

STV:

**A progressive
cause**

**A short history of
STV in the US**

We are grateful to **Professor Douglas Amy** of Mount Holyoke College for permission to reprint this article. We are also grateful to the McDougall Trust, a charity associated with the Electoral Reform Society, in whose journal, 'Representation', this article was first published.

Foreword

As we debate the case for using the single transferable vote system for local government elections in Britain, we generally look to Ireland (both Northern Ireland and the Republic) where STV is used for public elections, to see what effect STV might have on our own local democracy.

Little is known in Britain, however, about the American experience of STV. Between 1915 and 1936, two dozen US cities adopted STV for their local elections. Gradually all but one – Cambridge, Massachusetts – reverted to the first-past-the-post electoral system with which we are familiar. But, as Professor Amy's article points out, STV in the US was not abandoned because it did not live up to its supporters' claims – it was rejected because it did!

While electoral reform is an issue which divides people in Britain who regard themselves as 'progressive', in the US it was a reform promoted by the 'Progressive Movement' – a grouping of those concerned about civic rights, racial equality and politics free from the control of undemocratic party bosses and corporate interests. Where STV was adopted, it succeeded in producing more representative local government in which smaller, but significant, parties were able to win seats as were candidates from ethnic minority groups.

Over time, however, party bosses and their big business backers, sometimes after several attempts, were able to

overthrow STV, an electoral system which deprived them of almost unfettered political power. In New York, the final straw which broke STV was the election of a communist candidate in the McCarthy era, leading to STV being branded as a Stalinist import. Cambridge, Massachusetts, is the only city in which STV has survived.

STV is, however, making a comeback. With dissatisfaction over the two-party nature of American politics and concerns over issues such as the manipulation of constituency boundaries and the influence of company donations, there are many groups, particularly the Center for Voting and Democracy, which are calling for a renewal of American democracy. The demand for STV is back on the agenda.

In Britain, the case for electoral reform is not just based on the need for party proportionality but is about the nature of our politics. We too need a system which will shift power from parties to voters, which will improve the representation of women and ethnic and other minorities, and which will lead to councils which better reflect the diversity of society.

In America the Progressive Movement believed that STV would help to break the dominance of machine politics and achieve real democracy: Professor Amy's article demonstrates that they were right to do so. The history of STV in the US therefore has important lessons for those in Britain who want to see a better and fairer democracy here.

Ken Ritchie
Chief Executive
The Electoral Reform Society

The Forgotten History of the Single Transferable Vote in the United States

Douglas J. Amy

The United States has always clearly fitted into the category of first-past-the-post electoral systems. It is hardly surprising then that few people are aware of its history of experimentation with proportional representation (PR) elections. Admittedly these experiments were few in number, with only two dozen American cities using the single transferable vote (STV) during the first half of this century. Nevertheless, the story of STV's use in the United States provides some useful information about the history of this electoral system, its political effects, and the difficulties facing its adoption.

The historical roots of proportional representation

The political roots of proportional representation in the United States are located in the Progressive Movement of the early twentieth century. Besides such issues as child labour laws, anti-monopoly legislation, and women's suffrage, Progressives were also interested in government reform. Many were particularly concerned about the corruption in urban governments. Large cities often were dominated by 'party machines', of which Tammany Hall in New York City was the most infamous. Bribery, kickbacks,

favouritism, and voting fraud were rampant in these cities. The Progressives wanted to clean up these cities and blunt the power of the party bosses.

Their urban reform programme included such things as the non-partisan ballot and replacing elected mayors with appointed city managers. Some Progressives also added proportional representation to this reform agenda. They realised that winner-take-all, single-member district elections served to reinforce the power of urban political machines. It was not unusual for machines to win almost all the seats on city councils, based on only 50-60 per cent of the vote. PR was seen as a way to break these one-party monopolies and to allow for the fair representation of a variety of political parties.

The Proportional Representation League of the United States was also instrumental in promoting the use of PR. Founded in 1893, the League soon followed the lead of British electoral reform groups and endorsed the single transferable vote as the most preferable version of PR. The League eventually began to enjoy some political success when it decided in 1912 that its most realistic goal would be to promote the adoption of PR on the city level. Cities presented the fewest legal and procedural obstacles to PR. Usually cities would only need to change their charters to adopt PR elections. This change could be made by referendums that would be voted on directly by citizens, thereby avoiding the need to convince government officials to pass this reform.

Proportional representation received an important boost in 1914 when the National Municipal League, a leading proponent of urban reform, included STV

elections in its model city charter. Soon afterwards, in 1915, Ashtabula, Ohio became the first American city to adopt STV elections. Before long, Boulder, Kalamazoo, Sacramento, and West Hartford followed suit. In the mid 1920s, the first large urban areas, Cleveland and Cincinnati, adopted STV elections, and two other Ohio cities, Toledo and Hamilton, soon joined them. The greatest victory of PR advocates came in 1936 when voters in New York City approved the adoption of STV elections by a large margin. Interest in PR jumped dramatically as a result, with STV eventually being adopted in eleven other cities, including seven in Massachusetts. In all, two dozen American cities joined the PR camp.

Effects on representation

What political effects did STV have on the cities that adopted it? Did STV fulfil the political promises of its proponents to reduce corruption, ensure fair representation, and increase voter participation? Or did it confirm the fears of PR critics who predicted confused voters, lower turnout, and increased political divisiveness?

Scholars have begun to shed some light on these questions. The most extensive research to date has been produced by Kathleen Barber and several colleagues. Their study, *Proportional Representation and Electoral Reform in Ohio*, systematically analysed the political effects of STV in five Ohio cities. In many cases their findings are also confirmed by data from other STV cities. Among other things, Barber found that STV produced fairer and more proportional representation of political parties. In particular, STV eliminated the tendency of single-member district systems to exaggerate the seats given to the largest

party and to underrepresent the smaller parties. In the election before the adoption of PR in Cincinnati, the Republicans won 55 per cent of the vote, but received 97 per cent of the seats on the council. In the first STV election, the results were much more proportional, with the Republicans winning 33.3 per cent of the seats based on 27.8 per cent of the vote, and the rival Charter party winning 66.7 per cent of the seats on 63.8 per cent of the vote.

Similarly, in the last pre-PR election in New York City, the Democrats won 95.3 per cent of the seats on the Board of Aldermen with only 66.5 per cent of the vote. During the use of STV, the Democrats retained a majority of the seats, but it was a much smaller one that reflected more accurately their strength in the electorate. In 1941, STV gave the Democrats 65.5 per cent of the seats on 64 per cent of the vote. Moreover, STV also produced representation for the Republicans and three smaller parties in proportion to their voting strength. Similar results occurred in the other STV cities, demonstrating that this system greatly improved the accuracy of partisan representation.

STV also encouraged fairer racial and ethnic representation. It produced the first Irish Catholics elected in Ashtabula, and the first Polish Americans elected in Toledo. In Cincinnati, Hamilton and Toledo, African Americans had never been able to win city office until the coming of STV. Significantly, after these cities abandoned PR, African Americans again found it almost impossible to get elected.

Effects on political machines

Some evidence suggests that STV helped undermine the power of political

machines and party bosses. In several cities, such as Cincinnati, the machines lost their majorities and their grip on power. After the transition to STV, Cincinnati went from a city with one of the worst reputations for corruption to one that won praise for the integrity and professionalism of its city government. Interestingly, even in cities where the dominant party retained its majority, STV sometimes helped to curb the power of party bosses. It did so by allowing the election of independent Democratic and Republican candidates – candidates nominated by petition and not beholden to party leaders. STV proponents were correct, then, in predicting that this candidate-centred system would tend to take power away from party leaders and give it to voters.

Effects on wasted votes

Proponents of STV also believed it would minimise wasted votes. They argued that the ballot transfer process would ensure that most people would cast effective votes – votes that actually elected someone to office. The evidence supports this claim. In Cincinnati, the number of effective votes improved dramatically, rising from an average of 56.2 per cent in the three pre-STV elections to an average of 90 per cent for the 16 STV elections. Similar effects were found in other STV cities. In Cleveland, the number of effective votes increased from an average of 48.3 per cent in the pre-PR period to an average of 79.6 per cent during the STV period. And in New York City, the number of effective votes grew from an average of 60.6 per cent to 79.2 per cent with STV.

Effects on the party system

How did STV affect the size of the party systems in these cities? Did it subvert the

traditional American two-party system, as critics feared it would? Not always. In some cities, STV produced a stable two-party system. In Cincinnati, the PR elections were contested between the Republicans and the Charter Committee, with no minor party candidates winning representation. Indeed, only once in all of the PR elections in the five cities in Ohio did a minor party candidate win office – a Socialist in Ashtabula in 1915.

The situation was different in New York City – an intensely cosmopolitan area with a variety of political cultures. STV nurtured a vigorous multi-party system, where at any one time the Democrats and Republicans were joined on the city council by three smaller parties, including the American Labor Party, the Fusion Party, and the Communist Party. In general, however, STV did not seem to automatically favour a multi-party system over a two-party system but instead it tended to produce a party system that reflected whatever degree of political diversity already existed in particular cities.

Effects on voter turnout

STV proponents had predicted higher voter participation, reasoning that having fewer wasted votes and more choices at the polls would give citizens more incentive to vote. Opponents had forecast a drop in turnout, with voters discouraged by complicated ballots and incomprehensible vote counting procedures. In reality, however, STV seemed to have little effect on voter turnout. Barber and her colleagues looked at turnout rates before, during, and after the use of STV in five Ohio cities and found little correlation between voting systems and the degree of voter participation. She concluded that ‘the emergence and disappearance of local

issues and candidates appear to have had more to do with the act of voting than did the form of the ballot...” The scattered evidence from other PR cities seems to confirm the importance of local factors, with some cities seeing increased turnout with the adoption of PR and others seeing a decline.

Effects on political stability

Another great concern of STV critics was that it would increase political conflict and divisiveness. They worried that it would encourage so-called ‘bloc voting’ along ethnic, racial, religious, and class lines, and that the resulting city councils would be paralysed by conflict. In practice, STV often did result in substantial bloc voting. But as defenders observed at the time, so too did first-past-the-post elections.

As noted earlier, STV also produced some city councils that were more demographically and politically diverse. But there is no evidence that this increased political pluralism had any detrimental impact on the workings of these city councils. In the five Ohio STV cities, Barber and her colleagues found ‘no systematic evidence of greater dissension on PR elected councils, compared with the councils elected by other means... Indeed, striking decreases in conflict were found after PR-STV was implemented in Hamilton and Toledo.” This lack of increased conflict may have resulted from the ballot transfer process in STV, which encourages politicians to be more civil to each other so as not to risk alienating potential supporters.

STV made a difference

On the whole, from the available evidence, the single transferable vote seemed to have a beneficial effect on the cities that adopted it. It clearly produced

more representative government and, where voters wanted it, a more diverse party system. Large increases in the number of effective votes were also enjoyed in these cities. It may not have resulted in the substantial increases in voter turnout that proponents predicted, but neither did it produce the large decreases in participation that critics feared. And finally, even though STV city councils were often more diverse politically, this did not seem to impair their political efficiency or effectiveness.

The abandonment of STV

If STV amassed this generally favourable record, why was it eventually rejected by all but one US city, Cambridge, Massachusetts? The answer to this question is complex, with a number of factors playing a role in the abandonment of STV. Sometimes the reasons were primarily local. In a few cities dissatisfaction grew over other elements of the reform charters, such as the city manager, and when the reform charter was thrown out, STV went with it.

However, there were several common factors at work in many of the cities that abandoned PR. For instance, STV universally came under attack from the politicians and parties who lost power and privileges. In Michigan and California, the dominant political parties mounted legal challenges and the courts in these states ruled that STV violated their constitutions. A more common attack was the effort to repeal STV by popular referendum. The referendum was a two-edged sword for STV – initially making it easier to adopt this reform, but also making it easier for opponents to challenge it. In Cleveland, well-financed opponents sponsored five repeal referendums in the first ten years of STV,

with the final one succeeding. Similarly, STV opponents in Hamilton finally won their repeal effort after four failed referendums in 12 years.

Another common factor contributing to the demise of STV was the inability of supporters to defend it effectively. By 1932, the PR League was losing steam. It was unable to finance its separate existence and had to merge with the National Municipal League. In some cities, the progressive political coalition that supported STV gradually disintegrated. Important reform leaders lost interest over the years, moved to the suburbs, or died. Two exceptions to this trend were Cincinnati and Cambridge, both of which had active and well-supported organisations dedicated to defending STV. In Cincinnati the Charter Committee aggressively defended STV and it survived there for over thirty years, despite repeated challenges. The Cambridge Civic Association has also proved to be an energetic and capable defender of STV and has defeated every repeal effort to date.

Playing the race card

Another factor working against defenders of PR in many cities was the controversial nature of minority representation. Many Americans in the early twentieth century were hostile to political and racial minorities – the very groups aided by STV. Opponents of STV were not above fanning the flames of prejudice in their efforts to get rid of this reform. In particular, critics often played upon two of the most basic fears of white, middle class Americans: race and communism.

In Cincinnati, race was the dominant theme in the successful 1957 repeal effort. The single transferable vote had

allowed African Americans to be elected for the first time, with two blacks being elected to the city council in the 1950s. The nation was also seeing the first stirrings of the Civil Rights movement and racial tensions were running high. STV opponents shrewdly decided to make race an explicit factor in their repeal campaign. They warned whites that STV was helping to increase black power in the city and asked them whether they wanted a 'Negro mayor'. Their appeal to white anxieties succeeded, with whites supporting repeal by a two to one margin.

Red scare

In New York City, fear of communism proved the undoing of STV. Although one or two Communists had served on the STV-elected city council since 1941, it was not until the coming of the Cold War that Democratic Party leaders were able to effectively exploit this issue. As historian Robert Kolesar discovered, the Democrats made every effort in their repeal campaign to link PR with Soviet Communism, describing STV as 'the political importation from the Kremlin', 'the first beachhead of Communist infiltration in this country', and 'an un-American practice which has helped the cause of communism and does not belong in the American way of life.'

This 'red scare' campaign resulted in the repeal of PR by an overwhelming margin. Just as the earlier adoption of the single transferable vote in New York City prompted other cities to consider this reform, its well-publicised defeat there also encouraged repeal efforts in other STV cities. PR was abandoned in neighbouring Long Beach and Yonkers in 1947 and 1948. Repeal campaigns also won in Boulder (1947), Toledo (1949), and Wheeling (1951). The PR movement

never recovered from these defeats; and although supporters remained optimistic, the 1950s saw the repeal of STV in one city after another. By 1962, only Cambridge, Massachusetts retained this system.

While the repeal of STV in these American cities was taken by opponents as evidence that this electoral system had failed, it is probably more accurate to conclude that this system was rejected because it worked too well. STV worked too well in throwing party bosses out of government, bosses who never relented in their attempts to regain power. More importantly, STV worked too well in promoting the representation of racial, ethnic, and ideological minorities that were previously shut out by the first-past-the-post system. The political successes of these minorities set the stage for a political backlash that was effectively exploited by opponents of STV.

Renewed interest in STV

The 1990s have seen a revival of interest in proportional representation in the United States, and again STV has been the system promoted by most reformers. One organisation leading the way is the Center for Voting and Democracy in Washington D.C., a non-partisan educational institution that has been active in disseminating information about alternative election systems, particularly proportional representation. At the grassroots level, citizens in several cities, including San Francisco, Seattle, Cincinnati, and Eugene, have been organising to bring STV to their municipal elections. In addition, leaders of several minor parties, including the Greens, the Libertarians, and the New Party, have endorsed a switch to PR elections.

Ironically, one of the issues spurring the greatest interest in PR is the very one that helped to scuttle it in the first place: racial representation. Until recently, under the single-member district system, the main way that African Americans and other minorities have been able to win representation has been through the drawing of special election districts in which they are the majority – so called 'majority-minority' districts. However, in several recent decisions, the United States Supreme Court has declared many of these districts unconstitutional, and it seems in the process of closing the door on this approach to fair minority representation. This has led some minority voting rights advocates, such as law professor Lani Guinier, to make the case for proportional representation elections, including STV. Using PR's large multi-member districts would allow for the fair representation of minorities, and do so without the necessity of drawing special districts for minorities.

It remains to be seen whether these new developments are only another brief flirtation with proportional representation or whether this new system will gain some widespread use in the United States. Undoubtedly the outcome will be determined, as it was in the past, not simply by considerations of what is the best electoral system, but also by which groups are best able to mobilise political power and popular opinion.

References

Robert J. Kolesar, *Communism, Race and the Defeat of Proportional Representation in Cold War America* (University Heights, Ohio: History Department, John Carroll University, 1996).

Kathleen L. Barber, *Proportional Representation and Electoral Reform in Ohio* (Columbus, Ohio: State University Press, 1995).

About the author

Douglas Amy is Professor of Politics at Mount Holyoke College. He is author of 'Real Choice / New Voices: How proportional representation elections could revitalize American Democracy' and 'The Politics of Environmental Mediation', both published by Columbia University Press, and 'Behind the Ballot Box: a citizen's guide to voting systems' published by Praeger Publishing.