



PROGRAM FOR PUBLIC CONSULTATION
SCHOOL OF PUBLIC POLICY, UNIVERSITY OF MARYLAND

Public Supports Reforming How Members of Congress are Elected

Redistricting by Citizens, Rank-Choice Voting, Multi-Member Districts

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WASHINGTON, DC – Majorities of voters support a number of bold reforms to change how members of Congress are elected, including having congressional districts drawn by independent citizen commissions, and adopting ranked choice voting and multi-member districts, according to a new, in-depth survey from the University of Maryland’s Program for Public Consultation. These three reforms comprise new legislation – [The Fair Representation Act](#) – sponsored by Rep. Don Beyer (D-Va.) and cosponsored by Rep. Jim Cooper (D-Tenn.), Rep. Ro Khanna (D-Calif.) and Rep. Jamie Raskin (D-Md).

The highest level of support was for changing the way that House congressional districts are designed—a prominent issue now that the Supreme Court is considering whether the federal government should prevent state legislatures from designing congressional districts to the benefit of the dominant party, popularly known as gerrymandering.

Two thirds of respondents – including 53 percent of Republicans, 80 percent of Democrats and 62 percent of independents – favored having congressional districts drawn by a nonpartisan commission of citizens. The proposal specifies that the commission of citizens would be committed to drawing districts in a way that is geographically natural and compact without creating a favorable distribution for either party; be one third Republicans, one third Democrats, and one third independents; and reflect the balance of the state according to gender, race, ethnicity and the geographic areas of the state. Decisions on the shape of districts would be made by a majority of the commission members that includes at least one member from both parties and an independent. Only 19 percent found the idea unacceptable, including 29 percent of Republicans and 10 percent of Democrats, with the remainder saying it would be tolerable or acceptable.

The survey of 2,482 registered voters was conducted by the University of Maryland’s Program for Public Consultation (PPC), and released today by the nonpartisan organization Voice of the People (VOP). Neither VOP nor PPC take a position on the issues, but seek to give the public a greater voice.

“As the Supreme Court justices consider the question of how best to design congressional districts, they may want to consider an approach supported by a large bipartisan majority of American voters,” said PPC Director Steven Kull.

To ensure that respondents understood the issues, they were given a short briefing on the proposals and asked to evaluate arguments for and against. The content was reviewed by proponents and opponents of the legislation to ensure that the briefing was accurate and balanced, and that the arguments presented were the strongest ones being made.

Ranked choice voting, or ‘instant runoff’ voting also received majority support from respondents. This is a method for electing members of Congress when there are more than two candidates. Proponents argue that it is now difficult for independent and third-party candidates to get traction, because voters are concerned they’d be throwing away their vote. In an election result divided between three or more candidates, the

winner might even be opposed by the majority of voters. Opponents of the proposal say these issues are not significant enough to warrant overhauling the way that members of Congress are elected.

In this proposed system, voters select not only their most preferred candidate, but also their second choice, third-choice and so on. The winner is then selected by first counting all the first-choice votes and if any candidate gets the majority he or she is the winner. But if no candidate gets a majority, the candidate with the lowest number of votes is removed from the race and those who gave that candidate their first-choice vote have their votes redirected to their second choice. This may result in a candidate getting a majority and being declared the winner. But if not, the process is repeated until a candidate has a majority. This method is now used in elections in a number of U.S. cities including Minneapolis, St. Paul and San Francisco, as well as in some other countries, notably Australia.

This proposal for ranked choice voting was favored by 55 percent overall, including 64 percent of Democrats and 55 percent of independents. Only 46 percent of Republicans favored the idea, with 52 percent opposed.

Resistance to the idea is fairly low. In a separate question just 29 percent said the idea would be unacceptable, including 37 percent of Republicans and 21 percent of Democrats, with the remainder saying it would be tolerable or acceptable.

Similar levels of support were found for a third measure to create ‘multi-member districts.’ This would be a new way of structuring districts in the U.S. House of Representatives. Proponents say this proposal addresses two issues: that in some states, all of their members of Congress are from one party, even though a very large portion of the population identifies with the other party, and, again, independent and third-party candidates have little chance of getting elected, even though a substantial number of voters might favor them.

The proposal would make larger U.S. House districts that would be represented by more than one member of Congress. In a state with five or fewer congressional districts, the state would still have the same number of House members, but they would all be elected by all of the state’s voters and represent the whole state. For larger states, clusters of 3-5 districts would be merged into a larger district. Research has been done on what the likely effect would be: election results would more closely mirror the partisan balance of the state.

This proposal for multi-member districts was favored by 55 percent, including 66 percent of Democrats and 54 percent of independents. Among Republicans, only 44 percent favored the idea with 53 percent opposed. But here too opposition was not strongly held – only 27 percent said it would be unacceptable, including 34 percent of Republicans and 20 percent of Democrats.

The survey was conducted online from September 7- October 3, 2017 with a national probability-based sample of 2,482 registered voters, provided by Nielsen Scarborough from Nielsen Scarborough’s sample of respondents, who were recruited by mail and telephone using a random sample of households. The margin of error was +/- 2.0 percent.

Questionnaire: http://vop.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/Elections_Redistricting_Quaire041218.pdf

Slides: http://vop.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/Elections_Redistricting_Slides041218.pdf

Survey: <https://www.surveygizmo.com/s3/4221322/rankedchoice>

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