

Election Reform

Empowering Moderate Voters Implement an Instant Runoff Strategy

Background

The problem of gerrymandered districts for seats in the U.S. House of Representatives is not new, but resurged during the 1990s. In recent years, redistricting patterns have created an extraordinarily high number of “safe districts,” in which the incumbent or the incumbent party is highly likely to gain reelection. In “safe districts,” the primary is often the real election, and it is one that does not represent moderate Americans’ views well. In a predominantly one-party district, the dominant party’s candidate who wins the primary is very likely to win the general election. Considering that the more liberal Democrats and the more conservative Republicans—usually a small fraction of a district’s eligible voters—are the people most likely to vote in primaries, the more extreme candidates are the ones most likely to prevail.

Unfortunately, the “moderate middle”—some 70 percent of the electorate—is left out of this process. Many moderate voters don’t feel comfortable declaring party affiliation, and many independent voters simply refuse to vote in primaries. And, in some states, people who are not registered with a party—that is, independent voters—are barred from voting in primary elections, even if they wanted to. Finally, many voters don’t understand the importance of primaries and choose to vote only in the “real election.”

Recommendations

Our next President should work aggressively toward bringing moderate and independent voters back into the election process. The election of less partisan, more mainstream candidates to offices of all kinds will reduce the rancor and extremism that currently characterize U.S. politics, drive more and more Americans away from the polling booth, and even discourage them from seeking political careers.

Specifically, the next President should promote the concept of “instant runoffs” in U.S. elections, in order that candidates who appeal to a broader range of the electorate have a better chance to win their races and serve our citizenry. The next administration should work on achievements such as:

- competitive districts where the parties must nominate candidates who appeal to moderate and independent voters
- elections that permit voters to participate in deciding the final victors without voting in a party primary or two separate elections

Key Facts

- the U.S. Supreme Court has adopted three basic principles for congressional redistricting: (1) one person, one vote, (2) protection for minorities, and (3) observance of traditional political boundaries where these do not interfere with the first two principles
- legislative redistricting proposals are subject to federal court review as to whether they comport with these three principles
- redistricting plans generally are drawn up by a state's legislature and governor

A full version of this proposal, as well as supporting background material, is available at www.opportunity08.org.

About the Author and the Project

John Porter

John Porter, a partner in the law firm Hogan & Hartson and a former member of Congress and the Illinois House, is a member of the Board of Trustees at Brookings. Porter is an expert on health law and education matters, including administrative and regulatory, international, legislative strategy, and education and health policy. He was Republican chairman of the House Appropriations subcommittee on Labor, Health and Human Services, and Education.

Opportunity 08 aims to help 2008 presidential candidates and the public focus on critical issues facing the nation, presenting policy ideas on a wide array of domestic and foreign policy questions. The project is committed to providing both independent policy solutions and background material on issues of concern to voters.