Abstract: Daniel PROSTERMAN

Global Democratic Visions: Electoral Reform Activism in the Early Twentieth Century

“Global Democratic Visions” will analyze the rise of a network of self-defined democratic reformers, who argued for the expansion of proportional representation (PR) as a means of radically altering governmental power throughout the world. Coalitions for and against PR considered the system crucial to a fundamentally new conception of democracy that challenged the boundaries of who could be elected, what interests could be represented, and ultimately what policies could be implemented at local and national levels. Galvanized with a sense of opportunity following the First World War, activists in London and New York City championed PR’s use in more than a dozen nations, including Ireland, the United States, Denmark, Japan, Australia, Switzerland, and Sweden. In 1923, within one month of one another, voters in Cleveland, Ohio, and Dublin, Ireland, utilized virtually the same methods of PR voting to elect their local legislatures. Rather than coincidence, this similarity in democratic policy occurred precisely because of the correspondence between election organizers on both sides of the Atlantic.

Amid global crises concerning the purpose and power of government during the Great Depression and Second World War, people within and beyond the English-speaking world debated the meaning of self-rule. The popularity of PR and other methods of expanding the two-party system waned in the United States and Great Britain following World War II. However, PR’s use globally rose significantly as reconstructed democracies and newly independent nations incorporated the system, ironically often at the behest of U.S. and British diplomatic interests. More recently, while the two major political parties in the United States have consistently opposed PR, the administration of President George W. Bush endorsed its use in the 2005 Iraqi parliamentary elections as a means of fostering diversity in the new legislature. In Great Britain in 2010, an agreement to consider PR for parliamentary elections served as a central component of the formation of the Conservative-Liberal Democrat ruling coalition.

Daniel Prosterman, Salem College
daniel.prosterman@salem.edu