

# SIGHTLINE'S VOTING SYSTEM REFORM PRIORITIES IN WASHINGTON

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

April 2017  
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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 a Washington 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. Unfortunately, Washington State throws several barriers in front of voting reformers. First, state law prevents local cities and counties from eliminating primaries and prevents school boards from adopting multi-winner elections. Second, the Secretary of State does not require new voting machines to be alternative-voting-ready. Third, many auditors may be wary of ranked-choice voting because of its 2009 repeal in Pierce County. (Auditors appear to have played a role in Pierce County's repeal of IRV in 2009, King County's dismissal of IRV in 2010, and Whatcom County's failure to advance STV to the ballot in 2015).

But Washington reformers have many exciting opportunities, from King County's upcoming vote-counting machine replacement and Charter Review Commission to changing state law to require new voting machines to be alternative-voting-ready. Beyond this, the Evergreen State could even change state law to allow alternative and proportional voting in city, county, school board, and presidential primary elections.

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 Washingtonians, 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 voting reforms document for [Oregon 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, all Washington 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 overrepresented, while voters in the minority are

underrepresented. For example, in Washington, [white men make up 35 percent of the population but 60 percent of elected officials](#), while women of color make up 14 percent of the population but just 3 percent of elected officials.

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; Minneapolis; [Ireland](#); 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 single-winner “choose one” voting *can* win seats under multi-winner 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 multi-winner Ranked Choice Voting.

The national reform organization FairVote categorizes STV, MMP, Limited, and Cumulative systems under the umbrella 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.

One final challenge to adopting improved voting systems is that some Washington counties’ vote-counting machines cannot yet count alternative ballots. To ensure smooth implementation of voting reforms, some counties will have to update their vote-counting machines. On the bright side, because Washington 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.

Quick & Easy	Impact	Proportional Voting in:	Explanation
*****	***	King County	King County may be purchasing new vote-counting machines in 2017. Advocates should make sure the new machines are able to count alternative ballots.
****	****	State Leg. / Sec. of State	Require counties to acquire alternative voting-ready machines whenever turning over, or even to accelerate turnover.
****	*****	King County (2017-2018)	Encourage Charter Review Commission to propose charter amendments for proportional voting.
***	****	Clark and Clallam Counties (2020)	Encourage Charter Review Commissions to propose charter amendments for proportional voting.
***	****	Seattle	Encourage city to convert two at-large city council seats to a multi-winner pool with proportional voting, once King County's machines can count the ballots.
**	****	Charter cities	Amend charters to allow proportional voting (but retain primaries, per state law). Washington has 11 charter, or "first class," cities: Aberdeen, Bellingham, Bremerton, Everett, Kelso, Richland, Seattle, Spokane, Tacoma, Vancouver, and Yakima.
**	****	Charter counties	Amend charters to allow proportional voting. Washington has seven charter counties: Clallam, Clark, King, Pierce, San Juan, Snohomish, and Whatcom.
**	****	Local jurisdictions (via action in State Leg.)	Eliminate state law requirements for local primaries and local numbered seats. Allow general law counties, code cities, second class cities, and school boards to use proportional voting.
**	***	Port Orchard	Encourage city to become a charter city and write alternative voting into the charter.

*	*****	State House	Change state law to elect state representatives in multi-member districts with proportional voting. For example, 99 reps and 33 senators from 33 districts each with three reps and one senator, or 95 reps and 38 senators from 19 districts each with five reps and two senators. These reforms would shrink the state senate but would not require amending the state constitution.
*	*****	State House	Change state constitution and law to elect state representatives via MMP in multi-member districts with proportional voting. For example, 40 reps from single-member districts and 5 from each of 10 regional (4-district) party lists, for a total of 90.
*	**	School Districts, via State Leg.	Change Washington law to allow local voters to choose to switch to multi-winner school board seats and make it easier for voters to put such a proposal on the ballot.

## Implement improved voting for single-winner races

All elections in Washington use **“choose one” voting** for both executive and legislative seats. Most elections use a top-two runoff (also called [two-round system](#)), where voters vote for just one candidate in an open primary and the top two vote-getters advance to the general election. Voters again choose one, and the candidate with a majority of votes wins.

The Washington state legislature and all local councils use:

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

A top-two primary then narrows the field to just two candidates in all but presidential elections (state law requires cities and counties to use top-two primaries in nonpartisan races, and the 2004 Top Two Primary Initiative implemented open top-two primaries for partisan races). The candidate with more 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 in single-member districts, districts with numbered seats, or at-large numbered seats.

Under single-winner “choose one” voting, third-party candidates are discouraged from running for fear of “spoiling” the election for the major-party candidate to whom they are most similar. This cuts down on nuanced discussion of the issues and reduces voter choice. If a third-party candidate persists in running, he 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, “choose one” 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 IRV, voters rank their candidates in order of preference, and the ballots are counted in rounds: if a candidate wins more than half the first-choice rankings, she wins. Otherwise, the candidate(s) with the fewest first-choice rankings are eliminated, and their voters get to vote for 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 theoretically 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.

Both IRV and SRV allow third-party candidates to run, enriching political dialogue and increasing options for voters. 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 even better results than IRV. 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 voting for or scoring a less preferred candidate. Voters would, in practice, likely strategically bullet vote---or give a top score to their favorite and no or very low scores to other candidates they actually like---in a score voting system. Note that Score Runoff Voting attempts to overcome this flaw by incentivizing voters to score their less preferred candidates, just in case those candidates, but not their favorite candidate, make it to the runoff. Sightline thinks SRV deserves real-world trials to see how it performs.

**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, IRV, and possibly SRV, would be an improvement over single-winner "choose one" elections. 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 in the section above.

Quick & Easy	Impact	Proportional Voting in:	Explanation
****	****	King County	Encourage 2017-2018 Charter Review Commission to propose charter amendment for alternative voting.
***	****	Charter cities and non-partisan charter counties	<p>Amend charters to allow alternative voting (but retain primaries, per state law):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Washington has 11 charter (also called "first class") cities: Aberdeen, Bellingham, Bremerton, Everett, Kelso, Richland, Seattle, Spokane, Tacoma, Vancouver, and Yakima.</li> <li>▪ Washington has three non-partisan Charter Counties: King, San Juan, and Whatcom.</li> </ul> <p>(State law requires the four partisan charter counties to use "top two" primaries, precluding alternative voting. Non-charter cities and counties can only change their voting systems by changing state law.)</p>
***	***	Bellingham	Local citizens in Bellingham are considering a push for RCV for the city's council, which elects six councilors from wards and one at large.
***	***	Clark and Clallam Counties	Encourage 2020 Charter Review Commissions to propose charter amendments for alternative voting.
**	****	Charter cities, via State Leg.	In 1999, Vancouver voters amended the charter to eliminate primaries and use ranked-choice voting in the general election, but state law requiring primaries blocked the city from implementing the change. After six years, the legislature temporarily authorized Vancouver to go forward, but by that time momentum had dissipated. The city did not implement the change, and the legislative authorization expired in 2013. The legislature could revive the authorization and apply it to any charter city indefinitely.
**	****	Local jurisdictions, via State Leg.	Eliminate state law requirements for local primaries and local numbered seats. Allow general law counties, code cities, second class cities, and school boards to use alternative voting.

**	***	Vancouver	Implement IRV without eliminating primaries (as Benton County, OR, is doing). Vancouver adopted IRV in 1999 and might be willing to try again, this time without running afoul of state primary laws.
*	***	Presidential primaries, via State Leg.	Adopt alternative voting for US Presidential primaries. Could be politically possible since Democrats don't use the primary votes, but is administratively difficult because all counties would need to be able to count alternative ballots.
*	**	Vancouver	Use 2024 Charter Review Process to put alternative voting on the ballot again.
*	**	Tacoma	Use 2024 Charter Review Process to put alternative voting on the ballot.

## 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, Washington could mitigate the impact of the poll tax by modifying its “Top Two” system to instead advance three or four candidates to the general election, where voters could then 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.	Amend Top Two system to require Top Three or Top Four with alternative ballots.
**	***	State Leg.	Eliminate the parts of state code that require local jurisdictions to hold primaries.

## Create a unicameral state legislature

The Washington state **bicameral legislature** consists of two elected bodies representing exactly the same people in the exact same districts 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. Washington could do the same.

Quick & Easy	Impact	Proportional Voting in:	Explanation
*	*****	Unicameral State Legislature	Have to amend the state constitution---very difficult. But it would make it much easier to pass legislation and would build momentum for other states to do the same.

**Sightline Institute** is a think tank that provides leading original analysis of energy, economic, and environmental policy in the Pacific Northwest.

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