

How We Elect Our Representatives

Electoral Systems are the rules and procedures governing the election of public officials by specifying ballot structure, district size, and the way that votes are translated into seats. Electoral systems can enhance or deny voter representation just as gerrymandering can when district lines are drawn.

The **Plurality Election** is the most used electoral system in the U.S. (It is also called the At-Large or Winner-Take-All system). The candidate with the most votes wins, without necessarily receiving a majority of the votes. Such systems allow 51% of the voters to control 100% of the seats. Some Plurality Elections require **Runoff Elections** if no candidate achieves a certain percentage of the vote. In runoff elections voters go back to the polls to ensure that the winner receives a majority or certain percentage of the vote.

Another electoral system used is the **Proportional Election**, which depends upon the percentage of the vote that the candidates receive. For example, 40% of the vote gets 40% of the seats in a legislative body. 60% of the vote gets 60% of the seats in a legislative body.

Ranked Choice Voting (RCV) or Instant Runoff Voting is a form of proportional voting that has gained popularity and deserves further explanation. Voters rank candidates by preference, indicating a “back-up” candidate if their first choice does not have enough support to get elected. RCV can also be used to achieve a proportional result (i.e., 40% of the votes get 40% of the seats).

Verifiable Voting comprises procedures that provide a secondary confirmation, such as a paper ballot, that the voting equipment has correctly counted a voter’s ballot.

Consider: How do you choose a candidate? Do you always vote for your favorite candidate regardless of outcome? If so, you have cast a **Sincere Vote**. In Electoral Systems that encourage sincere voting you can vote for your preferred candidate and not worry about “wasting” your vote. If your candidate was the winner, then you have also cast an **Effective Vote**.

You may at times consider **Strategic Voting** and vote for a candidate other than your first choice in hopes of preventing what you consider a less-than-desirable outcome. You decide to vote not for your favorite candidate, but for the candidate who may have a greater chance of victory.

You might not vote for your first choice in order to avoid the **Spoiler Effect**, which can happen when two like-minded candidates split the vote and, as a result, help elect a less favored candidate. A well-known example of the spoiler effect occurred during the 1992

presidential election when Ross Perot split the vote with George H.W. Bush and helped elect Bill Clinton with 43% of the vote. The spoiler effect occurred again in 2000 when Ralph Nader split the vote with Al Gore, helping to elect George W. Bush.

With more than two candidates on the ballot, **Vote Splitting** can occur. Again, the outcome might lead to the election of a least favored candidate winning as two favored candidates split the vote.

The prospect of vote splitting can also cause good, like-minded candidates to not even run for office. This reduces your choices as a voter, especially when parties discourage people from running. Whenever votes are not useful in the election of a winner, they are referred to as **Wasted Votes**. Often this means all ballots cast for the losing candidates are labeled “wasted,” but it can also mean the extra or not needed votes cast in support of a much-liked winner.

Are some Electoral Systems better than others? What criteria would you include to create a better Electoral System? Would you like to have a discussion on this topic at an upcoming meeting?

Reprinted from the LWV of East Nassau Voter