

Choice Voting and Women's Representation

Santa Monica Ranked Voting¹

May 12, 2004

Santa Monica currently uses what is known as Block Voting to elect its city council. In this system, each voter gets to cast as many votes as there are seats to be filled, and the winners are the candidates with the most votes.

At-large voting systems like Santa Monica's have been shown to result in more women elected, including more minority women, than a system with single-member districts. However, Block Voting has not typically resulted in the level of representation by women that proportional representation has consistently attained. *In fact, comparative research has shown that the leading predictor of women's success in national elections, when tested against all other variables, is use of proportional representation.*

Proportional representation (PR) ensures that like-minded voters win seats in proportion to their share of the vote. In 1992, a city charter review commission recommended a form of PR called Choice Voting for Santa Monica's regular elections. Choice Voting was used in two dozen cities during the 20th century and is still used in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

Cambridge's elections reflect the international trend of providing women greater representation through PR. In 2001, both the school committee and the city council were one-third female, and in 1999 the school committee was 67% female, while the city council was one-third female. Lastly, in 1997 the school committee was two-thirds female, while the city council was nearly 45% female.

Women in countries using PR generally comprise somewhere in the range of 25% - 35% of elected officials, as opposed to less than 5% here most U.S. cities. Countries that use PR exclusively elect many times more women to their legislatures compared to countries that use winner-take-all exclusively, with countries like Sweden (43%), Finland (37%), Norway (36%), Denmark (37%), The Netherlands (36%), Germany (31%) and South Africa (29%) leading the way.

Choice Voting allows voters to rank the candidates 1st, 2nd, 3rd, 4th, etc. Each candidate must earn enough votes to surpass a winning threshold. The winners are determined through a series of runoffs that occur without the need for separate elections. Your vote always supports your highest ranking candidate that is still in contention, so that your vote is always as effective as possible.

Santa Monica's chapter of the League of Women Voters has indicated that they support consideration of alternative voting systems with a special emphasis on Choice Voting. In 1999, members of the Santa Monica city council gave city staff direction to explore ranked voting as an option for city council elections, and that exploration process is still ongoing. Santa Monica Ranked Voting believes that PR is a crucial step towards getting fairer representation for women in Santa Monica's government.

Much of the information in this summary came from the Center for Voting and Democracy, www.fairvote.org.

¹More information about Santa Monica Ranked Voting may be found at www.smrankedvoting.org. Contact: Amy Connolly at amyconn@socrates.berkeley.edu or Julie Walters at jooly@pobox.com.