

## Proportional representation gives everyone a reason to get out and vote

John Burbank; News Tribune Columnist

We all know about Florida, where a couple of hundred votes and thousands of disputed ballots determined a presidential election. But have you ever heard of David Harrison, Joyce McDonald, Adrienne Thompson and Lois McMahan?

All are legislators who could have been if the vote totals had swung just a percentage point in their favor in Pierce and Kitsap counties last November. And all are victims of the winner-take-all system of voting we take for granted here. It is something for our legislators to consider as they debate a new system of voting.

A recent court decision threw out Washington's open primary. So now legislators must come up with a new primary system. If they fail, then the decision will be made in the courts, namely by Judge Burgess in federal District Court in Tacoma.

This winner-take-all system makes sense in baseball, but in politics it undermines the fundamental nature of democracy. Essentially, only one vote counts, the one that makes the difference between a winner and a loser. All other votes can be thrown away.

The fundamental nature of a representative democracy is that the people choose their representatives. But with voter turnout in Pierce, Kitsap, Benton and Franklin Counties hovering at 55 percent of the total adult population in 2000 and, worse yet, 44 percent in 1998, we know that in too many elections, the majority of people are choosing not to vote.

Article I, Section 19 of the Washington State Constitution reads: "Freedom of elections. All elections shall be free and equal."

Consider this: In the 25th District state Senate race, 48 people voted for Joyce McDonald (Republican) for every 49 people voting for Jim Kastama (Democrat). Kastama got elected. The 49 people who voted for him are wholly represented, while the 48 people voting for McDonald are wholly unrepresented. So much for equality: One vote translates into zero power, while another vote translates into total representation.

So what to do? There is a different and more democratic system of voting that ensures votes are translated into political representation. That system is proportional representation. Essentially, it means that if 10 representatives are to be elected, and one party gets 20 percent of the vote, two of its candidates will be elected.

If another party gets 60 percent of the vote, six of its candidates are elected. Above a certain threshold of support, voters know that they will have representation in Olympia. And you can design this to maximize individual choice so the voters (not the parties) choose the candidates who are to be the parties' representatives in Olympia.

What would this look like for Pierce County? Pierce County holds about 12 percent of the total state population, entitling it to 12 seats in the House of Representatives. In the next election, the Republicans and

Democrats put up a full slate of candidates, and the Libertarians, Green Party, and new Labor and Right-to-Life parties also nominate candidates.

On Election Day, each voter selects a top candidate. The votes for all candidates are tallied together by party, and each party's legislative delegation is proportionally determined. The top vote-getters in each party, if the party meets the threshold for winning seats, are the people who are sent to Olympia.

If the Republicans and Democrats each get around 44 percent of the total vote, they each get five representatives. But the real interesting part comes if the Libertarians and Green parties get 6 percent of the total vote: Then they too get representation, maybe one seat each.

Well, you ask, what would this do?

Our current system pushes Democrats and Republicans toward a homogenization of public speaking and political discussion. Who isn't for families and work? But behind the rhetoric, Democratic and Republican parties and legislative leaders can easily sideline policy solutions, ideas and issues that could and should be part of the back-and-forth of governance. In short, our current system allows only a very shallow democracy.

The election process that I am suggesting would result in a flourishing of political ideas, candidates, parties, political participation and voting. The environment of decision-making by the power elite could be replaced with real, raucous and democratic debate.

People, instead of ignoring government, would have a reason to vote. Their votes would be translated into representation. Most importantly, election outcomes would be truly and accurately reflected in the Legislature. For our democracy, this should be more than a pipe dream.


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