

SIGHTLINE'S VOTING SYSTEM REFORM PRIORITIES IN OREGON

A WISH LIST OF POLICIES TO ACHIEVE MORE REPRESENTATIVE AND
EFFECTIVE GOVERNANCE ACROSS OREGON.

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This memo is an articulation of Sightline's internal strategy for voting systems reform. It is not a thoroughly vetted and reviewed report or article like most of our publications. All assertions are not cited or otherwise supported but instead reflect Sightline's current judgment, which we may revise with further learning. Not all reforms mentioned are explained in this memo but are or will be explained in [Sightline's other published work](#).

If you are an Oregon resident or advocate excited by the energy around democracy reform in the United States, you might be wondering what the easiest or most impactful reform opportunities are close to home. Fortunately, Oregon is ripe ground for voting reform. The state constitution specifically allows alternative and proportional voting. Charter counties and charter cities have autonomy to make changes without first seeking a change in state law. And all levels of government make liberal use of the citizens' initiative process.

As in other places, reformers must consider the lack of alternative-ready vote-counting machines and the possible resistance of county auditors. But [one Oregon county has already approved alternative voting](#), with several others poised to follow suit, and momentum is building around implementing proportional voting in Oregon's largest city, Portland.

An effective and comprehensive strategy may involve a mix of easier and harder reforms. Demonstrating reforms in low-stakes elections or in localities before attempting statewide reform, for example, might be a good progression. This

strategy memo is not based on public opinion research; such research would help prioritize among the objectives outlined here.

Below are the voting reforms we at Sightline would make if we could wave a magic wand, as well as our rough estimate of:

- how **quickly or easily** they might be accomplished (five stars is quick and easy, and one star is a long hard slog) and
- how much **impact** we think it might have (five stars means a significant improvement in democracy for a large number of Oregonians, and one star means a small improvement for a small number of people).

This memo is about voting systems reform, and we do not include other types of reforms that we are also researching, such as democracy vouchers for campaign funding and automatic voter registration. (You can find a similar document for [Washington here](#).)

- Our categories of preferred voting systems reforms are:
- Implement proportional voting for multi-member (legislative) bodies
- Implement improved voting for single-member offices
- Eliminate primaries or advance more candidates to the general election
- Create a unicameral state legislature

Implement proportional voting for multi-member (legislative) bodies

Although legislative bodies like the state legislature and city councils are meant to be reflective of all constituents, most Oregon jurisdictions use single-winner elections, either through single-member districts or numbered seats, to elect legislators. A series of single-winner elections yields a legislative body consisting almost entirely of the same kind of people because the majority in each district elects the sole representative from that district. Put together a body of majority winners and the majority is over-represented while voters in the minority are under-represented. For example, in Oregon, [white men make up 38 percent of the population but 67 percent of elected officials](#), while women of color make up 11 percent of the population but just three percent of elected officials. Democrats and Republicans win 100 percent of the seats, even though one-third of voters don't affiliate with either of those parties.

Proportional voting could correct that unfair skew. To achieve more representative results, multi-member bodies like legislatures, councils, and school boards generally must be elected via multi-winner elections, not by single-winner elections based on single-member districts or at-large numbered seats. However, a hybrid system called Mixed Member Proportional voting achieves proportional representation while retaining some single-member districts. Several forms of voting can be used to achieve proportional or semi-proportional results, including:

- **Single-Transferable Vote (STV):** A proportional, multi-winner form of Ranked-Choice Voting (RCV). It is used in Cambridge, Massachusetts; [Ireland](#); Australia; and for [Academy Awards](#) nominees. All candidates for the X-member district appear on the same ballot, and voters rank their candidates in order of preference. The top X candidates win seats.
- **Mixed Member Proportional (MMP):** Used in Germany and New Zealand, MMP retains some single-winner districts for local representation while adding multi-winner seats from party lists. Voters cast two votes: one for a local representative from a single-member district and one for a party.
- **Reweighted Range Voting (RRV):** A [proportional](#), multi-winner form of Score Voting. It is now used to select the [five OSCAR nominees for "Best Visual Effects."](#) All candidates for the X-member district appear on the same ballot, and voters give each candidate a score, for example from zero to 9. The top X candidates win seats.
- **Proportional Score Runoff Voting (SRV-PR):** A new method that would use a score ballot to select candidates one by one, with voters who supported a winning candidate having less say in subsequent rounds to ensure minority voters have a chance to elect a representative.
- **Limited Voting:** A semi-proportional form of voting used in jurisdictions across the United States. Voters can cast fewer votes than there are seats available. For example, in a five-member district, voters might be able to cast two votes, enabling minority voters making up about two-fifths of the population to elect two out of five seats.
- **Cumulative Voting:** A semi-proportional form of voting used in jurisdictions across the United States. Voters can cast as many votes as there are seats available but they can choose to allocate more than one vote per candidate. For example, in a three-member district, minority

voters can give all three votes to their favorite candidate, ensuring that favorite wins a seat. Or they can give two votes to their favorite and one vote to their second-favorite, who also has support from some majority voters.

Federal courts sometimes order jurisdictions in violation of section 2 the Voting Rights Act to switch from “choose one” voting to Limited or Cumulative Voting because racial minorities who could not win representation under plurality voting can win seats under Limited or Cumulative Voting. Experts consider Limited Voting and Cumulative Voting to be “semi-proportional” because they achieve more proportional results than single-winner elections, but, depending on the strategies that parties and voters employ, they still are often less proportional than STV.

The national reform organization FairVote categorizes STV, MMP, limited, and cumulative systems under the moniker “[Fair Representation Voting Systems](#).”

Multi-member offices can also use *party*-based proportional representation systems such as list voting, in which the ballot lists candidates by party, and voters can vote for their favorite candidate within a party list (in Open List systems) or for their favorite party, and the party then assigns seats based on its candidate list (in Closed List systems). But American voters tend to eschew strong party control, so these systems might be less popular in the near term.

A few cities in Oregon already elect multi-winner elections—electing multiple members in a single pool. Voters are allowed to “Vote for Three,” and the top three win, instead of the more common single-winner districts or numbered seats where voters can only “Vote for One.” These cities could make an easier switch to proportional voting, because the city would only need to switch to cumulative, limited, or ranked ballots, and not have to change anything else.

One challenge to adopting improved voting systems is that some Oregon counties' vote-counting machines cannot yet tally alternative ballots. To ensure smooth implementation of voting reforms, these counties will need to update their scanners or software. On the bright side, because Oregon votes by mail, it does not have to purchase expensive polling-place machines, only the scanners and software that scan and count the ballots once they are mailed in to the county.

Quick & Easy	Impact	Proportional Voting in:	Explanation
***	****	State Leg.	Encourage Democratic legislators to head off the Republican redistricting effort by instead passing a redistricting law that adopts MMP, or draws multi-member districts, or requires multi-member districts for any area of the state lacking adequate racial representation.
***	****	Portland	2018 ballot initiative switching the city council from at-large numbered seats to multi-member districts with proportional voting.
***	****	Multnomah County	Ballot initiative switching the county council from single-member districts to multi-member districts with proportional voting.
***	****	Other Charter cities and counties	By vote of the council or by ballot initiative, adopt proportional voting to elect council.
*	*****	State House	Change Oregon law to elect state representatives in multi-member districts with proportional voting. For example, 60 reps from 20 three-member districts (and reduce size of Senate to 20 reps).
*	*****	State House	Change Oregon constitution and state law to elect state representatives via MMP . For example, 30 reps from existing senate single-member districts, plus 5 from each of 5 regional party lists (each region encompassing six districts), for a total of 55.
*	**	State Task Force	Encourage the Republican-led state Redistricting Task Force to recommend multi-member districts for the state legislature.
**	***	Charter cities that use multi-member districts and bloc voting	Fifteen or more charter cities—including Lake Oswego and Maywood Park in Multnomah County—already use multi-member districts and bloc voting (eg: “vote for 3”). Reformers could target these cities to make a switch to using a ranked-choice ballot and achieve proportional representation with no other changes.

**	****	Gresham	Urge 2020 Charter Review commission to put proportional voting on ballot to elect the 6 at-large city councilors in one or two multi-member districts.
*	*****	Interstate Compact	Cascadian interstate compact for fair representation in Congress: get Washington, Oregon, and Idaho to agree to elect their Congressional delegations by multi-member district.
**	***	School Boards	Ballot measures or urge Board vote to adopt proportional voting to elect board and to move elections to even years with higher turnout.

Implement improved voting for single-winner races

Most elections in Oregon use **single-winner plurality voting** (voters “choose one” on the ballot, and the candidate with the most votes wins) for both executive and legislative seats. The state legislature and most local councils use single-winner districts (the city or state is carved into districts with one representative per district) or at-large numbered seats (several city councilors run for the city at-large, but instead of running against each other they each choose which of the numbered seats to run for.) Some cities use bloc voting in multi-winner elections. A primary narrows the field to two candidates in nonpartisan elections or one candidate per party in partisan elections, and the candidate with the most votes in the general elections wins. Even elections for multi-member bodies, such as the state legislature, city councils, and school boards, use single-winner elections, either in single-member districts or at-large numbered seats.

Most elections in Oregon use **single-winner plurality voting** for both executive and legislative seats. Under single-winner plurality voting, voters may choose just one candidate on the ballot, and the candidate with the most votes—though not necessarily a majority of votes—wins.

The Oregon state legislature and all local councils use one of the following:

- single-winner districts, in which the city or state is carved into districts, with one representative per district;
- at-large numbered seats, in which several city councilors run for the city at-large, but instead of all running against each other, they each choose which of the numbered seats to run for;

- bloc voting, in which several city councilors run for, for example, three open city-wide seats on the council, and voters can vote for three candidates.

In many local elections, if a candidate wins a majority of votes in the primary, she wins; otherwise, the top two vote-getters advance to the general, and the candidate with more votes in the general election wins. Even elections for multi-member bodies, such as the state legislature, city councils, and school boards, use single-winner elections, either in single-member districts or at-large numbered seats.

Under single-winner plurality voting, third-party candidates are discouraged from running for fear of “spoiling” the election for the major-party candidate they are most similar to. This cuts down on nuanced discussion of the issues and reduces voter choice. If a third-party candidate persists in running, it can throw the election to the less popular, opposition major-party candidate, ultimately meaning that a majority of voters dislike the one person elected to represent them.

Aside from the third-party spoiler problem, plurality voting also rewards candidates for scaring away voters as much as for winning them over. If a candidate can get enough of her opponent's voters to just stay home, disgusted with the spectacle of politics, she can win with just the minority of voters making up her base. This structural flaw encourages negative campaigning.

Single-member offices, such as governor, treasurer, and mayor, could instead be elected by Instant Runoff Voting (IRV, which is one form of Ranked-Choice Voting (RCV)). Under Instant Runoff Voting, voters rank their candidates in order of preference, and the ballots are counted in rounds: if a candidate wins more than half of the first-choice rankings, she wins. Otherwise, the candidate(s) with the fewest first-choice rankings are eliminated, and their voters' votes get transferred to their next-ranked candidate who is still in the running. Counting continues until one candidate wins more than half of the active votes. This [one-minute video explains](#).

[Score Runoff Voting](#) (SRV) is a promising but as yet untested option for electing single-member offices. Under SRV, voters give each candidate a score from 0 (no support) to 5 or 9 (strong support). The scores are added up, and the two candidates with the top total scores go to an instant runoff. In the runoff, a voter's vote goes to the runoff candidate he or she scored higher, and the candidate with the most votes wins.

Because they allow voters to give a rank or score to more than one candidate, both IRV and SRV would allow third-party candidates to run, enriching political dialogue and increasing options for voters. Because they reward candidates for winning

additional support, these improved voting systems also encourage candidates to reach out to voters beyond their base, encouraging positive, policy-oriented campaigns.

Two other voting methods—Approval Voting and Score Voting—can, in theory, achieve excellent results. Under Approval Voting, voters vote for all the candidates they approve of, and the candidate with the most votes wins. Under Score Voting, voters give each candidate a score, and the candidate with the highest total score wins. In practice, though, [experience indicates that approval voting devolves to “bullet voting.”](#) where voters only approve of their favorite candidate, out of (justified) fear that approving of their second or third favorite will hurt their most favorite. Score Voting has not been used in a public election, so we can't look to experience with it, but it suffers from the same structural flaw as Approval Voting—voting experts say it [fails the “Later-No-Harm” criterion](#) because voters can be harmed by scoring a less preferred candidate. Under Score Voting, voters would likely strategically give a top score to their favorite and no or very low scores to other candidates they actually like. (Note that Score Runoff Voting would likely overcome this flaw by encouraging voters to give scores to candidates other than their favorite to ensure they still have a vote in the runoff if their favorite doesn't make it.)

Multi-member bodies, such as the state legislature, city councils, and school boards, are often elected by district or by numbered (also called posted) seats via single-winner methods. In this case, Instant Runoff Voting and possibly Score Runoff Voting would be an improvement over single-winner plurality voting. However, even with such improvement, legislatures, councils, and school boards elected in single-winner elections will not proportionally reflect their constituents, and legislative bodies will continue to be mired in partisan gridlock. To achieve proportional representation and improved legislative capabilities, jurisdictions must use one of the methods detailed in the section above.

Quick & Easy	Impact	Proportional Voting in:	Explanation
*****	****	Benton County	Ensure that Benton County's recently-adopted IRV is implemented well.
***	*****	Multnomah County	2018 ballot initiative adopting alternative voting.
***	*****	Portland	2018 ballot initiative adopting alternative voting.
****	****	State Leg. / Sec. of State	Require counties to acquire alternative voting-ready machines whenever turning over, or even to accelerate turnover.
****	****	Lane County	Urge council to put SRV on the ballot in 2017.
***	****	Other Charter cities and charter counties	<p>By vote of the council or by ballot initiative, adopt alternative voting to elect single-member offices.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Oregon has nine charter counties: Benton, Clatsop, Hood River, Jackson, Josephine, Lane, Multnomah, and Washington. ▪ Oregon has 111 charter cities. ▪ Oregon's 241 general law cities also have the power of referendum and initiative, so it is possible they too could pass an alternative voting initiative, but it is not clear what the initiative would do since they don't have a charter to amend.
*****	*	Independent Party of Oregon (IPO)	Use IRV or SRV in next online election. The IPO has flexibility to quickly try things in its online elections, allowing for a quick and easy test with real voters.
*	*****	State Leg.	Adopt alternative voting for US Presidential primaries. Administratively difficult because all counties would need to be able to count alternative ballots.
**	***	Clatsop County	Use 2017 Charter Review process to propose alternative voting for county commissioners (elected by district).

Eliminate primaries or advance more candidates to the general election

Primaries act as a modern poll tax. Primary voters tend to be an [extremely small](#) (usually 10 to 20 percent) and non-representative ([whiter, older, wealthier](#)) share of the voting-eligible population. Primaries thus tend to nominate older, whiter, more conservative candidates. And primaries in single-winner districts that are “safe” for one or the other of the two major parties tend to nominate more sharply partisan candidates because they only have to campaign to win over their base in the party primary, not the general election. The primary thus narrows and skews the field, leaving general election voters with few options.

All of the alternative and proportional methods above could be used without a primary, so a switch in voting system could have the bonus of eliminating the 21st-century poll tax. Or, Oregon could mitigate the impact of the poll tax—and avoid the pitfalls of Washington’s “top two” system—by instead holding open primaries that advance three or four candidates to a general election, in which voters could use one of the alternative methods to select the winners. Either option would give general election voters more say in who represents them.

Quick & Easy	Impact	Proportional Voting in:	Explanation
*	***	State Leg.	Switch to ranked-choice voting for presidential primaries.
**	***	Charter cities and charter counties	Change charters to advance three or four people per seat to the general and to use ranked-choice voting in the general.

Create a unicameral state legislature

The Oregon state **bicameral legislature** consists of two elected bodies representing exactly the same people and charged with doing the same thing twice. This makes it twice as hard as it should be to pass legislation. Nebraska has had a unicameral state legislature for nearly a century, cutting down on waste and streamlining government. Oregon could do the same.

Quick & Easy	Impact	Proportional Voting in:	Explanation
*	*****	Unicameral State Legislature	<p>Ballot initiative to combine the state senate and state house into a single unicameral body elected through MMP voting or multi-member districts with proportional voting. For example, create one of the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ a single 60-member body elected from 20 three-member districts ▪ a single 75-member body elected from 15 five-member districts ▪ a 60-member MMP body with 30 representatives elected from single-member districts and 30 from six five-member party list regions.

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