

Numbers show system needs improvement

Math and politics: Two of my favorite things. After I attended my first caucus, I knew I'd have to write about them.

As I sat in my precinct meeting, I thought about the mathematics of representative democracy. The presidential nomination process has multiple levels to it. Because we're electing delegates, it's just like electing senators or congressmen: We're voting for voters. But when political decisions are made at the intersection between the abstract world of numbers and the physical world of postal addresses, interesting things can happen.

Try this thought experiment. Suppose there were five legislative districts in Colorado, which I'll call El Paso, Boulder, Jefferson, Summit and Gunnison. Suppose that each county had five registered voters. Suppose furthermore that Boulder, Jefferson and Summit each had three Democrats and two Republicans, while El Paso and Gunnison each had four Republicans and one Democrat. Colorado holds an election, and the Democrats win a majority of the five seats in the Legislature. If a majority vote is all that's required, they can pass all the bills they want.

But go back and count: In the scenario above, Republicans outnumbered Democrats! That's because in representative democracy, how much political power you get is connected not just with how you vote but where you live. This means you can have anti-democratic results in a democratic system. Particularly in a winner-take-all, two-party duopoly.

The connection between math and politics comes up in all sorts of places. Because school funding is tied to property taxes, which are based on where people live, we have rich schools and poor schools. Legislatures all over the country do something called "gerrymandering," in which the boundaries of districts are redrawn based on the voting patterns of those who live there. Change the space, change the numbers. Change the numbers, change the power.

You can also show mathematically that if people have just a slight preference for people of their own skin color, neighborhoods become segregated. The same is true if you want your particular racial, social or economic group to have clout. You all have to live somewhere close to one another so you can outnumber people. But if everyone



OPINION
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wants to be part of a majority in a district, then people have to segregate themselves.

I thought about all this on Super Tuesday. My Republican precinct caucus had 47 people. In our straw poll, Mitt Romney came in first, with barely more than half the votes. Huckabee came in second, with Ron Paul and John McCain tying for third.

When it came time to elect delegates, however, the first five nominated were all Romney supporters. Nobody else ran, so Romney got the whole ball of wax. I wanted to run,

but I just couldn't in good conscience commit to the time required. Instead, I put my name forward as an alternate and voiced my support for Ron Paul. I got 17 out of 47 votes, more than a third, which I thought was pretty good. But in a winner-take-all system, I was shouting into the wind.

Of course, the winner who took all in my precinct is now out of the race. My candidate tied with the new frontrunner, but nobody cares about that. Because the power of my vote was based on my postal address, my only option was for me to go around my precinct and convince people to vote the way I want. But who has time for that?

The other possibility, I suppose, is for everyone who shares my pro-freedom, pro-responsibility politics to pack up and move to the same place. New Hampshire and Vermont have been kicked around as possibilities, along with a floating offshore manmade country. Hey, we libertarians are nothing if not idealistic.

But why should politics be so important that I should have to consider moving to begin with? Why must we segregate ourselves and differentially fund our schools just to wield political power? Is politics really that important? Does it really deserve the enormous role it now plays in our lives?

There are so many better alternatives worth exploring. Open the system to competition. Adopt proportional representation. Let voters rank-order candidates. Take constitutional limits on government power seriously. Do more locally.

After all, people's lives are important. Too important, it seems to me, to be tossed aside by the cruel mathematics of politics.

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