

UNCONVENTIONAL WISDOM

New Facts and Hot Stats From The Social Sciences

Richard Morin

October 29, 2000; Page B5

The Problem With Plurality Politics

Majority rules? Increasingly not, says Robert Richie of the Washington-based Center for Voting and Democracy, which researches voting systems and voter participation.

Richie and his staff have just completed a major study of plurality winners in federal and state elections. They found that plurality winners have become more common in the past decade, as third-party and independent candidates such as Ross Perot capture the imagination of dissatisfied voters and claim large chunks of the vote or even, in Jesse Ventura's case, pull off an upset.

That lucky bubba Bill Clinton is, of course, the best example of a plurality winner--claiming the White House with just 43 percent of the popular vote in 1992 and 49 percent in 1996.

Clinton's far from alone, however. Richie found that, since 1992, 16 U.S. Senate races were won by a candidate who captured less than a majority of the vote, or one out of every eight contested seats in the past four federal elections. Since 1908, a total of 130 Senate seats have been won by plurality, according to Richie.

Also in the past eight years, 76 seats in the House of Representatives were won by a plurality, or 4 percent. "More governors were elected by plurality as well," Richie wrote in his study. "Of 50 sitting governors, 15 (30 percent) won one of their general elections in the 1990s by plurality, including two governors who won while running outside the major parties."

What's wrong with plurality winners? Their victories often come at the expense of the candidate who would have been the choice of voters in a two-candidate race, Richie said. Thus the winner is the candidate who was disliked by a majority of the voters.

Richie cites the 1998 Senate campaign in Nevada as a recent example. Incumbent Democrat Harry Reid won with 47.9 percent of the vote, defeating the Republican candidate, then-Rep. John Ensign, by 421 votes. "What makes this case interesting is that the Libertarian candidate, Michael Cloud, received more than 8,000 votes or 1.8 percent" of the total, Richie said. "Considering the leanings of most Libertarians, it is likely that these votes come primarily from people who would have voted for a Republican."

Vice President Gore is making exactly the same argument to supporters of Green Party presidential nominee Ralph Nader: A vote for Nader is, in effect, a vote for Texas Gov. George W. Bush. And given the generally lefty and anti-establishment 'tudes of Nader voters, Gore's probably right.

Richie's solution is what he calls Instant Runoff Voting (IRV). Voters would mark their first choice on the ballot, but also a second choice and a third if there are three candidates, and so on, in descending order of preference.

If a candidate receives a majority of first choices, he or she wins. If not, the candidate with the fewest votes is eliminated and the second-choice votes are apportioned to the remaining candidates, Richie said. The rounds of counting (and eliminating) continue until one candidate gets a majority of the votes.

Richie's proposal would require changing elections law across the country and, arguably, the Constitution. But, he said, "Given the increasing number of plurality victories in Senate races, adopting IRV would be an important step toward building a healthier democracy."

Diploma Logic

The conventionally wise say the secret to financial success isn't much of a secret: Earn a college degree and your income rises. That's led some educators to argue that the value of a college education is increasing every year. Some experts suggest that every additional year of schooling could increase lifetime earnings by as much as 50 percent over what that same person would have earned had he or she not gone to college.

Well, maybe, says Edwin Rubenstein, research director of the Hudson Institute, a think tank with offices in Washington and Indianapolis. It's certainly true that high school grads are paid only about 70 percent of what their college-educated peers make. It's also true that this earnings gap is widening.

But it's not because college grads are increasingly valued: Incomes of college grads have been largely flat for years, Rubenstein says. What's changed is the earning power of people who haven't gone to college: It's declining, widening the gap between college and

non-college grads, Rubenstein claimed in a recent issue of *Inside Academe*, a quarterly newsletter published by the **American Council of Trustees and Alumni**.

"After adjusting for inflation, the average income of college graduates holding full-time jobs rose by only 4.4 percent between 1979 and 1997, or at a minuscule annual rate of 0.2 percent," reported Rubenstein, who first presented his evidence in the Hudson Institute's magazine. "At the same time, workers with only high school degrees saw their real income plummet by 15 percent.

"Bottom line: The much-ballyhooed college wage 'premium' is due primarily to the fall in inflation-adjusted salaries of workers who haven't been to college" and not because college diplomas are increasingly worth more to employers.

[Return to Search Results](#)

washingtonpost.com

NEWS

STYLE

SPORTS

CLASSIFIEDS

MARKETPLACE