Beyond gerrymandering and Texas posses: US electoral reform

By Andrew Reding

New York — It was grand political theater when Texas Democratic legislators crossed into Oklahoma earlier this month to avoid Texas Rangers pursuing them for a quorum call to vote on a Republican redistricting plan.

But the underlying problem is national in scope. And for all their pretense of bravery for principle, not even Texas Democrats were willing to take the proverbial steer by the horns – the winner-take-all electoral system used in every federal and state election in the United States but almost nowhere else among the world’s advanced democracies.

At issue in Texas, as occurs periodically in all of the other 49 states, was a redistricting map for the election of representatives to the US Congress. Because the lines between districts are arbitrary, and because one can just as effectively win a district with 60 percent of the vote as with 90 percent, the party in power has every incentive to gerrymander.

Congressional districts are often molded into snake-like shapes in order to concentrate opposition voters into a few districts. That allows the dominant party to secure far more seats in Congress than would be justified by its share of the statewide vote.

Both parties play this game. When the Democrats controlled Texas, they shaped the districts to their advantage. Now the Republicans are trying to do so.

There are, of course, greater or lesser degrees of gerrymandering, but there is no way to avoid it altogether in a winner-take-all system. The only real remedy is some form of proportional representation.

Proportional representation not only gets rid of arguments over district boundaries, it also enfranchises minorities, because the party that wins the most votes in a district gets most, but not all, of the seats. Minority parties can also win seats, which in the US would break the duopoly held by Republicans and Democrats.

With roughly one-third of American voters identifying themselves as independents, isn’t it time their interests were properly represented in Washington? The essence of representative democracy, after all, is to have a legislature that accurately reflects the makeup of the citizenry, not one that is skewed for partisan advantage.

But what about the downside of proportional representation? Detractors point to Italy and Israel as examples of the chaos that can afflict multiparty systems. They also argue that having larger districts means losing the certainty of having a legislator who will actually represent local interests.
Those are potential defects in some forms of proportional representation. But other forms avoid such pitfalls by clever design. Germany, New Zealand, and Mexico, for instance, still have single-member districts. But they also have at-large seats, which are used to ensure that each party’s total representation in the legislature corresponds with the popular vote at the regional or national level, thereby eliminating all advantages of gerrymandering.

Ireland has taken an alternative approach, setting up relatively small multiple-member districts. That keeps representation local. It also makes it difficult for tiny parties to get seated, but ensures representation for significant minorities. Also, the Irish have pioneered preference voting, which allows voters to rank the candidates, thereby ensuring that if their first choice does not make it, their second choice will be counted, and, if need be, their third choice. That gives them the freedom to vote their convictions, without fear of “wasting a vote” on someone who appears unlikely to win.

Americans justly pride themselves in having one of the world’s longest-lived democracies. But when hanging chads on ballots in Florida cast a pall over the presidential election of 2000, it subjected the US to global embarrassment and ridicule, all the more so because Americans are so prone to criticize other countries for democratic shortcomings.

The spectacle of a posse of Texas Rangers assigned to arrest legislators in an attempt to dragoon them into rubber-stamping a particularly egregious gerrymandering scheme is yet another embarrassment and a sure sign that electoral reform is seriously overdue.

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