

Election Methods

Introduction

You've already received the full report on Election Methods from the state League. The committee thought it would be helpful to have a summary of the material for the consensus discussion at unit meetings.

The League of Women Voters of Oregon (LWVOR) hopes to achieve a consensus position to allow us to advocate for or against proposed changes in election methods at the state, regional, and local level in Oregon. The League, as a trusted source of information, should be able to advise on issues that are basic to our democracy

This report builds on the work of the LWVOR 2008 Election Methods Committee to present and evaluate voting methods and election systems that are currently in use in the U.S. or around the world and that could be considered for adoption in Oregon.

As election methods—good, bad, and ugly—continue to be proposed, the League should help Oregonians evaluate their merits.

Single-Winner Election Systems

There are multiple options for electing a single winner. A single-winner election could be for a single position, such as a Mayor or Governor, or for a single legislator from a certain geographic area, such as the one congressperson representing a particular district, or a councilor representing the whole city. Oregon currently uses plurality voting, but there are other possibilities.

- Plurality is the American status quo, majority-wins contest. It's easy to use and understand, but it discourages citizens from voting on how they actually feel about the candidate (called sincere voting). It can promote negative schemes by candidates or parties to discredit the other candidates. Due to the majority rule concept, more than two candidates in a race can discourage voters from voting for the candidate they really want for fear of electing someone they do not want. Compared to other methods, plurality is less effective at electing the candidate who is most representative of the people. See the sample plurality ballot on page 6.
- Delayed runoff is an improvement on plurality in electing representative candidates. It requires two elections, one to narrow the field to two candidates and a separate one to select between the two. If a candidate gets a majority they win the election, however, if not, a second separate election occurs with the top two vote receivers. This is called a "conditional delayed runoff," which is used by the city of Eugene.
- "Unconditional" delayed runoff election occurs in races such as top-two systems. It takes place automatically between the top two candidates regardless of the first round outcome. Conditional delayed runoffs with a second separate election typically have a much lower voter turn out. A candidate, therefore, can be elected by a minority of voters.
- Range voting requires voters to rate each candidate on a scale, say from 1 to 5. The candidate with the highest average rating wins. If all voters vote sincerely, range voting is extremely good at selecting the most representative candidate. It is, unfortunately, very susceptible to strategic voting as opposed to sincere voting. See the sample range voting ballot on page 6.

- Approval voting enables voters to indicate whether or not they approve of each candidate for the position. The candidate with the most approvals wins. Approval voting is second best to range voting in electing the most representative candidate and second worst to range voting in encouraging strategic voting. Oregonians used approval voting when the legislature referred five advisory questions on different tax options to the May 1990 ballot. Voters could vote “yes” or “no” on any or all options. Another instance is when the Oregon Independent Party used approval voting to determine which candidate from other parties it would support on the November, 2016 ballot. See the sample approval ballot on page 6.
- Ranked choice voting is known as instant runoff voting (IRV) when used to select a single candidate. Studies show it to be nearly as good as range voting in selecting the most representative candidate and best of all systems considered in encouraging sincere voting.

A ranked choice ballot lists all candidates for an office and asks voters to assign an order to them. Ballots are tabulated by first counting the first place vote on each ballot. If any candidate receives a majority of first place votes cast (50%+1), she is declared the winner. If no candidate has a majority, the candidate with the fewest number of first place votes is eliminated and redistributed to the voter’s second choice. The elimination continues until one candidate has the majority of votes. Several examples where ranked choice has been used for mayor and city council elections are Cambridge, Massachusetts; Minneapolis, Minnesota; Takoma Park, Md; and Berkeley, Oakland, and San Francisco, California. See the sample ranked voting ballot on page 6.

Multiple Winner Election Systems

Because each district is politically diverse, electing just one representative per district will not yield a legislative body that is exactly representative of the people at large. Most western democracies elect multiple candidates from each district so that legislators can represent the different political views within each district. There are several election systems for electing multiple legislators per district.

- Bloc types exist in Oregon. In this system, the entire electorate elects multiple candidates to a legislative body, electing each candidate in separate races. For example, all residents of the City of Portland elect four councilors, plus a mayor. Each council candidate runs for a numbered council seat against other candidates who filed for that numbered seat. This system has been shown to be less representative than dividing the area into districts and electing a candidate from each district, because the majority opinion of the entire area determines the outcome of all the races. It was this effect that led to the change in the Lane County charter in the 1970’s to provide for commissioners elected by and from districts, instead of at large. The three-member commission previously in existence was dominated by residents of Eugene, leaving Springfield and rural residents feeling left out.
- Semi-proportional systems, including cumulative and limited voting, allow voters multiple votes in the same race. The highest vote-getters win. In cumulative voting, candidates run in multi-member districts, and voters have as many votes as seats available. However, voters can give multiple votes to a single candidate or split their vote as they wish. Cumulative voting is often used for corporate stockholders’ voting. Councils, homeowners associations and boards in some areas use it to help elect more minority group members.

Limited voting is a multi-member system that is generally considered to achieve results similar to some winner-take-all voting. Candidates run in multi-member districts, and voters have more than

one vote but fewer votes than there are candidates. For example, in a five-member district, voters might be able to cast votes for their favorite three candidates. It is used in several cities and school boards across the county and in the country of Gibraltar. These systems can lead to more representation for all groups if minority political groups carefully coordinate their voting strategy and focus all their votes on a single candidate to ensure a candidate representing them wins one of the positions.

- Proportional representation systems are favored by most political scholars as the most representative systems. Most western democracies use a form of proportional representation voting to elect legislative bodies. A pool of candidates contends for the available seats in a district. There are several ways to elect representatives that reflect the political opinions of the district:
 - Party list voting is the most commonly used voting method for proportional representation. Eighty countries use it exclusively, and another three use it in combination with other systems. Of the top 20 nations with the best representation of women, 15 use list voting proportional representation. It allows voters to choose a candidate from a party list (open list voting, the most common form of voting in developed democracies) or simply to choose a party (closed list voting). In both forms, parties present candidate lists running in multi-member districts. In open list voting, a vote counts for that candidate and for the candidate's party. The party wins seats in proportion to the number of votes for candidates on its list, with candidates given the party's seats in proportion to their number of votes they receive. In closed list voting the party's ordered list of candidates win positions in proportion to the number of votes for that party, with the ordering of candidates determined by the party. One potential benefit of party list voting is eliminating primaries, saving taxpayer money and reducing voter fatigue. See a sample open list ballot on page 7.
 - Mixed-member proportional voting, a newer system, is the one most election experts favor. It retains a local representative while allowing for overall proportionality of the legislature. Voters get two votes: one for a local representative from a single-winner local district, and one for a party. Parties win seats in proportion to the number of votes each party receives. Mixed-member proportional retains a local representative while allowing for overall proportionality. Two countries, Germany and New Zealand, use this type of ballot, and it has increased the representation of women and people of color. Parties appeal for their votes by including members of those groups among their list candidates if too few are likely to win district seats. In Germany, 50% of seats are list seats, and they currently have 36% women members of the national legislature. New Zealand has 42% list seats and 31% women members in parliament. See a sample mixed-member proportional ballot on page 7.
 - Single-transferrable vote systems are the second choice of election experts. This system uses multi-member districts and a ranked choice ballot, see page 6. Candidates run in a pool for a number of seats. For example, all candidates for Portland City Council would run together for any of the four council seats, rather than splitting up into different races for individually numbered seats, as they do now. Voters rank the candidates and any candidate who passes a certain threshold of support wins a seat. A common way of determining a threshold is to divide the total number of valid votes by the number of seats plus one, and then adding one to that result. For example, in a three-seat district the threshold would be 26 percent of the valid votes $((100\%/3+1)$

+1.) For American voters, this proportional system has the added attraction of allowing voters to vote for individual candidates, not for parties.

The minimum level of the threshold, to avoid electing representatives with very small support groups, and the size of the district are important design considerations for proportional systems.

Political Parties and Oregon Reforms

In Oregon, a candidate can list up to three parties on the ballot, assuming all three have nominated the candidate. This aggregated fusion voting gives voters more information about the candidate. A full fusion voting system would list each candidate as many times on the ballot as there are parties nominating her. By choosing which place on the ballot to vote for the candidate, voters indicate support for that party. Full fusion would give candidates more information about the sources of their support.

The purpose of partisan races in primary elections is to select major party candidates to run for partisan seats, like State Senator or Governor, in November general elections. Major parties in Oregon are the Democrat, Republican, and Independent parties. Voters not registered with one of these parties are excluded from partisan races in the primary. Proposed reforms include a limited open primary, in which unaffiliated voters can vote by choosing which party's ballot to receive, an open primary in which all voters choose which party's ballot to receive on election day (a consideration with Oregon's vote-by-mail system), and top-two primaries, in which all voters, regardless of party affiliation, vote on all candidates for each seat and the top two vote-getters, regardless of party, advance to the general election. See delayed runoff above.

Voters who have not chosen a party are known as "unaffiliated" not "independents." Independents are affiliated with the Independent Party and are not unaffiliated.

Administration of Alternate Methods

Changes in election methods may also require changes in voting administration hardware and software, training and voter education campaigns, as well as updates to other aspects of election administration. The three Oregon county clerks interviewed as part of our research (from Lane, Jackson and Multnomah) all agreed that complexity and cost of equipment are important concerns and should be included along with other criteria when considering administering different voting methods

Glossary of Terms

Aggregated fusion is a type of ballot that lists a candidate once and also names multiple parties or platforms supporting the candidate. (See the sample aggregated fusion ballot on page 7.)

Full fusion is a type of ballot that lists a candidate multiple times, once for each party nominating the candidate. (See the sample full fusion ballot on page 7.)

Closed list is the type of ballot in which voters only choose a party and the party chooses which candidates win seats.

Cumulative voting occurs when candidates run in multi-member districts and voters have as many votes as seats available. Voters can give multiple votes to a single candidate or split their votes.

Limited voting occurs when candidates run in multi-member districts and voters have more than one vote, but fewer votes than there are candidates.

Multi-member district means an area represented by more than one elected individual. An example of a multi-member district is a U.S. Senate district, where each person within a state votes for two Senate members. In contrast, each U.S. House district is a single member district, where a single person represents a given territory.

Sincere voting occurs when the voter casts a ballot for her/his actual preference.

Strategic voting occurs when an individual makes a tactical decision to select a candidate to improve the chances of a desirable outcome or decrease the chances of a less desirable outcome. In our typical plurality elections strategic voting is most common when voters who prefer a minor party candidate choose to vote instead for one of the major parties to avoid making their candidate a “spoiler” and causing their least favorite to win.

Plurality is the type of election in which the voter can only choose one candidate and the candidate with the most votes win.

Gerrymandering is the arranging of political divisions (a state, county, etc.) to give one political party an unfair advantage in elections.

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