

Proportional Representation

Its Operation In Cincinnati

By HAROLD F. GOSNELL

THE single transferable vote, or Hare system as it is sometimes called from the name of its founder, Thomas Hare, a British barrister, is the most popular form of proportional representation employed in English-speaking countries.¹ It is based on the theory that a lawmaking body should reflect with mathematical exactness the strength of various groups in the electorate. In jurisdictions where the single member district plurality system gives decided advantages to the major parties, the spread of the Hare plan has been slow. However, it is now in use in such American cities as Boulder, Colorado, Cincinnati, Hamilton, and Toledo, Ohio, Wheeling, West Virginia, and New York City and such Canadian cities as Calgary, Alberta, Winnipeg and St. James, Manitoba, and Saskatoon.

As compared with other systems of proportional representation, the Hare plan is aimed to give the individual voter the maximum amount of freedom. In New York City, the instructions to the voters placed on the ballots in the first trial of the system in 1937 read as follows:

"Mark your choices with numbers only. (Do not use X marks.)

"Put the number 1 in the square opposite the name of your first choice.

"Put the number 2 opposite your second choice, the number 3 opposite your third choice, and so on. You may mark as many choices as you please.

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"Do not put the same number opposite more than one name.

"To vote for a person whose name is not printed on the ballot, write his name on a blank line under the names of the candidates and put a number in the square opposite to show which choice you wish to give him.

"If you tear or deface or wrongly mark this ballot, return it and obtain another."

The first step in the count is the distribution of the ballots according to the first choices. It is then necessary to apply the quota in order to determine what candidates are to be elected. Except in New York City where the quota was fixed in advance at 75,000, the quota is dependent upon the size of the vote cast and the number of candidates to be elected and complete the quotient to the next whole number. Thus, in Cincinnati where there is a council of nine to be elected, the quota for the 1937 election was 14,208, obtained by dividing the total number of valid votes cast (142,071) by ten and completing to the next round number.

All candidates whose first choice votes equal or exceed the quota are declared elected. The ballots in excess of the quota are then transferred to the next available choices. Following this the candidates with the smallest number of votes are eliminated in turn and their ballots transferred in the same manner until the offices are filled.

One of the essential characteristics of the Hare plan is the system of transfers. While the first choices give a general idea as to how the election is coming out, the transfers sometimes bring about important changes. Although the counting and sorting of the ballots usually takes a week in Cincinnati and took more than a month in some of the boroughs

1. A brief popular discussion of the subject may be found in G. H. Hallett, Jr., *Proportional Representation—The Key to Democracy* (Washington, D. C., 1937). The *National Municipal Review* devotes special attention to the subject.

of New York, the plan is defended on the ground of its great flexibility and accuracy in reflecting the wishes of the voters. The city of New York is considering the use of tabulating machines to speed up the counting of the proportional representation ballots.

A more detailed consideration of the Cincinnati elections of 1929 and 1937 will show how the system has been working in practice.² One of the claims made for the plan is that it secures a more representative legislative body. An analysis of the transfers in the two Cincinnati elections will give an idea as to what groups have been seeking representation in this city, since it is reasonable to assume that candidates with given characteristics will attract voters with the same characteristics.

In the two Cincinnati elections the two principal municipal parties were the Charter Committee and the Republican Executive Committee. The Charter Committee is made up of a combination of independent Republicans and Democrats who were instrumental in securing the adoption of the city manager charter with a council elected according to the Hare plan. This group has sponsored a full set of nine candidates at each election and won a majority of the seats up to the election of 1935. In contrast to municipal parties in many American cities it operates on a volunteer rather than a patronage basis and it has greatly improved the tone of city politics. While the Democrats were content to support the Charter ticket in 1929, in 1937 they were split into three factions only one of which supported the Charter group.

An examination of the transfer of votes from candidates with given party affiliations shows that the eight year period brought a decline in party discipline. While in 1929 about four-fifths of the ballots transferred from candidates with a given party affiliation went to candidates with the same party affiliation,

in 1937 only three-fifths of the ballots were transferred within the same party groups. Several explanations may be given for the drop in party cohesion. In the earlier election party issues were more clear cut since the memory of the misrule of the Republicans before 1924 was sufficiently strong to induce those who desired civic reform to keep their choices within the Charter list. In the more recent elections the Republican party has been putting up candidates who were frequently equal in ability and prestige to those presented by the Charter group and it has ceased to challenge many of the reforms originally brought in by the Charterites. The transfers show that both the Republican and the Charterite voters are crossing party lines in greater numbers since the issues between them have become less clearly defined.

One of the comments made about proportional representation is that it increases voting along racial lines. If the view is taken that candidates should be voted for because of their ability, experience and integrity, rather than their membership in a particular race, then a system of voting which accentuated racial distinctions would not be regarded as desirable on that account. On the other hand, it has been pointed out that the essence of democracy is opportunity afforded different groups to protect themselves against exploitation by other groups.

In Cincinnati the Negroes form about one-tenth of the total population and so they should be able theoretically to elect a representative to the city council under proportional representation. This they did in 1937 when one of their candidates had regular Republican backing, but not in 1929 when both their candidates were without party backing. However, an examination of the transfers in the earlier year shows that three-fourths of the transferred votes of the Negro candidate eliminated went to the other Negro candidate who was still in the running whereas in the 1937 election the transfers from the Negro candidates eliminated scattered more widely. While it is impossible to compare the two

2. See H. F. Gosnell, "Motives for Voting as Shown by the Cincinnati P. R. Election of 1929," *National Municipal Review*, XIX (July, 1930), 471-76. One of my students, Mr. Morris H. Cohen, assisted me in the analysis of the 1937 election.

elections accurately because of the changed conditions, it is apparent that there is a strong race consciousness in both of them. In the later election it is probable that the first choices of the Negro voters were more highly concentrated than in the earlier election. It may be concluded that proportional representation permits voting along racial lines, but it does not necessarily increase such voting.

Another comment made about proportional representation is that it tends to encourage voting along religious lines. An analysis of the transfers from eliminated Protestant candidates at the two elections shows that they were distributed roughly in accordance with the proportion of Protestant candidates still in the running. This probably indicates that religious considerations were not of prime importance. However, in the 1937 election there was some slight tendency among the voters who gave their first choices to Catholic candidates to favor Catholic candidates in their later choices.

The relationship of proportional representation to voting along economic lines is also a matter of general interest. If in a given community there is little labor consciousness, then the Hare system will reflect this condition. This was the state of affairs in Cincinnati in 1929 when there were two labor candidates, one on the Republican ticket and one on the Charter ticket. When the Charter

labor candidate was eliminated only 5 per cent of his ballots were transferred to the Republican labor candidate. However, in 1937 the situation had changed considerably. About one-half of the votes transferred from labor candidates went to other labor candidates. The system faithfully reflected the rise in labor solidarity during the eight year period.

The advocates of proportional representation point out that the system results in a high per cent of effective votes, that it cannot be manipulated by party organizations, that it insures majority rule and guarantees the representation of every substantial minority, that it gives the voters great freedom of choice, that it prevents gerrymandering and solves the problem of reapportionment, that it eliminates mudslinging in local campaigns, and that it develops local leaders. Those who have opposed the plan claim that it promotes racial and religious blocs, that it helps extremists, that count is cumbersome and expensive, and that the system is hard to understand. As in connection with other governmental devices, extravagant claims have been made on both sides. The plan is, after all, a mechanical device and the use made of it depends upon the social composition and the leadership of the community which has adopted it. Since civic reform groups have been the most active in urging its spread, its adoption has usually been accompanied by a civic awakening.