



**LEAGUE OF WOMEN VOTERS®
OF OREGON**
Education Fund

Election Methods: Review of Alternatives and Oregon Proposals Executive Summary

Introduction. Alternative election methods may provide options to increase meaningful political participation. In 2007 the League of Women Voters of Oregon (LWVOR) convention delegates voted to study election methods. Analysis of the methods must be done in an Oregon context, particularly with reference to our vote-by-mail system.

Criteria for Evaluating Election Systems. The following criteria are listed in this LWV study:

Ensure majority rule. Most major political races currently can be won with only a plurality.
Encourage minority representation, where minority is defined by either party or cultural affiliation.

Encourage fair gender representation.

Produce fair and accurate representation of diverse political views in legislatures.

Increase voter participation.

Encourage geographical representation.

Encourage “sincere” voting, as opposed to “strategic” voting.

Maximize effective votes/minimize “wasted” votes.

Provide a reasonable range of voter choice.

Prevent fraud and political manipulation.

Encourage competitive elections. Incumbents currently have an overwhelming advantage in the US Congress. In addition, in Oregon’s May, 2008 primary there were only 20 contested primaries of 150 primary races.

Be easy to use and administer.

Other important attributes of a good election method are that it promote healthy political parties, ensure stable government, encourage issue-oriented campaigns, protect fundamental rights which include freedom of speech and association, discourage extremism, help manage political conflict, be responsive to changes in public opinion, produce results viewed as legitimate, reduce campaign spending, establish close links between constituents and representatives and permit evaluation of the method’s track record.

Nonpartisan Versus Partisan Elections

In attempting to weaken the control by party machines, Progressives at the beginning of the twentieth century advocated reforms that included making local elections nonpartisan, as the majority now are around the nation. In the last three legislative sessions in Oregon there have been unsuccessful proposals in support of a nonpartisan legislature.

Single Seat Election Methods

Unranked Methods

Plurality Elections. In Oregon all congressional, statewide, state senate, and state house offices are elected in single seat plurality elections. A majority winner is not required.

Approval Elections. Voters can vote for, or approve of, as many candidates as they wish in elections with more than two candidates, and the candidate with most approvals wins. Approval voting is not currently used in any public elections.

Range Voting. Voters assign to each candidate a numerical score within some range, say 0 to 9. The winner is the candidate with the highest average score, except that the winner's total score must be at least 50% of the sum received by any other candidate (a "quorum"). Range voting is not known to be used anywhere for governmental elections.

Ranked Methods

Borda Count Elections. This system requires voters to rank candidates from most to least preferred. Rankings are converted to points. The winner is the candidate with the most points. A Borda count is vulnerable to easy manipulation by "burying", which occurs when a voter ranks a minor party candidate with no realistic prospect of winning ahead of a major party candidate.

Condorcet Elections. A Condorcet ballot lists every pair of candidates and asks voters to designate their preference in each pairing. The confusing ballot and difficulty of tallying votes made this system impractical.

Open/Top Two Primary Reform. In today's primary elections in Oregon, for major parties only, the candidate nomination process is a government paid function. "Open primary" is loosely used to describe a wide range of primary options in the 22 states whose voter registration process does not require the voter to state a party preference.

In some states, voters make a declaration of which party nominees they want to vote on by requesting either a Republican or Democratic ballot at voting time.

In other states, ballots include a Democratic or Republican column and voters choose one party's column in the voting booth. Crossover voting is not allowed.

A blanket primary is a completely open one: both parties are listed on the ballot and a voter can vote for a nominee from either major party and crossover voting is allowed.

An open/top two primary opens primary elections for partisan offices to all voters regardless of party affiliation or nonaffiliation. In addition, all candidates regardless of party affiliation or nonaffiliation run in this form of primary. This primary system is no longer a state paid mechanism for parties to select their general election nominees, and parties will presumably find other mechanisms for endorsements such as caucuses or conventions. In this primary system, the two candidates that receive the most votes are "qualified" for the general election and can be from the same party. In Oregon in 2006, Initiative #86 for an open/top two primary failed to qualify for the ballot. In that year, the Public Commission of the Legislature urged legislative consideration of an open/top two primary bill, SB 630, in 2007. The Senate failed to pass SB 630 with bipartisan opposition. Measure 65 is expected to be on the November 2008 ballot.

Instant Runoff Voting. Instant Runoff Voting (IRV) can be used in partisan and nonpartisan elections and will elect a majority winner in just one election. Voters rank the candidates in order of their preference. In counting the ballots, all the number one preferences are first counted. Any candidate receiving over 50 percent of the first choice votes, is declared elected. If no candidate receives a majority, then the candidate with the fewest votes is eliminated and the votes of supporters of this defeated candidate are then transferred to the candidate they marked as their number two choice. The votes are then recounted to see if any candidate now receives a majority of the vote. The process of eliminating the lowest candidate and transferring his/her votes continues until there is a majority candidate.

In 1908 the Oregon Constitution was amended to authorize proportional representation laws. However, Oregon law states, “the person receiving the highest number of votes shall be nominated or elected.” Legislation was introduced to amend Oregon statutes to enable use of IRV but received no hearings during the 1999, 2001, and 2005 legislative sessions. Both Eugene and Ashland have unsuccessfully explored the possibility of IRV.

Fusion Voting. Fusion voting is the practice of nominating the same candidate for an office by multiple political parties. The votes for all lines where the candidate’s name appears on the ballot are added together to arrive at a grand total of votes for the candidate. Fusion voting gives voters the opportunity to express their support for a minor party’s agenda while also participating in the actual choice between major party candidates who have a substantial chance of winning.

Fusion voting was legal in the United States until the end of the nineteenth century, but ended in 1888 with the government-printed secret ballot. Currently, only seven states allow fusion voting. Although discussed in the Oregon Legislature, proposals were unsuccessful, primarily due to the fiscal impact of changing vote tally machines.

Multiple Seat Election Methods. Relatively few elections in Oregon involve simultaneously electing multiple candidates for multiple seats. Some city councils, some school boards, and many special rural district elections may use multiple seat elections.

Cumulative Voting. Each voter gets a fixed number of votes to allocate among the candidates, with the option of giving multiple votes to a single candidate. The candidates with the highest number of votes are elected to the available seats. If members of a group work together and get behind a single candidate, they can hope to have their voice represented on the government body.

Single Transferable Vote or Choice Voting. Used globally, this is the most popular system for proportional representation. Voters rank candidates in order of preference. Unpopular candidates are eliminated in succession and their supporters’ votes are transferred to the supporters’ next choices. The goal is for no vote to be “wasted.” When STV is used to elect a single candidate, it is called instant runoff voting.

Election Administration Considerations. Currently, most elections are funded by counties in Oregon. Any change in election systems may require software upgrades, certification of new vote tally software, voter education, increased attention to clear ballot design, and consideration of ballot length. Oregon’s vote-by-mail system is a special consideration because it is unique in the country, although it is similar to absentee voting ballots and procedures in other states.