

Reform Essay #1

It is nearly uncontested that the national legislature of the United States is massively flawed. Seldom is it contested, specifically, that many of these flaws originate in the structure of the government. Armchair political theorists the world over note problems and generate solutions, although it must be said that no two theorists concur on either the nature of the problems or the optimal solutions thereof. That said, as an armchair political theorist, it seems incumbent upon me to spew my ideas across the land.

Before we start, it must be made clear that among the more common objections to any proposed reform is that the Founders of the United States did not intend it. Leaving aside the hagiographic interpretation of American history necessary to believe that they were infallible and the many successful amendments showing that such changes as these have had a good track record, so to speak, the governance available for a largely-agricultural nation of fewer than four million residents, where the fastest transportation was the horse and the fastest calculator the abacus, is not the same as the optimal governance for the present United States, nor will either it or this be optimal in the America of nearly two and a half centuries hence.

There seem to be two major schools of thought regarding the purpose of a legislator. The first, of which the First-Past-The-Post system is the brainchild, suggests that a legislator's responsibility is to the area that elected that representative, and that a legislature ought to be the meeting-place of the voices chosen to speak for various communities. The other theory, which begat Proportional Representation, contends that each representative represents an ideologically-bound swathe of the population - say, one-fourth of one percent of all voters - that votes for a certain ideology shared by that representative, and that a legislature ought to be the political views of the nation in a microcosm.

Both schools of thought have their positives and negatives. The former means that it is possible for beliefs that are common but do not prevail in any particular community to be silenced. The latter means that no one legislator is tied to a community, and thus that the interests of that community go without support. The former means that a plurality interest or view in individual communities can become the sole interest or view represented, even if the other views are similar enough that, banded together, they would outnumber them. The latter means that legislators who do badly can only be easily removed by their parties. The former means that interests bound to a

particular area, even if they are despised by the country at large, can be represented. The latter necessitates large parties and disadvantages non-partisan but popular candidates. And so on, and so forth...

It seems likely that no system of government yet designed will both perfectly represent the political views of the populace and produce the optimal results for the purposes of good governance, even when the two are in concord - indeed, it is unlikely that any system will successfully do either one. That said, there are nevertheless improvements to be made to the present system.

While the former view - the view of FPTP - is massively prevalent in the United States government, the alternative also makes good points and deserves a seat at the table. And what better place than the Senate, that great Proteus of the government - first the voice of the state legislatures, then that of the people of the various states, with its elections arrhythmically staggered in an odd 2/3 time signature. In truth, the states are strange choices for electoral districts - except for a few examples, too small for a viable regional identity, yet too large for a local one, usually too heterogenous to represent a specific community or type of community yet too homogenous to be reasonably competitive, and nowhere near proportional, with the residents of Wyoming having more than sixty times the electoral power of an equivalent quantity of Californians. What better solution than to replace the entire thing with a system which represents all Americans equally, is founded on a national identity rather than any smaller one (or, perhaps, if necessary, a number of regional interests that elect national representatives), and is exactly as heterogenous or homogenous as the country? Granted, such a system would be ill-fitting for the end-all and be-all of the legislature - but its consistency of results make it nearly-ideal as an upper house.

And what of the lower house?

Political factions are fractal. There are two schools of thought regarding how a district ought to be designed - that a district ought to reflect some kind of natural community, and that a district ought to be designed so that it changes with the nation. The extent of the former would be a district filled with homogenous electors, seldom changing its political affiliation - only when the mass views or party loyalty of the public changed, as in the American South between 1960 and 1972. The latter suggests a legislature that vacillates from one supermajority to another, according to the vicissitudes of the electorate amplified to staggering crests and troughs.

The former, it seems self-evident, is a better model for a legislature founded on representing the wills of individual constituencies. But while the United States House of Representatives intends to represent individual constituencies, it is subverted by gerrymandering and single-member districts, which split natural communities.

Granted, single-member districts have their advantages. Notably, it improves minority representation - when the Texas House of Representatives switched over in 1972, African-American members were elected for the first time since Reconstruction. But that minority candidates are disadvantaged is not solely the fault of multiple-member districts - after all, they remain disproportionately uncommon in single-member legislatures. That minority candidates have been forced to obviate representative democracy means that the forces that oppose them should be tackled first, but it does not in and of itself present a reason not to use multi-member districts.

Where, in multi-member and fairly apportioned districts, it could honestly be said that there are five national representatives for Houston (or perhaps three from South Houston and two from North Houston, or some other scheme), in this present system, it can only be said that there is one district for a swathe of Houston stretching from Atascocita to Montrose by way of Spring, another for a vaguely horse-shaped zone between Bush Intercontinental and Downtown Houston, &c...

But why should representation be dependent on where someone lives - in many ways, the least important thing about a person? What common interests bind a Channelview longshoreman and an affluent Downtown lawyer, more than they are bound to their compatriots in, say, Los Angeles? Why should the vote of a company executive in River Oaks determine who represents a teacher in Bellaire, or vice versa? In this new world of the Internet - of, as one might say, e-democracy - why must we be bound to the districts of the past, which divert untold billions into porkbarrel spending? True, local affairs such as roads bind them - but shouldn't those be handled by local authorities anyway?