COLLECTION IV — ELECTORAL REFORM

Proportional Representation — A Primer

An introduction to proportional representation systems and how they differ from winner-take-all elections.

By Daniel P. Devine · Civest Sphere · November 2026

Winner-take-all vs. proportional

Most U.S. elections are **winner-take-all**: each district elects one representative, and the candidate with the most votes wins. A party that wins 55% of the vote in every district could, in theory, win 100% of the seats.

Proportional representation (PR) aims to give parties or groups a share of seats that matches their share of the vote. If a party wins 30% of the vote, it gets roughly 30% of the seats.

Main types of PR

- **Party-list PR.** Voters choose a party, and seats are divided according to each party's vote share. Used in the Netherlands, Israel and many other countries.
- **Single transferable vote (STV).** Voters rank candidates in multi-member districts, and votes transfer until all seats are filled. Used in Ireland and Malta, and for some local elections in the U.S.
- **Mixed-member proportional (MMP).** Voters elect some representatives from districts and some from party lists, which top up the results to match the overall vote. Used in Germany and New Zealand.

Arguments for PR

- Seats more closely match how people actually voted.

- Smaller parties and minority viewpoints gain representation.
- Gerrymandering matters less, because district lines decide fewer outcomes.
- Fewer "wasted" votes.

Arguments against PR

- It can weaken the link between a representative and a specific local area.
- Coalition governments can be harder to form and less stable.
- Small parties can gain outsized leverage in coalition negotiations.
- Some forms give party leaders more control over who gets elected.

In the United States

Federal law requires single-member districts for the U.S. House, so PR for Congress would require changing federal law. Some local governments use proportional methods, and cities have experimented with them throughout U.S. history.

Civest Sphere presents electoral reform options for education, not advocacy.

Last reviewed November 2026. This guide is general information, not legal advice. Laws, deadlines and procedures change, so confirm details with the official source before you act.

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