

What ancient electoral systems in U.S. cities mean for us

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July 29, 2019

I want to focus on the core of my research, which is electoral-system change in cities up to 104 years ago. What can we learn from Ashtabula's bipartisan referendum on proportional representation in 1915? Why does it matter that New York City Republicans were in coalition with the American Labor Party until 1947? Changes like these mark party de-alignment. They may be a window into our medium-term future. Therefore, we should learn about the last time, in order to avoid repeating any mistakes.

From our vantage point in the aftermath of the 2016 election, it is hard to imagine left and right cutting any deals on electoral reform. Our parties polarize on race and immigration, and this can be no clearer than in the voting-rights domain. Consider: voter ID laws, the census immigration question, and recent Supreme Court decisions on Congressional districting.

But behind the polarization is a latent coalition of people "fed up with everything being about race." For now, it's hard to call this coalition racist, but the potential seems to be there. The person who said those words to me was a white Democrat who, with local civil rights figures, worked to replace their city's two-round elections with a one-round system of ranked voting. A racial-equity argument seemed like a no-brainer here. Data he had shown me suggested very low first-round turnout in poorer, blacker precincts. Yet the reform coalition did not make that argument. Elsewhere, such as where I spent my summer, people tell me their taxes are rising thanks to combined welfare spending and politicians' refusal to burden corporations. This could be the stuff of a white-middle-class tax revolt.

We have been here before. The Progressive Era was a time of widespread institutional change. It also had anti-immigrant undertones and an ambiguous record on race relations. That ambiguity was due, in part, to a left-right split within the movement itself. Because the right wing was the senior partner, it was able to impose regressive measures like opt-in voter registration, non-partisan ballots, assembly-size reductions, and so on.

So, one goal of my research has been to myth-bust the modern reform agenda. That agenda includes ranked-choice voting, both for filling single-winner offices and as a party-free method of proportional representation. The technical names for these, respectively, are the Alternative Vote and Single Transferable Vote. A century ago, the reform terms were “preferential ballot for ensuring election by a majority” and “Hare system of proportional representation.” The core idea in either case is that, if your vote does not help your favorite candidate win, it counts toward your next-ranked pick. The difference between the methods is the percent of votes needed to win: 50% in the single-winner form, and potentially much less than that with multiple winners. In either case, the purpose is to disrupt the current party alignment.

I sympathize with the modern movement, but I also have reservations. On the one hand, I am a product of it. I worked for its peak group in my first years out of college, serve as one of its academic advisors, and try to cultivate a community of scholars who can make these reforms less foreign to Americanists. On the other hand, the movement has tended to over-promise and cherry-pick its own history. This is to be expected. Issue advocacy has its logic, and historical research is very time-consuming.

Ranked-choice voting will not solve this society’s deepest problems. In its single-winner form, it might have neutralized the Green Party spoiler, giving us Presidents Gore and Clinton. As a candidate-based method of proportional representation, it could make our legislatures more internally diverse. At the end of the day, however, power and party competition are difficult to avoid. This seems true at the adoption stage, as I have shown in two journals,¹ and when reform is operating, which I tried to show in a third piece.² If partisanship is the default setting for representative democracy, the best hope for solving problems is through party organization.

What sets me apart from other skeptics, though, is personal connection to the people on the ground. I appreciate their volunteer investment, as well as the movement cleavages they confront in their work. At a point when civil society seems frayed, the reform cause is making people work together who might not do so otherwise. So, I talk to this movement, learn from it, and try to educate it along the way.

¹Jack Santucci, “Maine Ranked-choice Voting as a Case of Electoral System Change,” *Representation* 54 (2018): 297-311; Jack Santucci, “Party Splits, not Progressives: The Origins of Proportional Representation in American Local Government,” *American Politics Research* 45 (2017): 494-526.

²Jack Santucci, “Evidence of a Winning-cohesion Tradeoff under Multi-winner Ranked-choice Voting,” *Electoral Studies* 52 (2018): 128-138.