Let’s Dump Single-Member Electoral Districts

Proportional representation would ensure minorities a place in legislatures

By Andrew Reding

The Supreme Court ruling that the use of race to delineate congressional districts is unconstitutional invites reexamination of our system of representation.

It is ironic, as some justices pointed out, that the attempt to fix a major defect of that system—under-representation of African-Americans—has resulted in a form of electoral apartheid. The attempt at a fix based on race has done nothing to improve representation of women and political minorities. By creating so-called majority-minority districts, it has merely shifted discrimination from one group of citizens to another.

The problem is “winner-take-all,” which grants representation only to pluralities. Though winner-take-all makes sense for electing presidents and governors, who need a wide base of support to carry out executive duties, it makes little sense for electing state legislators and members of Congress. Legislatures are supposed to be broadly representative, reflecting the diversity of the electorate. Representation by plurality defeats that purpose by denying an effective voice to minorities.

Most democracies have solved the problem through forms of proportional representation. All have in common multiple-member districts and assignment of seats in proportion to the percentage of the vote received. In a five-member district, for example, any candidate or party receiving 20 percent of the vote wins one seat. A party or slate receiving 40 percent gets two seats, and so on.

Proportional representation offers numerous advantages, many of which address other problems with our electoral system.

• First and foremost, no significant minority is excluded. Women, Hispanics, Asian-Americans, political independents, and African-Americans can win seats without being in the majority. That cuts voter apathy. Americans have the lowest participation rates in the developed world precisely because many voters are denied a meaningful choice.

• Second, proportional representation virtually eliminates the swing factor, that often-small percentage of the vote that tilts an election one way or the other under winner-take-all. In so doing, it addresses two of the scourges of American politics: gerrymandering and the influence of money. If a swing vote of 5 percent can be leveraged into a 100 percent change in the outcome of an election, it pays to manipulate district boundaries or concentrate campaign funds on close races. With proportional representation, these efforts are far less rewarding, since the most to be gained from a 5 percent swing in a five-member district is 20 percent (and less for larger districts).
• Third, it discourages negative advertising. Whenever there are more than two serious contenders in a race, mean-spirited attacks on adversaries tend only to benefit other candidates. George Bush and Ross Perot learned that lesson to their chagrin in the last presidential election. Under proportional representation, this dynamic is the norm, not the exception.

• Fourth, it undermines pork-barrel politics. One of the greatest sources of waste in government spending, both at the federal and state levels, is the conspiracy that develops among legislators to approve each other’s pet projects for their constituencies, in order to secure reelection. This effect is diluted by the much larger districts used for proportional representation, and by freeing politicians from the need to win majority support. Unlike a balanced-budget amendment, which would try to impose fiscal discipline against the grain, proportional representation addresses the underlying problem of political incentives.

• Fifth, it is only fair. All citizens, regardless of whether they are in the majority, are required to pay taxes to support the government. They are therefore entitled to effective representation in the legislative process that determines how that money is spent. That is the essence of our democracy’s founding principle of no taxation without representation.

Why, with all the advantages of proportional representation, is the United States one of the holdouts? Because ours is among the oldest of the world’s democracies. We have not changed our system of representation in more than two centuries, even as it has been outgrown by changes in society. When Congress was formed in the late 1700s, women could not vote, African-Americans were held in slavery, the poor were often barred from voting by property qualifications, and political parties had not yet been formed.

Though the vote has since been extended to all Americans, Congress has, for the most part, remained a club of prosperous white men. Of one hundred senators, only eight are women and one African-American; of 435 representatives, 48 (11 percent) are women and 38 (9 percent) African-American. Only in the case of African-Americans in the House of Representatives does the proportion come close to reflecting reality. And that has been achieved only by drawing strange-looking districts that create artificial majorities at the expense of new minorities.

Proportional representation, on the other hand, yields significant improvements. Women, for example, hold 21 percent of the seats in the Australian Senate, more than twice their representation in our own. In Sweden they hold 41 percent of the seats in the national legislature. Even in Ireland, a Roman Catholic country with a weak women’s movement, women hold 12 percent of the seats in the Dáil, more than they do in either house of the US Congress.

Conventional wisdom holds that proportional representation could not be introduced in the United States because it requires voting for political parties instead of individuals. Though “party list” systems are common in Europe, an alternative known as preference voting—now used in Ireland and for the Australian Senate—would preserve our emphasis on candidates instead of parties. In preference voting, citizens rank the candidates. After first choices are tabulated, second and then third choices are considered, until all seats are filled.
There are no constitutional obstacles to electing the House and most state legislatures by proportional representation. The Constitution only mandates that states maintain separate representation in Congress, in keeping with the rules of federalism. Thus New York, with 31 representatives, could divide itself into one seven-member and four six-member districts. Georgia, with 11 seats, could set up a five-member district and a six-member district. Georgia Rep. Cynthia McKinney (D), the African-American congresswoman who stands to lose her district under the Supreme Court decision, is proposing to restore to the states the power to set up multiple-member districts with preference voting. It should serve as a point of departure for serious deliberation about proportional representation.

An associate editor of Pacific News Service, Andrew Reding directs the Americas Project of the World Policy Institute.