

## **Deterring Democracy: the American Voting System**

Jing Zhao

The 2002 American midterm elections in November may well have a momentous impact on America's foreign and domestic policies in the current "War on Terrorism" time, with Republicans having gained control of both branches of Congress and the White House for the first time in half a century.

As usual, voter turnout again was abysmally low in most states, between one third to 40% of all voting age Americans. Many commentators pointed out that most legislative races lacked any meaningful competition, with as few as three U.S. House incumbents losing to non-incumbent challengers in their severely gerrymandered districts. Minor parties again made no significant gains, and the major parties will control all 50 governor's mansions for the first time in more than a decade. Women and minorities remain severely under-represented.

While in name America has a multi-party system, the frame of reference of most voters is of a one-party system: the party that dominates their district or even their state, such as in the monopoly politics of Massachusetts and Nebraska. Moreover, because most of these districts are so lopsided, there really aren't even campaigns in many districts to engage voters and turn them out to vote. The winner-take-all electoral system continues to be a tremendous barrier to third party participation and representation.

Commentators in the U.S. pointed two major points to improve the current voting system. First, several results from the election bolster the case for instant runoff voting (IRV), the ranked choice system and that would more fully, fairly represent and engage the American electorate. The IRV allows multiple candidates to run, yet not end up with distorted results. It would change the result of many important elections. For example, South Korea's Noh, Taiwan's Chen, America's Bush would not become President in a second round count because most of third party votes would be added to Kim, Song and Gore. The IRV does not require another round of vote for the top two candidates, as France, Yugoslavia and other do. San Francisco has adopted the IRV for their next city elections in 2003, and we will see the apparent advantage for the electorate. Besides, more states could do what six states already do: permit citizens to register on Election Day.

Second, to overcome the two-party system malpractice, America should seriously consider the proportional representation system. For example, Japan's previous relatively healthy middle-size electoral system was close to proportional representation system, which allows one district with 3-5 seats. This is the base for Japan's multi-party system (Liberal Democratic Party, Socialist Party, Komei Party, Democratic Socialist Party, Communist Party and Social Democratic Alliance) and multi-fraction mechanism within the ruling LDP. As the consequence, the Japanese electorate vote mainly for party's policy, rather than candidate's personality (the capacity to collect money), and minority voters can at least have some proportional seats in the national politics. Japan's post-Cold War electoral "reform," under the U.S. pressure to shift to an American style two-party system, brought about an "LDP versus LDP Jr." farce, rather than an "LDP versus Socialists" political frame.

In the U.S., for example, the Green Party recently has received over 5% votes in many elections. If it can hold even 3% seats in the House of Congress, the American political

map would change sharply. If the American electorate could send their representatives to the Congress proportionally according to their votes, more people would vote and the American politics would never be the one as we are forced to accept it until today. This is the reason why both the Democratic Party and the Republic Party deter a multi-party system in the U.S.

However, and more fundamentally, the American electoral system should not deprive of the right of millions of immigrants to vote. Consider two typical cases. 1) A Chinese scholar lived in the U.S. for the first two years as a Research Fellow of Political Science in a prestigious university department (from where the US Vice President was graduated), for three years waiting for permanent residence approval, and has to wait for another five years to become eligible to apply for citizenship. It takes about ten years for this type of "fortunate" immigrants to have the right to vote. 2) A former Sandinista guerrilla who fled from Nicaragua's intensified war to the U.S. without any legal document. The only hope for him to become legal to stay in the U.S. is through amnesty at the mercy of the US President. It takes ten to twenty years for this type of unfortunate immigrants to become citizens.

Any electoral system depriving of its residents' voting right for longer than a decade is a serious violation of basic human rights. Citizenship is not a privilege granted from the state power; it is a human right based on a period of residence (say, five years) in a country. America should let all immigrants, under certain reasonable condition (such as no serious criminal record), to vote. One apparent consequence is that this would truly revolutionize the imperialist American foreign policy, because all these immigrants are also diplomatic experts better than Pentagon's "strategists".

Jing Zhao  
November 2002  
Comparative Policy Review  
<http://cpri.tripod.com>