the first election under this system third parties (and fourth, fifth, sixth and seventh parties) could get on the ballot based on signatures on petitions, or possibly on polling numbers. In a conservative state this might mean that the Tea Party might field their own candidate (or candidates), and in a liberal state it might mean that the Green Party might have candidates. In subsequent elections minor parties would get on the ballot based on prior election results, but there would always be the ability to get on the ballot based on signatures on a petition.

This system would significantly increase the likelihood that a minor party might gain enough votes to get candidates elected. Under this system it is possible that the top three candidates might each receive roughly a third of the vote, resulting in their easy election. Or it might mean that four candidates are close, with each receiving roughly 25%, and with third winning, and fourth not winning. It is most likely, however, that the leading candidate might receive nearly 50%, the second might receive 30% and third might receive 20%. This means that a candidate might be elected with only 20% of the vote. And this would mean that a candidate with a smaller but highly loyal following could win an election. In some conservative leaning states this might mean that the Tea Party would become a real political party with candidates winning seats under their own banner, and not as an adjunct to the Republican Party. In others it might mean the development of a Green or a Labor party.

This system is more representative than the current system. Under the current "winner take all" system the candidate that wins 50% plus one vote represents 100% of the people, even

though his or her partisan beliefs may not be shared (or may be abhorred) by 49.9% of the citizens of the district. This means that those voters who chose the losing candidate are, or at least feel that they are, unrepresented. In a multi-seat district most voters would have voted for at least one elected candidate, so they will feel that they have some representation in Congress.

In most states I imagine that the partisan break-down and electoral results would roughly mirror what we already have. Even in traditionally liberal states, like New York, there are Republican Congressmen, and even in strongly conservative states like Texas, there are Democratic Congressmen. This would not change. But what would change is that many districts would have a mixed Congressional delegation. There are democrats in even the most conservative district. I know that personally. I once lived in the Congressional District of Tom DeLay, one of the most conservative members of Congress in the late 1990s and early 2000s. DeLay generally got over 60% of the vote and won easily, but this meant that there were about 40% of the population that might vote for a Democrat. Under the existing system these people are essentially unrepresented. But under my proposal, this district would probably elect two Republicans (or possibly a Republican and a Libertarian), but the remaining 40% might be able to elect a lone Democrat.

On the flip side, in a traditionally liberal state, like New York, the Democrats would most likely get the most votes, and likely win two seats in many districts, but it is possible that a Republican might get enough votes to gain a seat. This would mean that in traditionally liberal states Democrats would still win the most seats, but it would make it much more likely that Republicans would have elected representatives in almost all districts. This is in stark contrast with the current system, where voters whose candidate did not win are essentially unrepresented.

(I should note that most Representatives take seriously their obligations to all their constituents, and provide assistance regardless of political orientation of the constituent.)

So there are two major benefits to this system. First it would allow the election of third-party candidates, and second it would ensure some representation for most people in every district.

There are a number of other benefits to establishing multi-seat districts.

It would largely eliminate political Gerrymandering of districts. While there might be some attempt to Gerrymander (I'd put nothing past many legislators), it would be exceedingly difficult to craft a district where all of one party's candidates would win.

It would minimize the effectiveness of negative campaigns. There is little benefit to tearing down an opponent when there are multiple candidates and multiple seats. One candidate may go negative, but eliminating one opponent wouldn't assure victory in a multi-candidate and multi-seat district. And if a candidate attacks all of his opponents then clearly he's a jerk (note masculine since most negative campaigning is done by male candidates). The elimination of negative campaigning should help tone down the anger and bitterness in political campaigns. And once much of the rancor is eliminated from campaigns it might also be reduced in the general political discourse.

It would lead to effective third parties. As noted above, under this system it would be possible for a candidate to win a seat as a representative with 20% (or even less) of the vote. This would mean that smaller parties with a devoted following, like the conservative Tea Party, or the liberal Green Party, might win a few elections in favorable districts. This would introduce more voices into the political debate, and this would increase the number of ideas and solutions to any given national problem.

It would eliminate what I call the destructive duality. One of the problems in American politics is that both sides of the political spectrum have come to believe that the other side is actually trying to harm the nation. This is caused, at least in part, by the fact that in our two party system every issue can be presented as an either/or choice: and either/versus/or easily becomes good versus bad. And once partisans present their ideas as good, and their opponent's ideas as bad, it's another easy step to believe that your opponent is bad, and taking action that is bad for the nation. And someone taking action that is bad for the nation must be stopped at all cost. (And if you don't think that partisans think that way, watch Sean Hannity or Lawrence O'Donnell.) But if there are a number of policy choices, a number of candidate choices, and a number of different ideas on the table, it is more difficult to label one idea as good and the other idea as bad. And this will reduce the demonization of political opponents.

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This proposal might seem extreme at first glance, but it has precedence in the country. In the first years of the nation, when we were government under the Articles of the Confederation, most states selected multiple delegates to the Congress of the Confederation from a slate of candidates. In the first few Presidential elections a list of men ran, and under the Constitution at the time the two receiving the most votes were elected, with the Presidency going to the candidate with the most votes and the vice presidency going to the candidate with the second most votes. This worked passably well when George Washington was elected President and John Adams vice president, but was a disaster when Adams became President with Thomas Jefferson as Vice President because the two men loathed each other and had vastly different ideas about governing. The system doesn't work well for an executive office, but there would be no problem in a deliberative body like the House or Representatives, where the purpose is debate over issues.

Throughout American history a number of states used proportional voting to elect representatives. In the first few Congressional elections a number of the states elected Congressmen from a slate of candidates. This changed as political parties developed. But Illinois introduced a form of Proportional voting in 1870 because of the deep partisan split in the state at the end of the Civil War. Under this system there were three seat districts and a cumulative voting system. The system worked well for over one hundred years, but in 1980, in a move to save money, the system was abolished in favor of the familiar single seat and winner take all district. And many cities (including Lexington) elect a number of council members from a slate of candidates. So the system has historical roots, and is familiar, in one form or another, to most people.

Obviously this system would have no direct effect in electing Senators because the Constitution gives each state two Senators, and sets their elections in different years. And each Senator is elected in an individual election to represent the entire state. But this would have an indirect, and hopefully beneficial, impact on the operation of the Senate.

First, the potential presence of a third party candidate on the ballot might influence an election. This would most likely only happen if a small party gained a large following and won seats in the House of Representatives. This would produce viable, tested, and known third party candidates with a significant chance of winning. But it might also change the dynamic of the election. It might be possible in a conservative leaning state, for a smaller conservative party candidate to siphon enough votes away from a main-line Republican and allow a Democrat to win. Something similar might happen, but benefiting the Republicans, in a more liberal state. This might mean that candidates from the major parties might try to win votes from the other party, and this might mean that those candidates might moderate their rhetoric and their

positions. It is also possible that a third party candidate might win in certain states. It is possible that a left wing party, like a Green, or Labor, might win in a more liberal state, like Washington or New York, and a candidate from a right wing party, say a Libertarian or Tea Party, might win in Wyoming or South Carolina.

The presence of even a few minor party Senators could alter the dynamic in the Senate. It would be likely that these small party Senators might work with different parties to achieve different policy objectives. This could end the power of the two voting blocks. It might also be possible, if there were enough minor party Senators, to significantly alter the ability of the minority party to stymie legislation through the filibuster. If, for example, there were only 39 Democrats and 39 Republicans, and the remaining 22 were split among a variety of parties both left and right, it would make it very tricky for the Democrats or Republicans to block legislation through a filibuster.