Election Methods Update Study Executive Summary

The principal difficulty lies, and the greatest care should be employed in constituting this Representative Assembly. It should be in miniature, an exact portrait of the people at large. It should think, feel, reason, and act like them. That it may be the interest of this Assembly to do strict justice at all times, it should be an equal representation, or in other words equal interest among the people should have equal interest in it. Great care should be taken to effect this, and to prevent unfair, partial, and corrupt elections.

-John Adams

Have we taken all the care we can to ensure fair, impartial and representative elections? In addition to fighting voter disenfranchisement and the corrupting influence of money, are there ways to design the way we vote to help ensure our elected officials speak for the people and our legislative bodies are more nearly a miniature portrait of the people at large?

In this report we build on the work of the 2008 Election Methods Committee to present and evaluate voting methods and election systems that are currently in use in the U.S. or around the world and that could be considered for adoption in Oregon. In Benton County, one such system will be on the ballot in November 2016.

Single-Winner Election Systems

There are multiple options for electing a single winner. A single-winner election could be for a single position, such as a Mayor or Governor, or for a single legislator from a certain geographic area, such as the one congressperson representing a particular district, or a councilor representing the whole city. Oregon currently uses first-past-the-post, plurality voting, but there are other possibilities.

Plurality is the American status quo. It's easy to use and understand, but it discourages sincere voting and, compared to other methods, is less effective at electing the candidate who is most representative of the people.

Delayed runoff is an improvement on plurality in electing representative candidates. It requires two elections, one to narrow the field to two candidates and one to select between the two, usually involving lower voter turnout in one of the elections.

Range voting requires voters to rate each candidate on a scale, say from 1 to 5. The candidate with the highest average rating wins. If all voters vote sincerely, range voting is extremely good at selecting the most representative candidate. It is, unfortunately, very susceptible to strategic voting as opposed to sincere voting.

Approval voting enables voters to indicate whether or not they approve of each candidate for the position. The candidate with the most approvals wins. Approval voting is second best to range voting in electing the most representative candidate and second worst to range voting in encouraging strategic voting.

Ranked choice voting is known as instant runoff voting when used to select a single candidate. Studies show it to be nearly as good as range voting in selecting the most representative candidate and best of all systems considered in encouraging sincere voting.

Multiple Winner Election Systems

Because each district is politically diverse, electing just one representative per district will not yield a legislative body that is "an exact portrait of the people at large." Most western democracies elect multiple candidates from each district so that legislators can represent the different political views within each district. There are several election systems for electing multiple legislators per district.

Bloc types exist in Oregon. In this system, the entire electorate elects multiple candidates to a legislative body, electing each candidate in separate races. For example, all residents of the City of Portland elect four councilors, plus a Mayor. Each council candidate runs for a numbered council seat against other candidates who filed for that numbered seat. This system has been shown to be *less* representative than dividing the area into districts and electing a candidate from each district, because the majority opinion of the entire area determines the outcome of all the races.

Semi-proportional systems, including cumulative and limited voting allow voters multiple votes in the same race. The highest vote-getters win. These systems can lead to more representation for all groups if minority political groups carefully coordinate their voting strategy and focus all their votes on a single candidate to ensure a candidate representing them wins one of the positions.

Proportional representation systems are favored by most political scholars as the most representative systems. Most western democracies use a form of proportional representation voting to elect legislative bodies. A pool of candidates contends for the available seats in a

district. There are several ways to elect representatives that reflect the major political opinions of the district:

Party list voting allows voters to choose a candidate from a party list (open list voting, the most common form of voting in developed democracies) or simply to choose a party (closed list voting). In open list voting, a vote counts for that candidate and for the candidate's party. The party wins seats in proportion to the number of votes for candidates on its list, with candidates given the party's seats in proportion to their number of votes they receive. In closed list voting the party's pre-determined list of candidates win positions in proportion to the number of votes for that party.

Mixed-member proportional voting, a newer system, is the one most election experts favor. It retains a local representative while allowing for overall proportionality of the legislature. Voters get two votes: one for a local representative from a single-winner local district, and one for a party. Parties win seats in proportion to the number of votes each party receives.

Single-transferrable vote systems are the second choice of election experts. Candidates run in a pool for a number of seats. For example, all candidates for Portland City Council would run together for any of the four council seats, rather than splitting up into different races for individually numbered seats, as they do now. Voters rank the candidates and any candidate who passes a certain threshold of support wins a seat. For American voters, this proportional system has the added attraction of allowing voters to vote for individual candidates, not for parties.

The minimum level of the threshold, to avoid electing representatives with very small support groups, and the size of the district are important design considerations for proportional systems.

Political Parties and Oregon Reforms

In Oregon, a candidate can list up to three parties on the ballot, assuming all three have nominated the candidate. This **aggregated fusion voting** gives voters more information about the candidate. A full fusion voting system would list each candidate as many times on the ballot as there are parties nominating her. By choosing which place on the ballot to vote for the candidate, voters indicate support for that party. **Full fusion** would give candidates more information about the sources of their support.

The purpose of partisan races in primary elections is to select major party candidates to run for partisan seats, like State Senator or Governor, in November general elections. Major parties in Oregon are the Democrat, Republican, and Independent parties. Voters not registered with one of these parties are excluded from partisan races in the primary. Proposed reforms include a **limited open** primary, in which unaffiliated voters can vote by choosing which party's ballot to receive, an **open** primary in which all voters choose which party's ballot to receive on election day (a consideration with Oregon's vote-by-mail system), and **top-two** primaries, in which all voters,

regardless of party affiliation, vote on all candidates for each seat and the top two vote-getters, regardless of party, advance to the general election. See delayed runoff above.

Administration of Alternate Methods

Changes in election methods may also require changes in voting administration hardware and software, training and voter education campaigns, as well as updates to other aspects of election administration. The three Oregon county clerks[1] interviewed as part of our research all agreed that complexity and cost of equipment are important concerns and should be included along with other criteria when considering administering different voting methods.

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[1] Jackson, Lane, and Multnomah Counties