

Cincinnati's 1988 Proportional Representation Initiative

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In a referendum the voters of Cincinnati rejected by 55 per cent to 45 per cent a proposal to adopt the single transferable vote system for electing the Cincinnati city council. STV had been in use in Cincinnati from 1925 until 1957 and it was the first effort to bring it back.

A relatively unique event in American politics occurred in November of 1988. Voters in a major American city, Cincinnati, Ohio,¹ were presented with a ballot initiative that, if approved, would have replaced the city's at-large plurality election system for choosing the city council with a single transferable vote (STV) proportional representation arrangement. Had the voters agreed to the change, Cincinnati would have become only the second city in the United States (the other being Cambridge, Massachusetts) to elect its council today through a PR system.² Sponsors of the proposed change were motivated primarily by a desire to rectify the 'underrepresentation' of Blacks and women in Cincinnati, and although the proposal was defeated in a racially divided vote, the proponents were encouraged by the fact that 45.4 per cent of those voting on the issue favoured the change. Given that the campaign for PR was a poorly financed, low profile affair, many proponents remain optimistic that voter approval of PR can be attained in a subsequent referendum.

The issue of electoral system revision has been 'like a persistent boomerang' in Cincinnati politics (Moloney, 1981). The 1988 proposition was in fact the seventh time that voters in Cincinnati have been presented with the question of adopting or retaining STV. The last time was in 1957 when the city's voters, after using the STV system in 16 councilmanic elections from 1925 through 1955, voted to substitute their current simple plurality at-large system for the PR scheme.³

Cincinnati's PR Experience

STV has been used at some time to elect city councils in approximately two dozen American cities (Childs, 1965:65; Kneier, 1957:235).⁴ The first city to adopt the system was Ashtabula, Ohio in 1917; the last adoptions were in 1950 in four Massachusetts cities, Worcester, Medford, Quincy, and Revere (Weaver, 1986:141). (The largest city to adopt STV was New York City, in 1936.) In almost every instance the adoption was part of a more extensive structural revision of municipal government centred around the council-manager form of government. Although the council-manager plan was a 'reform' that survived, PR was not. It came under

'incessant attack' in every city in which it was used (Childs, 1965:68; see generally Weaver, 1986:142-4), resulting in its abandonment everywhere but Cambridge.

Cincinnati's experience with PR seems fairly typical. STV was adopted in 1924 as part of a larger package of structural reforms. The voters that year voted to replace a mayor-council form of government with the council-manager system. The new city council would consist of nine members chosen through a formally nonpartisan at-large STV election, in contrast to the old 32 member council, of whom 26 were elected by district and six at-large in partisan elections.⁵ This structural revision was intended to undermine machine politics in Cincinnati. The Republican Party, under the dominance of 'bosses' George B. Cox and Rudolph K. Hynicka, had controlled municipal government for a number of years (see Taft, 1971:8-30, and more generally, Miller, 1968). In the six councilmanic elections prior to the 1924 referendum, the Republicans had won 187 of the 192 seats to be filled (97.4%) (Heisel, 1982:1). So gerrymandered was the system that in the last election, in 1923, Democratic candidates won only one of the 32 council seats despite receiving well over 40 per cent of the votes (Straetz, 1958:XIII, 63; Taft, 1971:96). STV was incorporated into the new system to preclude this type of electoral dominance in future elections (Reed, Reed and Straetz, 1957:11; see also Bentley, 1925).

As noted above, STV was used in 16 councilmanic elections in Cincinnati. While the ballot was officially nonpartisan, these elections were contested vigorously by two political parties, the Republicans and a local party, the City Charter Committee.⁶ The result was essentially a two-party system, as only four of the 144 seats filled in these 16 elections were won by candidates not endorsed by one of these parties. On only two occasions did either party win as many as six seats in any STV election, as votes (measured as first preferences) were translated into seats in a fairly proportional fashion, at least until 1955 (See Table 1).⁷

The PR system in Cincinnati, as elsewhere in the United States, was under persistent attack. The 1957 vote to repeal it was the *fifth* referendum in which voters were asked to abandon the system. The other repeal efforts occurred in 1936, 1939, 1947 and 1954. These referendums generally stimulated vitriolic campaigns (both for and against PR) and the votes were usually exceptionally close (see Table 2).⁸ The opponents of PR recited the usual arguments against it, for example, that it was too complex for voters and too expensive to administer, that outcomes were partially the result of chance or random factors, that it encouraged bloc voting along racial, ethnic, and religious lines, and that it could result in the election of 'crack pot' or fringe candidates and a fractionalized city council. Supporters of PR generally cited the fact that under PR Cincinnati had a strong two-party system, a fair translation of votes into seats, and effective representation of minority groups (for greater detail on these campaigns, see Straetz, 1958:passim).

One minority group in particular that had gained representation during the STV elections was Cincinnati's Black voters. No Black person had ever been elected to the council prior to the adoption of PR. The first Black was elected in the STV vote of 1931. A Black was also elected in the 1935 and 1937 elections. Blacks were then elected in each of the last eight elections conducted through STV, from 1941 through 1955, with two elected in both 1949 and 1951 (Reed, Reed and Straetz, 1957:31). The Black percentage of the population during this time, as measured by the decennial census, was 10.6 in 1930, 12.2 in 1940, and 15.5 in 1950, (the percentage of the voting age population was 10.3, 11.5, and 14.9, respectively). Blacks therefore had attained roughly, and sometimes better than, proportional

TABLE 1. Results of PR elections

Year	% of first preference votes for			No. of seat won		
	Charter candidates	Republican candidates	Other candidates	Charter	Republican	Other
1925	63.8	27.8	8.4	6	3	—
1927	58.0	28.6	13.4	6	2	1
1929	56.8	36.7	6.6	6	3	—
1931	52.8	39.6	7.6	5	4	—
1933	49.7	45.6	4.7	5	4	—
1935	39.6	41.1	19.3	4	4	1
1937	36.8	44.0	19.2	4	4	1
1939	34.3	49.4	16.4	4	4	1
1941	32.4	59.3	8.3	4	5	—
1943	40.2	54.2	5.6	4	5	—
1945	44.2	54.8	1.0	4	5	—
1947	47.8	47.8	4.4	5	4	—
1949	50.8	47.1	2.1	5	4	—
1951	47.3	52.2	0.5	4	5	—
1953	51.4	48.5	0.0	5	4	—
1955	42.9	51.0	6.1	5	4	—

Source: Reed, Reed and Straetz (1957:39).

TABLE 2. Repeal referendums

Year	Vote for PR	Vote against PR	Margin for PR	% for PR
1936	36,650	35,819	+831	50.6
1939	48,300	47,558	+742	50.4
1947	82,017	74,415	+7,602	52.4
1954	75,493	74,886	+607	50.2
1957	54,004	65,593	-11,589	45.2

Source: Heisel (1982:2).

representation for about two-and-a-half decades under PR.

Racial antagonism is widely regarded to have been the critical or decisive factor in the abandonment of PR. As reported in Table 2, the STV system had survived, by close votes, four efforts at repeal, including one as late as 1954. In 1957 however, PR was defeated by a margin of about 10 percentage points. This shift in voter support is often attributed to a fear that, if the system were not changed, Cincinnati would soon have a Black mayor. As in many council-manager systems, the mayor was selected by the council from among its own members. In 1953 and then again in 1955, the Charterites won a majority of the seats and therefore controlled this selection. In both elections, the only Charter candidate to be elected on the first count of the ballots was Theodore Berry, a Black. Although Berry was not named mayor, his status as the leading vote getter within the majority party was widely viewed as a basis for his asserting a powerful claim on that position. In what has been described

as 'an underground racist campaign' (Taft, 1971:X), the possibility of a Black mayor was made an issue in the 1957 repeal effort. STV is widely believed to have been dropped in Cincinnati to preclude this from happening (Straetz, 1958:XI; Patterson, 1974:84-5; Heisel, 1982:2; Stephens, 1987:15; Banfield and Wilson, 1963:97).⁹

The 1988 Initiative

Racial considerations were also a major factor in the effort to bring PR back to Cincinnati. The at-large plurality election system has a distinct tendency to leave a Black minority under-represented in a descriptive sense (see, for example, Engstrom and McDonald, 1981 and 1986), and Cincinnati's experience has not been an exception. Voting in councilmanic elections has been racially polarized, leaving black candidates at a distinct disadvantage in the at-large context (see Lieske and Hillard, 1984 and Hamilton, 1978:55-6, 59). Despite Blacks constituting 33.8 per cent of the city's population by 1980 (and 29.9 per cent of its voting age population), only one Black was elected to the council in both the 1985 and 1987 elections. This stimulated demands among Blacks for a change in the election system (demands fueled further by the fact that the Black who had been elected those years was a Republican viewed by some Blacks as too conservative).

A critical event that contributed to the elevation of these demands into a serious political issue was a visit to Cincinnati by the Reverend Jesse Jackson soon after the 1985 councilmanic election. All nine incumbent council members stood for re-election that year, including at that time two Blacks and three women (one a black woman). While all five of the white males retained their seats, along with the (Republican) black male, the two white women and the black woman were replaced on the council by three additional white males. Both Blacks and women therefore were left seriously under-represented in a descriptive sense.¹⁰ Jackson had made the problem of minority vote dilution a major issue in his 1984 presidential campaign, and had specifically identified at-large elections as a major impediment to the election of minority candidates (Barker, 1987:40). Not surprisingly, during his visit to Cincinnati Jackson encouraged a challenge to the city's election system, and the Cincinnati chapter of Jackson's Rainbow Coalition subsequently pressed for a change.

The Rainbow Coalition made two important decisions in 1986. One was to choose STV over single-member districts as the system to replace the at-large plurality scheme. Single-member districts have almost always been the preferred alternative to at-large elections among Blacks in the United States. In Cincinnati, however, it was felt that the Black population was too dispersed geographically to take full advantage of a district arrangement. This concern was compounded by fears that the districts themselves would be gerrymandered to the disadvantage of Blacks. STV, on the other hand, was viewed as a system that had, and would once again, provide equitable representation for Blacks (as well as other voting groups) (see Stephens, 1987:15, also Hamilton, 1978:45-6, 54-5). The second decision was to use the initiative process, rather than litigation, as the means through which to bring about the change. The issue could be placed on the ballot for voters to decide if a petition requesting such a vote was signed by enough registered voters (the number of signatures had to equal at least 10 per cent of the total number of valid ballots cast in the last municipal election). A legal challenge, based on the Voting Rights Act or Fourteenth Amendment (see, e.g., Engstrom, 1985), was viewed as too expensive. In addition, there was no guarantee that a successful attack on the at-large plurality

system in court would result in the adoption of STV, as the choice of a 'remedy' would not be left to the plaintiffs.

A number of other organizations and groups joined the Rainbow Coalition in the effort to bring PR back to Cincinnati. Among these were the Charter Committee, the local reform party that had been 'the patron saint of PR' in the past (Straetz, 1958:10), women's groups such as the local affiliates of the National Organization for Women (NOW) and the Women's Political Caucus, labour organizations, including the AFL-CIO Labor Council, and political reform organizations like Common Cause. Individuals from these and other organizations established the Fair Ballot Coalition, which assumed direction of the petition drive as well as the subsequent campaign in favour of PR. Over 14,000 signatures were presented to election officials in September of 1988, and the PR proposal was placed on the November general election ballot.¹¹

The brief two-month campaign was a low profile affair. There was no paid advertising on television or radio, nor in the daily newspapers. Neither was there significant coverage of the issue by the local news media, which had to be attentive to the concurrent campaigns for national, state, and county offices. The proponents spent only about \$15,000 in what has been described as 'a hastily organized and poorly financed campaign' (Wilkinson, 1988:C1). The major argument on behalf of PR, as noted above, was that it would provide more fair and equitable representation, especially for Blacks and women. Other themes developed in the proponents' campaign was that PR, by making almost all votes 'count', would stem the decline in voter turnout in the city's councilmanic elections, and that PR had previously and would again, if necessary, prevent corruption in government. Proponents also maintained that a computer-assisted STV system would not only keep the act of voting simple, but allow ballots to be counted as quickly as (and at no greater expense than) they are under the current arrangement.

A majority of the city council opposed the proposed revision in the election system, as did the local Republican Party, and the city's major newspaper, the *Cincinnati Enquirer* (the Democratic Party took a neutral position). Opponents noted that the system would not guarantee the election of more Blacks or women. It would, however, divide the electorate into narrow special interests, they argued, resulting in a 'fractionalized' city council containing 'one of everything'. The system, they further maintained, would be confusing to the voters, while the counting of the ballots would be a 'nightmare'. The adoption of STV would be, the *Enquirer* editorialized, 'the worst thing that could happen to the City of Cincinnati politically' (18 September 1988).

PR was rejected on election day by a vote of 65,496 (54.6%) to 54,438 (45.4%). The reason for PR's defeat was summarized succinctly by a Cincinnati journalist (Wilkinson, 1988:C1):

It's pretty simple: Most white voters voted against proportional representation (PR)..., most black voters voted for it, and not enough blacks went to the polls.

Although no exit or post-election polls were taken on the PR issue, precinct returns reflected a clear racial division in the vote on PR. An examination of the vote across geographical areas of the city, for example, led a political scientist at the University of Cincinnati to estimate that about 80 per cent of the Blacks voting on the proposition supported PR, while only about 33 per cent of the Whites did

Table 3. Participation figures for the November 1988 election

	% of registered voters that signed in	% Falloff*		
		Presidential election	Tax proposition	PR proposition
City-wide	63.3	3.3	8.3	14.5
Pro-PR Wards	53.4	5.6	14.9	20.5
Con-PR Wards	69.4	2.3	5.4	11.4

*The percentage of those who signed in that did not vote in the respective election.

(Tuchfarber, 1989:2). The vote across the predominantly White areas of the city did not appear to vary by social class.

While support for PR was especially marked among those Blacks voting on the issue, participation in the PR vote appears to have been considerably lower among Blacks than Whites. This is suggested by a comparison of participation figures (Table 3) for the five wards in which the vote in favour of PR was greater than 65 per cent, all of which are majority Black, and the five wards in which the vote was less than 35 per cent, all predominantly White. Despite the presence of the American presidential election on the ballot, only 63.3 per cent of Cincinnati's registered voters signed in to vote on election day. Within the pro-PR wards, however, this figure was even lower, 53.4 per cent, compared with 69.4 per cent in the wards most opposed to PR. This is consistent, of course, with a general tendency for election day turnout to be lower among Blacks than Whites in the United States (see especially Abramson and Claggett, 1984, 1986 and 1989).

Racial differences in participation do not necessarily stop at the sign-in stage, however. The typical American ballot contains numerous separate elections. The November 1988 ballot in Cincinnati, for example, contained contests for federal, state, and county offices (including offices such as county engineer and county coroner), as well as two ballot propositions (the other concerned a renewal of a nominal property tax levy for the county park system). Several studies have discovered that among people signing in to vote, Blacks tend to vote in fewer of the election contests on a ballot than do Whites (see, e.g., Walker, 1966:460; Collins, 1980:333, and Sheffield and Hadley, 1984:458). Blacks have been found to be disproportionately likely to 'falloff', in particular, on ballot propositions (Magleby, 1984:103-14, and Vanderleeuw and Engstrom, 1987), and this appears to have been the case with Cincinnati's PR proposition as well. Falloff in the vote on PR was 20.5 per cent in the pro-PR wards, compared with 11.4 per cent in the wards most opposed (Table 3). Surprisingly, in both groups of wards, and in the city overall, fewer ballots were cast on the PR proposition than on the nominal tax renewal (which was approved by 58.4 per cent of those voting on the issue). Black support for PR, while impressive, was diluted by disproportionately low participation.

Conclusion

The effort to bring PR back to Cincinnati is not dead. Proponents were disappointed but not discouraged by the November vote. Many in fact are optimistic that another

attempt, in the near future, could be successful. Restructuring the election system will certainly remain on the public agenda in that city, as even many opponents of PR interpreted the closer than expected vote as a sign that the present system needs to be changed (although not to STV).

This effort to adopt PR was, as noted above, a relatively unique event in American politics. Rarely is PR viewed as a serious alternative to the first (or first few) past-the-post system that dominates the American electoral landscape. But in a broader sense, what occurred in Cincinnati in 1988 is no longer unique. Challenges to the basic plurality format are being heard increasingly in the United States. These challenges are driven, as in Cincinnati, by minority voter dissatisfaction with the representational consequences of that format, and they are producing, as in Cincinnati, demands for a major restructuring of election systems. Outside Cincinnati, however, the proposed alternatives have focused on the semi-PR systems of cumulative and limited voting. A number of local governments, in fact, have adopted (through settlements in voting rights lawsuits) semi-PR arrangements in recent years, and minorities have contested elections successfully under them (see Engstrom, 1989, and Engstrom, Taebel and Cole, 1989). Cincinnati still stands out, however, as the only place in the United States in which PR itself is a serious item on the public agenda.

Notes

1. Cincinnati's population, in 1980, was 385,457. It is the central city of a metropolitan area containing over 1.6 million people.
2. The only other use of PR to elect a public governing body in the United States today is the election through STV of 32 community school boards within the City of New York. This use of STV was mandated by a state statute adopted in 1969 (see Weaver, 1984:197 and 1986:141-2, 146-7).
3. Under the present '9X' system, all nine seats on the city council are up for election every odd numbered year. Voters are allowed to cast a vote for as many as nine candidates, but may cast no more than one for any particular candidate. The top nine vote-recipients among the candidates are awarded the seats.
4. No city has used a list system of PR (see Weaver, 1986:139).
5. The new city charter containing all of these changes was adopted by a vote of 92,510 to 41,015.
6. The Charter party was formed after the adoption of the 1924 city charter and continues to operate today. On the earliest STV elections in Cincinnati, see Goldman (1930).
7. The disproportionate results in 1955 are attributed to an absence of cohesion in the transfer of ballots across Republican candidates (see Reed, Reed and Straetz, 1957:40, 42-3, and Appendix).
8. The proposed alternatives were in all but one case the 9X system. The exception was the 1954 proposal which was a limited voting scheme in which each voter could cast up to six votes although nine candidates would continue to be elected.
9. The disproportionate result (based on first preference votes) in 1955 also may have contributed to the swing away from PR, along with the fact that the first recount of ballots occurred in 1955. Although the recount did not change the outcome, and even replicated the initial count almost perfectly, it did take a total of 14 days to complete (Reed, Reed and Straetz, 1957:44-5).
10. One of the White women was again elected in 1987, and a second Black was appointed to fill a vacancy on the council in 1988.
11. An effort was made to obtain the signatures in time to have the PR issue on the same

ballot as the state's presidential primary in May. This was viewed as advantageous because Jesse Jackson's candidacy was expected to stimulate a high Black turnout that day. Not enough signatures were obtained by that time however (see Stephens, 1989:9).

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