AMERICAN ACADEMY
OF ARTS & SCIENCES

EXPANDING REPRESENTATION

REINVENTING CONGRESS FOR THE 21ST CENTURY

AN OUR COMMON PURPOSE PUBLICATION

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REINVENTING CONGRESS FOR THE 21ST CENTURY

AMERICAN ACADEMY OF ARTS & SCIENCES
Cambridge, Massachusetts

OUR COMMON PURPOSE

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CONTENTS

A LETTER FROM THE PRESIDENT OF THE AMERICAN ACADEMY

October 2025

This report introduces a timely concept about political representation in a season marked by continuously evolving discussions about the role, power, capacity, and authority of the United States Congress. Does Congress alone have the power to declare war? To control our country's purse strings? To advise the president and consent to his officers? To make laws, or to delegate such authority to executive branch rulemaking? While these debates have taken on new urgency in the first half of 2025, as a new presidential administration has vigorously pursued an executive-centric vision of the balance of power, they are not new. Congress has long been viewed as deadlocked or dysfunctional, and actors across the political spectrum have sought to bypass the legislative process.

Underlying these debates is a more fundamental question: Even if Congress could pass more laws, control the purse strings, exercise oversight, and direct foreign affairs, would it do so in a way that responds to the interests, desires, and preferences of the American people?

The challenges of our constitutional democracy today are well known: Americans are deeply polarized and increasingly distrustful of our institutions. Dissatisfaction with Congress, in particular, is so deep and so long-standing as to seem inevitable and unchangeable.

Our Common Purpose: Reinventing American Democracy for the 21st Century, the landmark report of the Academy's Commission on the Practice of Democratic Citizenship, posits that declining trust and institutional dysfunction are interrelated—that "lack of representation is part of what is eroding our civic faith." When the system seems not to be working, Americans disengage, further eroding the system and trapping us in a "vicious cycle."

Our Common Purpose sets out a positive vision for the future of American constitutional democracy underpinned by a "virtuous cycle" in which responsive political institutions foster a healthy civic culture of participation and responsibility. That civic culture, in turn, ensures that political institutions remain responsive and inclusive. The report offers a set of key reforms to political institutions and processes to change how our system works and improve the responsiveness and representativeness of the first branch.

This publication elaborates on perhaps the most profound of these proposed institutional reforms. Replacing the current system of winner-take-all elections for members of the House

of Representatives could fundamentally alter our constitutional democracy, giving new voice to millions of Americans and reshaping Congress as a result. Americans are ready for this change: as the survey research in this report highlights, they are overwhelmingly frustrated with the status quo and, more importantly, are open to something new.

This publication complements the Academy's previous report on expanding the House of Representatives and offers a comprehensive look at the basic design questions policymakers would face in implementing a new electoral system. It collects the best available research to lay out how a shift away from winner-take-all elections might work.

Special thanks go to the working group, especially Lee Drutman, Deb Otis, Maria Perez, and Grant Tudor, who took the lead in writing this paper, and to John Carey, whose notes throughout the process were indispensable. Thank you also to Moon Duchin, Michael Hanchard, Charles Stewart III, Christopher Thomas, and Philip Wallach, who were involved in earlier stages of this project and whose perspectives helped shape the working group's deliberations.

I am especially grateful to the cochairs of the Our Common Purpose project, Danielle Allen of Harvard University, Stephen Heintz of the Rockefeller Brothers Fund, and Eric Liu of Citizen University, for their invaluable leadership and guidance as the Academy works to further the recommendations in the *Our Common Purpose* report.

Thank you to the Academy staff who supported the working group and contributed to this publication, including Betsy Super, Jessica Lieberman, Zachey Kliger, Phyllis Bendell, Scott Raymond, and Peter Walton.

Finally, the Academy's work to strengthen American democracy would not be possible without the generous support of the S. D. Bechtel, Jr. Foundation, the Rockefeller Brothers Fund, the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, the Ford Foundation, the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation, the Suzanne Nora Johnson and David G. Johnson Foundation, the Clary Family Charitable Fund, Alan and Lauren Dachs, Sara Lee Schupf and the Lubin Family Foundation, Joan and Irwin Jacobs, David M. Rubenstein, and Patti Saris.

Strengthening constitutional democracy has been part of this organization's mission since it was founded. The Academy was chartered in 1780, at the height of the Revolutionary War, by John Adams, John Hancock, and other scholar-patriots of their day, "to cultivate every art and science which may tend to advance the interest, honor, dignity, and happiness of a free, independent, and virtuous people." They recognized the need for continuous reflection about our political system and the vital role of knowledge in setting out a path for the future of this nation. The paper you are about to read follows proudly in that tradition.

Laurie L. Patton
Cambridge, MA

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Across partisan lines, Americans today are deeply dissatisfied with our political system:

- 80 percent say that public officials do not care much about what people like them think;
- 70 percent say that half or more of the people running the government are corrupt;
- 69 percent say that people like them have no say in what the government does; and
- 78 percent say either that the government in Washington can be trusted only some of the time or that it cannot be trusted at all.[1]

Faced with this deepening voter frustration, a growing number of scholars and advocates have encouraged policymakers to consider America's *electoral system*, or the system by which votes are translated into congressional seats, as one important source of dysfunction. In our current *winner-take-all* electoral system, one candidate is elected per district, and the person who receives more votes than any opponent wins that sole available seat (that is, "takes all"). Winner-take-all systems can leave large portions of the electorate—up to nearly 50 percent in very close elections—without a representative who shares their views. Researchers have linked this type of system to a variety of negative outcomes, including a decrease in competitive legislative races, the underrepresentation of women and racial and ethnic minorities, and escalating polarization and extremism.

As part of its groundbreaking 2020 report on reinvigorating democratic citizenship, *Our Common Purpose: Reinventing American Democracy for the 21st Century*, the Commission on the Practice of Democratic Citizenship recommended moving from our current winner-take-all structure to a system known as *single transferrable vote* (STV; sometimes also called proportional ranked-choice voting or emergent proportionality) to elect members of the House of Representatives.[2] This is a type of *proportional representation*, or a system in which multiple representatives instead of one are elected from each district and seats are won in proportion to votes.

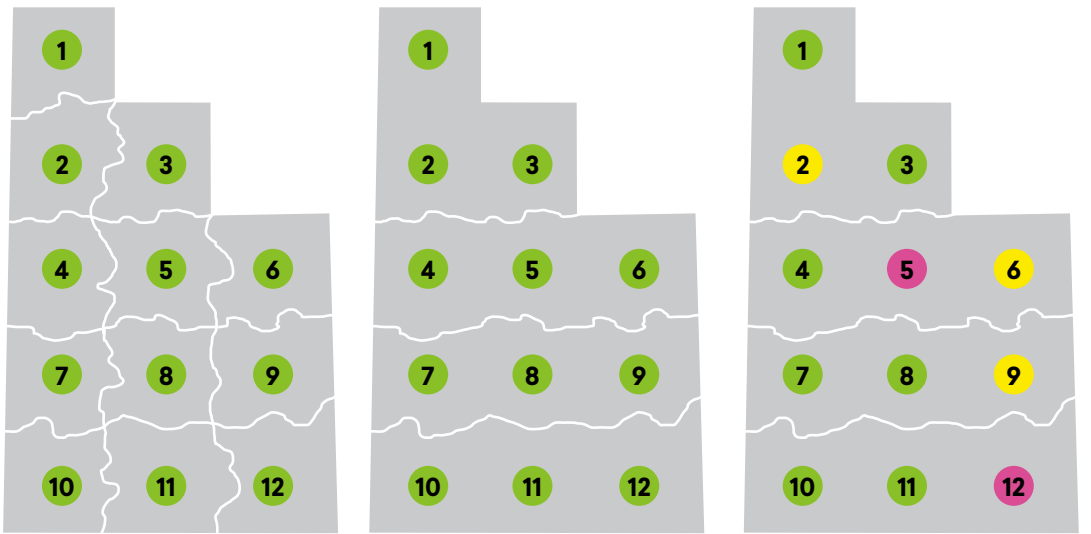
This paper is intended to help policymakers and reformers better understand this *Our Common Purpose* recommendation, as well as a broader array of proportional options. It is the product of a working group of political

scientists, legal scholars, advocates, and others convened by the Academy who offered their diverse expertise as a complement to the extensive scholarly literature on the topic. The paper does the following:

- Provides a primer on electoral systems, including the key distinctions between the two main classes: winner-take-all, currently used for most U.S. federal, state, and local elections, and proportional representation.
- Reviews the core components of any electoral system, with recommendations on basic design decisions when considering proportional systems in the United States. These components include district magnitude, assembly size, ballot structure, and allocation method.
- Distills existing scholarship to suggest how changes to our electoral system could affect the health of American democracy. While the impacts of any change are not guaranteed, shifting away from a winner-take-all system as outlined here is associated with improvements that are vital to America's civic health, including reducing negative polarization, increasing voter turnout, and increasing representation across several kinds of group characteristics. International experience shows that proportional representation is also associated with stable governing and lawmakers advancing policies that broadly serve the electorate.

The paper intends to be an accessible resource for understanding *what* proportional representation is, *how* it might be designed for U.S. elections, and *why* it should be considered as a potentially powerful reform given the existing and growing evidence of its impact.

Multimember Districts with Proportional Representation



CURRENT SYSTEM
one representative per congressional district

MULTIMEMBER DISTRICTS
multiple representatives for each district

MULTIMEMBER DISTRICTS WITH PROPORTIONAL REPRESENTATION
seats are allocated according to the proportion of votes

INTRODUCTION

Every two years, American voters in districts across the country cast a ballot for a single congressional candidate, understanding that the candidate with the most votes will win their district's seat. Many take this basic design of our system as a given—that each district is represented by a single official and that the winner is the candidate who gets more votes than the next closest competitor.

In reality, there are a variety of ways to elect representatives. States have long experimented with other methods, and outside the United States, most democracies use a different system altogether.

As dissatisfaction with our politics has deepened, scholars and reformers have encouraged policymakers to consider America's *electoral system*, or the system by which votes are translated into legislative seats, as one important source of dysfunction. Scholarship has linked our current American system, known as *winner-take-all*, to a broad array of issues affecting the practice of American constitutional democracy, such as escalating polarization and extremism, the underrepresentation of women and racial and ethnic minorities, a decrease in competitive legislative races, and even an increase in political violence. The methods we use to elect our representatives—often taken for granted—play one important role in the challenges confronting our politics.

A growing body of scholars and civil society groups across the country advocates replacing our system for electing lawmakers with a *proportional* system in which multiple representatives instead of one are elected from each district and seats are won in proportion to votes. Proponents of this change point to research that finds a variety of benefits associated with more proportional electoral systems, from tempering polarization and improving governance to ensuring that more voters are fairly represented.

ELECTORAL SYSTEM: the method by which votes are translated into legislative seats.

WINNER-TAKE-ALL: a system in which a single candidate with more votes than any competitor wins the entire district (that is, "takes all").

PROPORTIONAL REPRESENTATION: a system in which multiple representatives instead of one are elected from each district and seats are won in proportion to votes.

The American Academy of Arts and Sciences' report *Our Common Purpose: Reinventing American Democracy for the 21st Century* (*OCP*) recommends a specific form of proportional representation known variously as single transferrable vote, proportional ranked-choice voting, or emergent proportionality.

This paper aims to help policymakers better understand this *OCP* recommendation, the backdrop of alternative systems, and the reasons why scholars and advocates believe that reforming our electoral system can spur positive change in the United States.

The American Academy of Arts and Sciences and *Our Common Purpose*

Founded in 1780 by John Adams, John Hancock, and other scholar-patriots of their day, the American Academy of Arts and Sciences has a long history of convening leaders from a wide variety of fields and backgrounds "to cultivate every art and science which may tend to advance the interest, honor, dignity, and happiness of a free, independent, and virtuous people." Today, the Academy is both an honorary society and an independent research center that brings together Academy members and other experts in cross-disciplinary efforts to inform public policy.

The Academy's current work on electoral system reform began in 2018, when it convened its cross-ideological and interdisciplinary Commission on the Practice of Democratic Citizenship to explore the state of our constitutional democracy. The Commission looked to the voices of experts and existing research but also conducted nearly fifty listening sessions across the country with a broad cross-section of Americans. That work led to the release of the *OCP* report in June 2020.

OCP is grounded in the theory that, in a healthy democracy, strong civic institutions and civic culture reinforce and are reinforced by responsive government institutions, leading to a "virtuous cycle." In America today, however, we are caught in a "vicious cycle": our institutions are not sufficiently responsive, which causes individuals to disengage, which further reduces the responsiveness of the institutions, and so on. To remedy this, *OCP* offers six broad strategies and thirty-one specific recommendations intended to address all parts of this cycle.

The first set of recommendations focuses on improving representation and giving all Americans a greater sense of agency over the government decisions that impact their lives. One of those—Recommendation 1.3—calls for reimagining the system currently used to select members of the U.S. House of Representatives. Since 1967, federal law has mandated that states use single-member congressional districts. This arrangement produces a winner-take-all electoral system, wherein a single representative wins the entire district ("takes all"). The Commission called for replacing this system with a specific type of proportional system, termed by political scientists *single transferable vote* (STV). This system is also commonly known in the United States as *proportional ranked-choice voting*, and some advocates refer to it as *emergent proportionality*.[3]

Winner-take-all and proportional systems like STV are distinguished by a variety of important features and effects. But the principal distinguishing factor, as the name suggests, is that proportional systems result in greater

"Amend or repeal and replace the 1967 law that mandates single-member districts for the House, so that states have the option to use multi-member districts on the condition that they adopt a non-winner-take-all election model."

—*OUR COMMON PURPOSE*, RECOMMENDATION 1.3

proportionality in outcomes. For instance, in a proportional system with a district electing three or four congressional seats, a minority group or party supported by about one-quarter of the voters will typically receive at least one seat. The share of seats won by the group thus would be roughly in proportion to the share of voters it represents. By contrast, under winner-take-all, a minority group of that size would almost certainly receive no seats at all, leaving the group's voters without representation of their choice. As the *OCP* report explains, enacting Recommendation 1.3 would "signal a victory for equal voice and representation." Implementation of STV is framed in the report as a logical next step that could build on other recommended reforms, including the single-seat version of ranked-choice voting (Recommendation 1.2 in the report).

Most democracies throughout the world use proportional electoral systems, and those systems are as different as the nations that created them. Within the United States, a handful of cities also uses proportional systems for local elections. The STV-type system recommended in *OCP* (which is also the type used in Portland, Oregon, and Cambridge, Massachusetts) is different from the proportional systems used in most other countries in that the improvements in representation it engenders need not be mediated through the party structure. Internationally, versions of STV are used in Ireland, Australia, and Malta, as well as by various subnational governments.

The Working Group

As attention to proportional representation has increased, the need for a clear and thorough resource that policymakers can use to understand the ins and outs of electoral system design has become apparent. To address this need, in March 2024 the Academy convened the Electoral Design Working Group, which is composed of political scientists, election law experts, advocates, practitioners, and other leaders with diverse backgrounds and ideologies. In addition to relying on their own expertise and the available academic research, the group conducted outreach to state and federal policymakers and activists to better understand their perspectives on the issues at hand. That outreach occurred alongside a related public opinion research project, for which the working group served in a consultative capacity.

All the members of this working group agree, at a minimum, that the STV-type electoral system recommended in *OCP* would be an improvement over the current winner-take-all scheme. Opinions among the group are more varied with respect to other forms of proportional representation: some of the working group members prefer STV over other systems. These members argue that alternatives (like the party list systems common in the rest of the world) have drawbacks that make them less viable and effective in our American constitutional system and political culture. Other members of the

working group believe that these concerns may be overstated and that other proportional representation systems may in fact work better than STV in the United States. Still other members believe that it is impossible at this stage to know what specific system would work best, and states should thus have the option to experiment with a variety of approaches. Finally, some are hesitant to move forward with any specific system in the absence of a more comprehensive process that meaningfully provides opportunities for agency to historically marginalized groups and other stakeholders.

This paper aims to lay out the policy choices required to implement any new electoral system and to outline the benefits most likely to result from discarding winner-take-all. In so doing, we hope to make the case for abandoning winner-take-all, as recommended in *OCP*, and to facilitate greater understanding of both the specific system proposed in that report and the full spectrum of possibilities. Where possible, the group has made actionable recommendations; elsewhere it has laid out possibilities and articulated open questions. We enthusiastically invite further research and debate, and we hope that this work will spark an informed discussion of how better electoral system design could make American constitutional democracy more representative, responsive, and resilient.

Research Methods

A principal challenge of predicting the outcomes from any given proportional system of representation in the United States is the relative lack of empirical evidence in the U.S. context. Only one state—Illinois—has ever used a non-winner-take-all electoral system (in that case, a semiproportional system), and never has one been used for a congressional election. While the study of electoral systems is buoyed by substantial research today, extrapolating lessons for U.S. elections given the dominance of the winner-take-all model throughout American history can be challenging.

This paper draws from three principal categories of scholarship to offer insights into the potential implications of adopting the *OCP* reform or any other form of proportional representation. First, it draws from available domestic research, even if limited. For example, city councils and school boards across the country use semiproportional systems to elect their members, and researchers have studied their results on dimensions like the representation of women and racial and ethnic groups. Second, it draws from cross-national or comparative research, or research that compares experiences among various countries. For example, cross-national evidence indicates that proportional systems are correlated with lower levels of affective polarization. This means that, in countries that use proportional systems, voters are

Overview of the Paper

Section I of this paper provides a summary of electoral systems and the two broad classes (proportional and winner-take-all) into which they may be divided. It also describes the main takeaways from the working group's stakeholder interviews and public opinion research to provide insight into how both the grassroots and local and national civic and political leaders may react to electoral reform. Section II discusses the design choices that would be required to implement any change to our electoral system, including a change to the type of proportional system recommended in *OCP*. Finally, Section III outlines impacts that might be expected from moving to a proportional system.

less likely to think negatively about members of opposing parties. Third, it features certain simulation exercises of proportional representation in the United States. For example, modeling shows mathematically the near impossibility of gerrymandering under certain proportional rules. Many members of this working group have helped to produce this research.

While none of these data points can themselves predict how a different electoral system might perform for, say, the U.S. House, they do offer directional guidance. For instance, domestic evidence shows improved racial and ethnic minority representation under semiproportional rules across local U.S. jurisdictions; comparative research generally finds the same in proportional systems across other democracies and finds that proportional systems can be one factor in increasing the number of women who run for and win elected office; and simulation exercises produce similarly improved racial and ethnic representation for U.S. congressional elections. While predicting actual results remains impossible, this evidence does offer directionally useful information. And although general insights can obscure important exceptions and nuances, our hope is that distilling multiple sources of scholarship can, as a starting point, offer meaningful suggestions about potential implications.

I. ELECTORAL SYSTEMS: THE BASICS

Winner-Take-All Versus Proportional Representation

Elections are shaped by many important factors, from ballot access laws and voting procedures to campaign finance laws and candidacy requirements. As political scientists Michael Gallagher and Paul Mitchell explain, "Such rules . . . are all very important in determining the significance and legitimacy of an election. However, they should not be confused with the more narrowly defined concept of the electoral system itself."[4]

Electoral systems are the methods by which *votes* are translated into legislative *seats*. While many factors determine the nature of a country's elections, not all are "specifically about the votes-to-seats conversion process."[5]

To illustrate, consider the United Kingdom's 2024 election results, in which the Labour Party won 68 percent of seats in Parliament by securing 33.7 percent of the vote. Meanwhile, in Germany's most recent elections, the leading parties (the Christian Democratic Union of Germany/Christian Social Union in Bavaria) won 30.02 percent of seats in the Bundestag with 30.02 percent of the vote. In the United Kingdom, Labour won seats significantly out of proportion to its share of the vote, while the leading German party's shares of seats precisely reflected its share of the vote. The two countries use markedly different electoral systems that convert votes into seats in different ways.

Broadly, electoral systems can be divided into one of two classes: they are either *winner-take-all* or *proportional*.[6]

In winner-take-all electoral systems, the election winner secures 100 percent of the available seats, regardless of the actual share of the vote received. A winner can be established either on a majority basis (meaning that the winner must receive 50 percent of the votes plus one) or a plurality basis (meaning that the winner simply receives the most votes, even if that amount is less than 50 percent of the total number of votes cast). Winner-take-all systems may use either single- or multimember districts, though single-member districts are more common. In the United States, each congressional district is represented by a single official, so if that candidate wins 50 percent plus one vote (or if the winner can be established by a plurality), they in effect win 100 percent of the seats. Voters who did not back the single winning candidate do not have an official representing them for whom they voted. Winner-take-all is used in all U.S. state and federal legislative elections and most municipal elections. It is also used in a few other major democracies, including the United Kingdom, Canada, and India.

In contrast, proportional systems aim to ensure that a group's share of seats reflects its share of votes.[7] For instance, if a given multimember district has six seats, and a party secures 50 percent of the vote, the party's candidates will win three of those seats. Proportional systems can exist only in multimember contexts, but they come in a rich diversity of forms; and while common variants exist, no two countries' systems look exactly alike. Nonetheless, they all share the property of aiming to roughly approximate seats to votes.[8] It is the most common electoral system among the world's democracies today.[9]

To illustrate the system in practice, consider Illinois. Like all states, Illinois uses winner-take-all to elect its congressional delegation. In the 2024 election for the U.S. House, nearly 53 percent of the state voted Democratic, yet Democrats won fourteen of the seventeen available seats. That is, 53 percent of the vote translated into 82 percent of the seats. Meanwhile, Republicans, who commanded 47 percent of the vote, secured only 18 percent of the seats. In Illinois, Republicans do not constitute a majority in most districts and so Democrats are likely to win the single seat available in most cases. The cumulative effect is a lopsided delegation in Congress.

Consider how outcomes would likely change under a proportional system instead. Illinois could create, say, four three-member districts and one five-member district. With districts featuring at least three seats, Republicans—who regularly constitute roughly one-third or more in nearly all of today's single-member districts—would secure at least one in each, significantly lessening the gap between their share of the vote and their share of seats.

Why Does Federal Law Require Single-Member Districts?

Today, federal law mandates that all states use single-member congressional districts, although some states still use multimember districts for state legislative races.[10]

Since the nation's founding, many states have used multimember districts in the form of statewide at-large voting, also known as bloc voting, a type of winner-take-all system. Instead of allocating multiple winners proportionally to votes, winners were determined by a plurality or majority. In practice, this meant a single majority group could elect every seat in the state. The system was used to deny fair representation both to partisan and racial minority groups. As a result, multiple Congresses in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries passed laws prohibiting the system and instead requiring the use of single-member districts—another variant of winner-take-all, though a less evidently nonproportional one. The latest mandate was passed in 1967 to improve representation for African Americans during the burst of legislative activities that attended the Civil Rights Movement.[11]

The reform examined by this paper is fundamentally different from systems used earlier in our country's history. We recommend that multimember districts be used with a *proportional* allocation of winners: in effect, the exact opposite of the methods previously used to exclude all groups except the majority faction.[12]

While we highlight here an example in which winner-take-all disfavors Republicans, the consequences can affect any political party. As we explore in greater depth below, the consequences are also felt beyond partisanship: gender, racial, and ethnic groups, issue-based constituencies, and other groupings of voters that typically fail to constitute an outright majority in any given jurisdiction regularly struggle to secure representation commensurate with their numbers under winner-take-all.

The American colonies inherited winner-take-all from the United Kingdom. Various framers imagined a House that would proportionally reflect the electorate; but proportional systems had yet to be developed. As political theorist Robert Dahl observes, winner-take-all was "the only game in town in 1787 and for some generations thereafter. The Framers simply left the whole matter to the states and Congress, both of which supported the only system they knew."[13] Later, Congress passed a law mandating single-member districts for House elections, thus cementing winner-take-all as the rule for federal races.

Where Are Multimember Districts Currently In Use in the United States Today?

Multimember districts can be used in both proportional and winner-take-all electoral systems. When combined with a proportional method for allocating winners, multimember districts generate a proportional electoral system; when used with a plurality or majority allocation, they generate a winner-take-all system. Multimember districts are currently used in both forms across various U.S. jurisdictions today.

In the form of proportional representation, multimember districts are used in some cities—such as Portland, Oregon, and Cambridge, Massachusetts—although no states use a proportional system for state legislative or congressional elections.[14] More than one hundred additional cities use systems considered semiproportional.[15] These were typically adopted in response to lawsuits brought under Section 2 of the Voting Rights Act. This paper does not examine semiproportional systems. Instead it focuses on methods we consider to be more fully proportional, although semiproportional systems have been successful at mitigating vote dilution in municipalities.

Ten states use multimember districts for state legislative elections, but none combines it with a proportional allocation of winners.[16] This kind of system, termed bloc voting, is a distinctly nonproportional variant of winner-take-all in which multiple seats are typically allocated to the majority group rather than allocated proportionally. Because of its potential to suppress, rather than enhance, representation of minority groups, bloc voting for congressional elections is fundamentally at odds with the recommendations outlined in *OCP*.

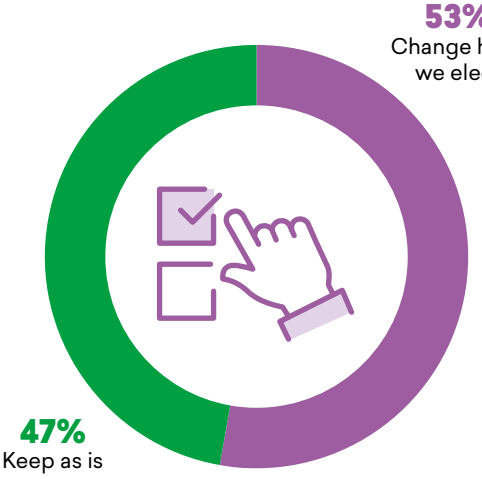
Public Support for Reform

In September 2024, the Academy commissioned a public opinion research exercise to assess potential support for electoral reform. The exercise included a large-scale survey of 3,200 eligible voters complemented by focus groups. Across partisan lines, respondents demonstrated significant distrust of the federal government: 78 percent said government in Washington can be trusted only some or none of the time, including 69 percent and 63 percent of Democratic women and men, respectively, and 89 percent and 86 percent of Republican women and men, respectively. In turn, 53 percent support changing the system by which Americans generally elect their lawmakers.

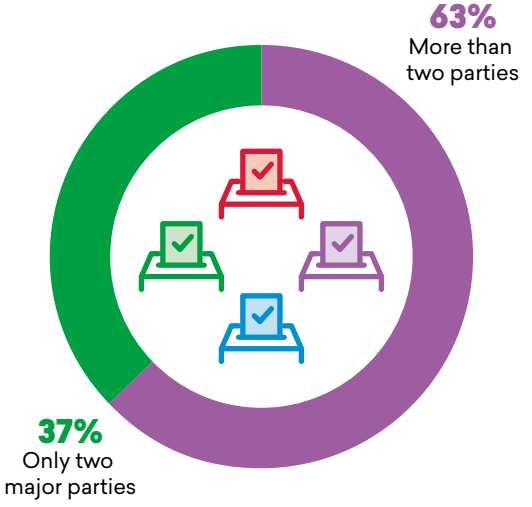
Public understanding of electoral systems and reforms like proportional representation is understandably limited. However, respondents were more compelled by the idea of generating additional political parties than by reform in general, with 63 percent supporting changes that would permit more than two options (including 63 percent among Democrats, 80 percent among Independents, and 58 percent among Republicans). Further, when framed as generating additional parties, increased support for reform was most pronounced among those who were otherwise most skeptical of change in general, including Republican men, voters without a college degree, and voters who pay little attention to politics. (The lowest level of support for more than two parties, 49 percent, was among those without a college degree.) Finally, results indicate majority support (60 percent) for adding 150 new members to Congress when that change is framed in a way that emphasizes its potential to help representatives better understand their constituents' needs.

Americans are open to changing our electoral system

Do you think that how we elect members of Congress should change, or should we keep the system the way it is?



Would the United States be better off if it had more than two competitive political parties, or is the United States better off with Democrats and Republicans as the two major parties?



In general, discussing the *mechanics* of electoral system design—as does the analysis that follows—is far less compelling than the potential outcomes, such as reducing corruption, reducing the power of interest groups, and improving the competence of and voter communication with lawmakers.

Policymaker Interviews

To better understand the political opportunities and barriers to moving toward proportional representation, the working group and Academy staff conducted several interviews with policymakers and advocates at the federal, state, and local levels. Legislators currently working on electoral reform noted that they were motivated to do so because of its potential to reduce polarization, improve representation, and eliminate "spoiler" effects and other idiosyncrasies of our current winner-take-all system. They cited inertia as the most significant barrier to electoral system change; current elected leaders have done well under the existing winner-take-all system and thus are reluctant to change it. One legislator suggested that overcoming this barrier may require setting legislation to take effect far in the future to allow a long adjustment period.

Some policymakers also expressed concern about whether changes would provide advantages to the opposing party and whether voters would understand and support a new electoral system. One policymaker noted the existence

Single-Winner Versus Proportional Ranked-Choice Voting

Our Common Purpose recommends two versions of ranked-choice voting: a single-winner version, which is the focus of Recommendation 1.2, and a multiseat, proportional version, which is the focus of Recommendation 1.3. In both versions, voters rank the candidates in order of preference. Differences arise with the number of seats filled via the election.

In the single-winner version of ranked-choice voting (RCV, also called "instant-runoff voting"), if a candidate wins an outright majority of first-choice votes, the race is over, and the candidate secures the seat. However, if no candidate has a majority of first-choice votes, then the candidate with the fewest first-place votes is eliminated, and ballots that had indicated a first preference for the eliminated candidate are allocated according to their second choices. This process continues until a candidate has more than 50 percent support.

Winner-take-all systems may have either a plurality or majority requirement for winning a seat, with the latter typically requiring a run-off between the final two candidates to generate a majority winner. Single-winner RCV operationalizes a majority winner requirement through an alternative to a multi-election run-off. A majority requirement—whether achieved through run-offs or RCV—helps avoid "spoilers" (nonwinning candidates whose presence on the ballot changes which candidate wins the election) and ensures that the winner has support from a majority of the voters. In addition, the need to appeal

of certain "sacred seats"—majority-minority districts that were formerly represented by historically significant figures, giving them a resonance and importance beyond the seat itself. Because moving to multimember districts would effectively dismantle these districts, voters within those districts may have particular reason to view any changes as a step back from hard-fought gains for underrepresented communities.

Among community leaders familiar with successful local efforts to adopt STV, one of the most important benefits reported was the ability to form new coalitions. These coalitions could include established representatives and voters or community members new to electoral politics. In other cases, community leaders found that the ability to discuss and address policy concerns that impacted many voters but were not usually part of elections, such as the performance of municipal services, generated the most excitement.

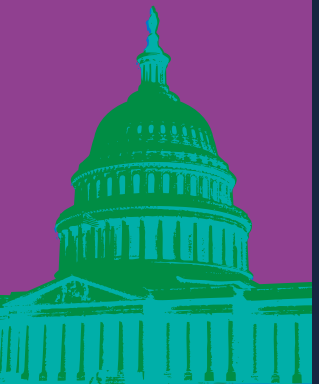
Finally, in our interviews, we encountered situations in which ranked-choice voting and STV were treated as interchangeable or assumed to have identical features and effects—even where the evidence does not point to these conclusions. This underscores the importance of ensuring that public discussion clearly delineates the differences between single-seat ranked-choice voting and the *OCP* recommendation discussed here.

to other candidates' supporters to get their second-choice votes may potentially reduce negative campaigning and/or drive candidates to moderate their policy positions.

However, in any single-winner race—even one with a majority requirement—large numbers of voters (potentially nearly 50 percent) can still be stuck without a representative of whom they approve.

RCV can also be implemented with multiple-winner rules. This system is generally known as either *single transferrable vote* or *proportional RCV*. A win threshold is established based on the number of seats available. That threshold will be lower than the 50 percent required to win a seat in the single-winner version of RCV. For instance, in a three-seat district, a candidate will need 25 percent plus one vote to win. As in the single-winner version, voters rank the candidates on their ballot. When a candidate surpasses the win threshold, the surplus votes are allocated to the candidate's supporters' second choices according to a formula. Whenever no candidate reaches the threshold, the candidate with the fewest votes is eliminated and their supporters' votes are transferred to their second-choice candidate. This process continues until all the seats are filled.

In short, in multiseat districts, election results will deliver seats to a broader range of parties, factions, or identity groups roughly in line with the amount of relative support they have from voters.



II. KEY SYSTEM DESIGN CHOICES

Each electoral system is composed of the same constituent parts. The design of those parts can vary significantly, producing different kinds of systems. Proportional systems differ from winner-take-all because of fundamentally different design choices. *Within* the broad class of proportional representation, different design choices can produce meaningfully different variants.

Policymakers and reformers considering proportional systems in lieu of winner-take-all—whether for federal, state, or local elections—will inevitably face certain choices. To clarify the basic design decisions intrinsic to all electoral systems, the following presents significant benefits and drawbacks to consider, while also offering perspectives on which decisions might be most appropriate for designing proportional systems in the U.S. context. The discussion is intended as directional guidance based on contemporary research and this group's interdisciplinary expertise.

Electoral systems are made up of four key components, all of which interact to determine how votes are converted into seats.[17] Different rule choices give rise to different kinds of systems, and, because choices are expansive across each, no two countries' electoral systems look exactly alike.

- **DISTRICT MAGNITUDE**, or the number of seats per district. Districts can be either single- or multimember. The number of seats in a multimember district is limited only by the total number of representatives in a delegation or legislature and so can vary widely.
- **ASSEMBLY SIZE**, or the total number of representatives in a legislative chamber. Assembly size is also expressed as a ratio of representatives to constituents to reflect the relative size of a legislative body given population size.
- **BALLOT STRUCTURE**, or how voters can express their preferences on a ballot. Some ballots allow voters to select a single candidate or party, while others allow voters to rank candidates in order of preference.
- **ALLOCATION METHOD**, or the mathematical rules used to determine winners. Under a plurality rule, a candidate must secure more votes than the next closest rival to win but need not secure an absolute majority. Under a majority rule, a winner must obtain at least 50 percent plus one vote. There are a number of proportional formulas, which generally aim to allocate seats in proportion to votes. These proportional formulas are applicable only in systems that use multimember districts.

What follows is a brief overview of each rule and implications to consider for the design of proportional systems in the United States.

District Magnitude

District magnitude—the number of seats per legislative district—arguably constitutes the most consequential decision for any electoral system. That is because district magnitude, more so than any other variable, determines a system's potential for proportionality.[18] In general, as district magnitude increases, so, too, does the proportionality of electoral outcomes, assuming the use of a proportional allocation method.

However, proportionality is not the only consideration. Comparative research shows that, as district magnitude increases, so does the effective number of political parties.[19] That is, the greater the average number of seats per district, the greater the number of competitive parties. "This logic follows something close to a law in political science. Knowing the average number of seats per district, along with the total number of seats in a legislature, will generate a remarkably accurate prediction of the number of nationally competitive political parties in any given country."[20]

Proportional systems, because of their use of multimember districts, tend to generate multiparty systems. But variability across countries is significant. Low district magnitudes correspond to fewer political parties, whereas

District Magnitude and Gerrymandering

Gerrymandering is the practice of drawing district lines to generate a bias that favors one party or voter group over others. While gerrymandering is observable across electoral systems, it is especially prevalent under winner-take-all. Single-member districts are uniquely vulnerable to gerrymandering.

One study of fifty-four democracies finds that "not all electoral systems are equally prone to gerrymandering. The problem is inherent in the system of one-seat districts, while it is less serious in multimember districts."[21] As district magnitude decreases, the prevalence of gerrymandering increases; thus, single-members districts, or the lowest possible district magnitude, are especially susceptible. As the number of seats per district increases, drawing lines to advantage one party becomes "prohibitively difficult."[22] Districts with at least five seats appear to be functionally immune to gerrymandering.[23]

Modeling exercises demonstrate how gerrymandering might be significantly reduced or eliminated by a shift to proportional representation.[24] A 2023 study found that "even some of the most gerrymandered maps in the nation would produce fair outcomes if existing gerrymandered districts were combined into multimember districts and seats were allocated to parties proportionally."[25] Illinois's century-long experiment with cumulative voting, a semiproportional system, offers additional empirical evidence. Researchers in 1920 observed that the system (using three-seat districts for state legislature), introduced in 1870, had virtually eliminated the practice of gerrymandering.[26]

higher district magnitudes correspond to more. Consider that in a district with, say, five seats, up to five political parties have the opportunity to secure one seat; with ten seats, even more parties could potentially win and so may be motivated to form and compete. As we explore in greater detail below, a more dynamic and competitive party system could decrease polarization, improve representation, and facilitate better governance, among other effects. But scholarship also cautions against the risk of fragmentation, when *too* many parties hamper effective governance through overly "broad and fractious coalitions."[27]

Scholars have long debated an "optimal" district magnitude range.[28] One study using data from 610 election outcomes in eighty-one countries from 1945 to 2006 concluded that average district magnitudes of between four and eight tend to maximize proportionality in outcomes (that is, gains in proportionality become minimal thereafter) while limiting party fragmentation. They also surpass both winner-take-all systems and proportional systems with higher district magnitudes on various indicators of government performance.[29] Other research finds that magnitudes below this range—and especially, two-seat districts[30]—are neither likely to increase proportionality nor create space for more parties.[31]

So, what is the right district magnitude to adopt for U.S. congressional elections? The working group recommends drawing districts that have three to eight seats, but it also discussed allowing states some flexibility to experiment slightly beyond the upper end of this range. This window is larger than the electoral "sweet spot" of four to eight seats identified in the academic literature and takes into account particular features of the American polity. A baseline district size of three is helpful to secure the benefits of a proportional system while permitting the broadest set of states to participate. Meanwhile, while comparative evidence indicates a higher district magnitude could lead to greater party fragmentation, features of the U.S. system—including an unusually strong Senate compared to other countries' upper chambers, and an especially powerful executive—will probably continue to advantage the two largest parties. So, too, will existing restrictive state rules on party formation that hinder the emergence of new parties. Thus, while eight-member districts generally are an advisable ceiling, going above this range in the U.S. context is less likely to result in severe downsides.

Assembly Size

The size of a legislative assembly performs a similar function to district magnitude. Larger assemblies increase proportionality in both electoral outcomes and the effective number of parties in a system.[32]

Assembly sizes are typically expressed in relation to population size as a ratio of constituents to each representative. The constituent-representative ratio in the United States is nearly 800,000:1, placing it on the extreme end of the assembly-size spectrum globally. Only one other country (India) has a smaller lower chamber relative to population. The U.S. ratio is six times larger than the average democracy.[33] State legislatures across the United States also tend to be small compared to their populations.[34]

Cross-national and domestic research suggests various drawbacks for assemblies that are too small relative to their population (that is, that have very large ratios of constituents

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per representative), such as weaker electoral connections between representatives and constituents, poorer legislative deliberation, and decreased trust among constituents in their representatives.[35] Comparative observations and studies of the United States show that representatives with a larger number of constituents are also more likely to take more extreme positions and prioritize wealthier and narrower interests.[36] Research from U.S. state legislatures finds that relatively smaller assemblies result in more negative evaluations of representative government.[37]

At the country's founding, each member on average represented thirty thousand constituents, and until 1929, when Congress capped its size, the House gradually expanded to roughly keep pace with population growth. In the *Our Common Purpose* report, the Commission recommended that the House initially expand by 150 seats for a total of 585, and that, as the framers intended, it continue to expand as the U.S. population grows. This initial increase would still fall below global averages and well below historical ratios in the United States. Nonetheless, while modest, the increase would help to restore representation and place the House back on track to gradually expand. (For a discussion of why 150 seats would help and how this number was arrived at, see *The Case for Enlarging the House of Representatives*.)[38]

This group underscores that recommendation. In addition to the benefits described in the prior *Our Common Purpose* report, this working group considers larger assemblies especially desirable when coupled with proposals for adopting electoral systems that are more proportional. Indeed, the two reforms are often packaged together,[39] in particular because an expanded House would allow more states to experiment with proportional systems.[40]

Consider that Alaska, Delaware, North Dakota, South Dakota, Vermont, and Wyoming each have only a single representative. Multimember districts are foreclosed to each—and so, in turn, is the ability to adopt a proportional system. Another seven states have only two representatives, below the minimum district magnitude recommended here to yield the benefits of a proportional system. Pursuing proportional representation outside this limited set of states is certainly possible absent changes to the size of the House, but increasing the size of the House would at least marginally expand opportunities for implementation and experimentation. The proposal to add 150 new seats, for example, would likely bring Hawaii, West Virginia, and Idaho across this threshold. However, most proposals to increase the size of the House would still leave many of these states with delegations too small to make the switch to a proportional system.

Ballot Structure

Ballots are the point at which voters most directly engage with an electoral system. *Ballot structure* refers to the kind of basic information a system gathers from a voter, with different structures collecting different kinds of information from voters. It is the vehicle through which an electoral system collects the electorate's preferences. This is different from *ballot design*, which refers to the way that information is presented to a voter.

Ballot structures can generally be classified as either categorical or ordinal. Categorical ballots, used in most U.S. elections, allow voters to express a single choice. Voters are given a list of candidates and simply select their top preference. Ordinal ballots, by contrast, allow voters to express multiple choices in order of preference—as with ranked-choice voting. From a list of candidates, voters rank them according to their first choice, second choice, and so on.

In proportional systems, ballots are still categorical or ordinal—selecting one choice or multiple—but the options from there expand.

Transferable systems, like the system recommended in *OCP*, use an ordinal ballot. Typically, all candidates are listed together, with the order determined by state law. Voters rank candidates in order or preference, and the top-ranked candidates are elected.

By contrast, in most of the world, proportional systems present voters with lists of candidates grouped by party. For instance, Democratic Party candidates running in a district would be listed together; next to them, would be a list of Republican Party candidates; and next to them, perhaps a list of Moderate Party candidates.

In *open list* systems, voters select a single candidate from among these lists. The number of votes a party's candidates receive is totaled together. If a party then receives, say, 50 percent of the vote in a six-seat district, three of its candidates win. *Which* three is determined by the voters: if candidates B, D, and E on the list received the most votes, those candidates are seated. In *closed list* systems, voters are still presented with lists of candidates—but voters select a *party*, not individual candidates. If a party receives 50 percent of the vote in a six-seat district, three of its candidates will again win. But this time, candidates A, B, and C on the list are seated, because the party itself chose the order of candidates. Elections in proportional systems that use party lists are akin to combining the primary and general elections.

Certain options are more like current U.S. voting experiences and election administration than others. For instance, *open list* mirrors the categorical ballot experience used for most U.S. elections today: voters simply select a single candidate, and administrators tally the totals. (The difference lies in how seats are allocated based on those totals.)[41] As ordinal ballots become more common with the adoption of ranked-choice voting in many U.S. jurisdictions, *transferable* systems would replicate the ranking experience. By contrast, *closed list* would mark a meaningful departure by asking voters to select only a party, not a candidate, and so may generally be considered a poorer match for the American context. Still, among the recent proposals for a proportional system in the United States is a closed list system for the Wyoming state legislature.[42] Familiarity may not be the only appropriate measure for ballot structure decisions. For example, policymakers may want to consider the ease of interpreting outcomes, the preferences of election administrators, the costs of

Categorical ballots, used in most U.S. elections, allow voters to express a single choice. Voters are given a list of candidates and simply select their top preference. Ordinal ballots, by contrast, allow voters to express multiple choices in order of preference.

implementation, the impact on voter confidence, the cognitive load on voters, and so on.

A robust comparative literature exists that grapples with the benefits and drawbacks of each possible ballot structure: how different options strengthen or weaken political parties, facilitate or hamper coalition-building, enforce accountability among elected officials, and other outcomes. Political scientists hardly have a consensus view, and the group responsible for this paper similarly has no uniform perspective favoring one ballot structure over another, with many group members advocating that states be allowed to experiment.

Allocation Method

When ballots are tabulated, how does a system determine who gets seated? Allocation methods are the rules used to convert votes into a determination of winners and an allocation of seats.

In winner-take-all systems, winners are decided by either a *plurality* or a *majority* of votes. For example, in a three-way race in a single-member district, a plurality rule requires that a candidate secure one-third of the vote plus one to win. A majority rule would instead require that a candidate secure at least 50 percent plus one vote to win. In a three-way race, though, a third possible outcome is that no candidate reaches this threshold, and so systems have different approaches to solve for a lack of an initial majority vote. For example, some require run-off elections in which the top-two vote-getters face off in a second round. Instant run-off (also called ranked-choice voting) similarly seeks to ensure that the candidate who wins secures a majority of votes. U.S. state and federal elections use both plurality and majority rules.

When an election has only a single winner, allocation methods, as described above, are straightforward. With multiwinner races, less so. In a six-seat race, a party securing 48 percent of the vote cannot win exactly 48 percent of the district's seats; seats cannot be fractionalized. Practically, that party should win three of the six seats, given that it *nearly* won half of the votes. But some standard allocation method is required to make that determination. Proportional systems generally use one of two types of allocation methods: *quotas with largest remainders* or *divisors* (also called highest average methods). Both approaches aim to ensure that a party's share of seats approximates its share of votes.[43] STV requires the establishment of a quota for the sequential allocation of seats. Ireland, a well-known example, employs an allocation method termed the "Droop Quota."[44] Different methods impact the proportionality of results, with effects more noticeable when district magnitude is moderate or small (below eight). Certain methods also tend to favor larger parties or groups while others favor smaller ones.[45]

As with ballot structure, scholars have not reached consensus as to a "best" method—nor did the members of this working group. Instead, what matters as a first-order principle is the necessity of using a standard proportional allocation method from within one of these classes. Given the history of some U.S. states' use of multimember districts together with a *non*-proportional (plurality or majority) allocation method—producing a bloc vote system, effectively moving in the opposite direction from what is intended by a switch to proportional representation—policymaking should at minimum explicitly prohibit the use of winner-take-all allocation methods with multimember districts in federal elections. In their place, lawmakers could specify a menu of options from which states could choose.

Proportional Representation and Primary Elections

In almost every state, congressional elections begin with a primary election: a separate publicly held election in which voters decide which candidates each political party will nominate. Proportional representation systems have important implications for how voters can select candidates within a party. As such, shifting to proportional representation, including the STV-type system recommended in *OCP*, can have significant consequences for how primary elections are conducted, or whether they are necessary at all.

Under either STV or open list proportional representation, a separate primary election is less necessary because voters have the opportunity to choose among several candidates affiliated with each political party during the general election. For example, open list proportional representation can effectively combine the primary election with the general election by allowing voters to vote for any candidate on a party's list, and thereby collectively decide not only how many seats each party will earn but also which candidates will fill those seats.

Because proportional representation allows the primary election to be folded into the general election in this way, instead of holding a separate primary election to choose nominees or winnow the field, candidates could simply petition to be placed on the general election ballot, with party labels or lists determined by candidate affiliation or by consent of the parties. States could continue to hold primary elections, albeit for multiple nominees instead of just one, but proportional representation makes it possible to combine both rounds into one competitive general election. Doing so could reduce costs for state and local governments. More important, since primaries tend to have lower turnout than general elections and primary electorates differ from general election voters in significant ways, moving to a single all-encompassing election could mean that more voices are factored into the selection of candidates. This latter impact could also change the types of candidates who represent the parties.

The working group did not take a position on whether to forgo primary elections as part of a shift to a proportional system but noted the importance of thinking about primaries as one factor deserving further study.

The law that mandates single-member districts was an act of Congress in 1967, and Congress itself could repeat or amend it.

Constitutionality

Under the Constitution, Congress has the power to prescribe the manner of holding elections for the House and Senate and has exercised that power numerous times.[46] The law that mandates single-member districts was an act of Congress in 1967, and Congress itself could repeal or amend it, such as by permitting or requiring that states employ a more proportional system for electing members of the House.[47]

Additionally, legal scholars argue that proportional representation is compatible with the Voting Rights Act—and is likely to outperform single-member districts at achieving improved minority representation.[48] Proportional representation interests this working group precisely because it is a tool for increasing voter voice and representation. As a result, compliance with the Voting Rights Act can be considered the floor and not the ceiling for meeting the needs of an electoral system that provides meaningful avenues for representation. (See page 24 for further discussion of the Voting Rights Act.)

Some variants of proportional representation may not be constitutional. For example, a national party list system may be incompatible with the requirement that House members come from state delegations rather than be elected nationally. However, the proportional multimember districts discussed in this paper are all states or subsets of states and would not present that issue. Likewise, the working group did not discuss the use of proportional representation for Senate elections, as it would likely conflict with the Constitution's instructions on the allocation of two seats per state elected on separate cycles.

III. IMPLICATIONS OF REFORM

Representation

Electoral systems determine which groups of voters are able to secure representation—and how much. A key driver of this working group's interest in proportional representation (and, likewise, the *OCP* recommendation of STV) is its potential for improved representation on a variety of dimensions.

i. Party and Ideological Representation

Single-member districts tend to *over*represent groups already in the majority and *under*represent those in a minority. To illustrate, consider Massachusetts, where Republicans do not constitute a majority in any given district—they are too geographically dispersed—and so Democrats win the single U.S. House seat available in each district. The cumulative effect is an all-blue delegation. Despite constituting one-third of the entire state's electorate, Republicans are unable to secure any of the delegation's nine seats. Republicans' one-third vote share translates into a zero percent seat share, while Democrats' two-third vote share translates into 100 percent of seats.[49]

Lopsided House delegations are common. Those from Arkansas, Hawaii, Iowa, Massachusetts, Oklahoma, Rhode Island, South Dakota, and Utah, for example, are composed of only a single party, despite at least one-third of each of their electorates voting for the opposing party. In Oklahoma, where roughly one-third of the state votes Democratic in congressional elections, all five House seats are held by Republicans.

Typically, these nonproportional outcomes are *not* the result of gerrymandering. In California, for example, where gerrymandering has been virtually eliminated, Democrats currently hold 77 percent of congressional seats despite earning less than 60 percent of the vote.[50] In Massachusetts, district lines are slightly biased toward Republicans, who still cannot secure a single seat.[51] Instead, these outcomes are a consequence of single-member districts, which are uniquely sensitive to the geographic distribution of voters: in no Oklahoman district are Democrats concentrated enough to constitute a majority.

Finally, proportional systems, because of their use of multimember districts, create space for more political parties to form and effectively compete. Proportional systems vary widely in their number of parties, principally due to different district magnitudes and assembly sizes.[52] But in general, proportional systems generate multiparty systems. Multipartyism can provide for more multidimensional representation, with more voters able to identify and affiliate with a party that represents their interests.[53] Instead of sorting the electorate into just one of two camps, multiparty systems

permit voters expanded options that can more accurately reflect their preferences.

In the current two-party system, voters who do not believe that either party adequately represents their interests rarely have a viable alternative from which to choose. During this most recent national election, nearly 90 million eligible voters abstained. By contrast, 77 million voted for Donald Trump and 74 million for Kamala Harris. That is, more eligible voters opted out of participation than voted for either the Democratic or Republican candidate. Today, 70 percent of Americans feel that neither major party adequately represents them and wish they had more options to choose from.[54] Proportional systems, in comparison, have higher turnout because voters are more likely to believe their vote matters, races are more likely to be competitive, and campaigns are more likely to engage in direct outreach to minority populations that are ignored under a winner-take-all scheme.[55]

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ii. Race and Representation

The nonproportional results of winner-take-all similarly affect racial minorities. In South Carolina, Black voters constitute one-quarter of the electorate yet succeed in electing only a single candidate of their choice among the state's seven-seat House delegation. A roughly one-quarter vote share translates into a one-seventh seat share. The single seat afforded to this voter group is made possible by South Carolina's single majority-minority district, or a district with lines deliberately drawn to ensure a statewide minority can elect a candidate of choice in a district. Otherwise, Black voters in South Carolina would likely secure no representation in the seven-member delegation—despite accounting for one of every four voters.[56]

As political scientists Miriam Hänni and Thomas Saalfeld contend, "electoral systems are probably the most important determinants for the representation of ethnonational minority groups."[57] As a general principle, they observe, "proportional electoral rules . . . facilitate the representation of an ethnic minority, whereas majoritarian [winner-take-all] rules restrict . . . and exclude smaller groups."[58] Despite various important exceptions, cross-national evidence largely supports this observation.[59] One global study of electoral systems and their relationship to minority representation

finds that winner-take-all systems are "predisposed to exclude minorities from power, even if the minority's concentration allows them to win some single-member seats."[60]

More specifically, district magnitude—as the principal lever regulating the proportionality of outcomes—is a useful predictor; minority groups tend to be better able to secure representation as the number of seats per district increases.[61] Additionally, as district magnitude increases, more parties, including major parties, nominate minority candidates "on the basis that balanced tickets will increase their electoral chances."[62] As one study comparing elections across various U.S. cities as well as Australia, Ireland, and the Netherlands found, higher district magnitudes correspond to "larger numbers of parties seating candidates of color."[63] Given that single-member districts represent the lowest possible district magnitude for an electoral system, they present an especially challenging avenue for minorities to secure representation commensurate with their vote share.

In the United States, research from the implementation of more proportional systems in lieu of winner-take-all at the municipal level reflects these trends. In a review of thirty races conducted throughout the 1990s using semiproportional systems in locations where Black voters were the predominant group and winner-take-all had previously been used, researchers found that Black candidates won at least one seat in 97 percent of races they contested, whereas previously not a single Black candidate had won.[64] In Illinois, the only state to have employed a proportional alternative (doing so for over a century) for its state legislature, both partisan and racial minorities secured seats more commensurate with their votes than they had prior to its implementation.[65]

Modeling exercises suggest that proportional representation could generate similar effects on racial representation for U.S. House elections. One 2022 study concludes that, in states with three or more representatives, a proportional system for House elections could enable racial and ethnic minority populations to elect preferred candidates in close proportion to their share of the electorate—and that "race-conscious line-drawing . . . does not make any appreciable difference in the modeled outcomes."[66]

iii. Women and Representation

Comparative research finds two major implications of proportional systems for women's representation: the shift to proportional representation can lift the number of women who turn out to vote, and more women are elected in proportional systems.[67] Regarding turnout, one recent study found that earlier shifts from winner-take-all to proportional representation increased the turnout of women in previously uncompetitive districts.[68]

Regarding the impact on the number and proportion of women who are elected to legislatures, the effects of proportional representation *systems* is harder to separate from another characteristic in the comparative research: many proportional democracies incorporate some form of gender quota, either at the party nomination stage or the general election stage.[69]

Indications from the broader scholarship on electoral systems point to how proportional representation of the type recommended in *OCP* (and used without quotas) could lead

to improved representation for women.[70] One area for further consideration includes understanding how proportional representation may shift candidates away from "zero sum" approaches to electoral competition. These changes may in turn alter perceptions of what running for office entails, thus reducing the barriers to women who run for office and increasing the "supply" of women candidates.[71] The entry of more women into politics may, in turn, indirectly change gendered notions of leadership. Continuing research in this area will be crucial for understanding the potential impacts of shifting to STV at the congressional level in the United States.

The *mechanisms* through which proportional systems create the various effects discussed here vary widely, and some of those mechanisms may be more or less likely to be replicated in the United States.[72] In the case of the election of women, comparative evidence identifies gender quotas as an important factor and, as noted above, changing perceptions of campaigning may also play a role. In the case of racial and ethnic representation, the key difference is that proportional systems allow for the representation of 5 percent, 10 percent, or 20 percent of an electorate spread over a broad geographic area in a way that does not occur in winner-take-all systems. The increased number of legislators from racial and ethnic minorities may also be facilitated in part through the formation of parties based on racial or ethnic identity. That is, the context (really) matters. In the United States, the specific experiences of race and gender and the broader rules governing elections *and* how discrimination is combatted (or enabled) through state and federal legislation may be different from experiences abroad. As a result, while the comparative data indicate the general direction of how proportional representation can have certain impacts and why, its practice in the United States will still be bounded by U.S. customs, laws, and experiences.

Proportional Representation and Voter Turnout

In proportional systems, more votes tend to contribute to "winning" outcomes. In any multiseat district, for example, a party that earns 40 percent of the vote will secure at least one of those seats, whereas a party garnering that same vote share in a single-member district would win nothing. Under the proportional system, more candidates and, in turn, their voters have won.

This may be one chief explanation of higher voter turnout rates in proportional systems.[73] As the likelihood that one's vote will count toward securing a seat for a preferred candidate or party increases, so, too, does voter engagement. This appears to be especially true among racial and ethnic minorities as well as women.[74] In general, more proportional systems tend to see parties compete for more racial and ethnic minority voters.[75] Racial and ethnic minorities are in turn more likely to turn out. Given the increased competition to secure more votes, minority voters in proportional systems are also more likely to split their votes across parties.[76]

Proportional Representation and the Voting Rights Act

The Voting Rights Act (VRA) of 1965 was a signature legislative achievement of the civil rights era, meant to capture in law the reality of "one man, one vote."[77] The VRA and its subsequent reauthorizations had many tools to achieve this, including banning some of the most egregious practices in the Jim Crow South, such as the poll tax and locally administered voter tests that were used to disenfranchise African American voters. While the VRA was originally designed to apply only to the voting rights of African Americans, through subsequent reauthorizations it advanced protections for Latino and Hispanic voters as well as other underrepresented racial and ethnic minorities. Today, it remains a core legal tool for preventing racial discrimination in voting. Among its other provisions, the VRA protects against "vote dilution," which occurs when voters from underrepresented racial and ethnic groups are unable to elect candidates of choice due to unfair district maps or winner-take-all at-large elections.

Because proportional representation is designed to improve representation for more voters, including those in the political minority, it tends to boost representation for communities of color compared to winner-take-all. Not only is proportional representation unlikely to violate the Voting Rights Act, but it can also be used to *remedy* vote dilution caused by winner-take-all electoral systems.

In August 2024, legal scholar Nicholas Stephanopoulos analyzed the interaction between proportional representation and the VRA.[78] He concluded that

- proportional representation in practice is very unlikely to violate the Voting Rights Act;
- proportional (and semiproportional) electoral systems can effectively serve as remedies to vote dilution in VRA litigation; and
- the new wave of powerful, state-level voting rights acts may create more opportunities for proportional representation by encouraging their use as remedies in litigation.

Polarization

While scholars do not agree on an ideal electoral system, "a strong scholarly consensus" holds that winner-take-all systems are "clearly *not* advisable" in societies characterized by deep divisions.[79] Numerous studies find that winner-take-all systems tend to exacerbate existing social divisions in polarized societies.[80] Various studies also find that more proportional systems tend to perform better at accommodating diverse interests in different kinds of countries—and ultimately, according to some studies, at maintaining democratic governance.[81] Political scientists have often recommended proportional systems for diverse societies that may be prone to ethnic conflict.[82]

One of the key concerns in the United States today is high levels of *affective polarization*, or the degree to which those with different partisan identities dislike one another rather than just disagree with one another. This is bad for healthy constitutional democracies because it makes it difficult for those with opposing views to find common ground and solve

problems together. It reduces the trust that citizens have in one another and in their institutions and can even lead to political violence.

Recent comparative research has helped to draw more conclusive links between electoral system types and this kind of pernicious partisanship. One study of nineteen Western democracies found that winner-take-all systems "are associated with partisans' more negative feelings toward opposing parties," while "proportional systems are associated with positive partisan affect."[83] According to another study (of thirty-six countries), while identity-based polarization "is increasingly challenging democracies across the world," those with proportional systems are associated with lower levels of it and "tend to do better at coping with [it]."[84] In an assessment of eleven countries experiencing what the researchers term "pernicious polarization," in which the public is divided into two mutually distrustful camps, "the most extreme cases . . . emerge in contexts of majoritarian [winner-take-all] electoral systems."[85]

The relationship between electoral system type and polarization may be explained by how different electoral systems structure political conflict—and, in particular, by how they shape a country's party system.[86] Winner-take-all systems tend to generate predominantly two-party systems that more easily create an "us versus them" approach to conflict.[87] Two-party systems—of which the United States is arguably the world's strictest—in practice can divide an electorate into two camps that continually vie for power and where there is a consistent "other side."[88] As one scholar summarizes, "the more binary the party system, the stronger the outparty hatred."[89]

Two-party systems may not inherently generate dangerous levels of polarization—the United States has experienced periods of less polarized politics than the present despite having a predominantly two-party system. Instead, "the rigid, binary choice of parties makes it much harder to break out of pernicious polarization once it arises, because there is no other choice for voters who fear the other party."[90] A winner-take-all electoral system can therefore make escalating polarization more difficult to escape. Voters—if they choose to vote at all—are perpetually left with only two viable options: to support one's own party or to defect to the other team.[91] Most choose to remain with their side, further entrenching binary conflict.[92]

AFFECTIVE POLARIZATION: the degree to which those with different partisan identities dislike one another rather than just disagree with one another.

By contrast, in contexts where rules of party formation are open and accessible, proportional representation generates multiparty systems in which coalitions tend to form and change over time. The coalitional implications of multipartyism can "defuse partisan hostility," as one group of researchers found.[93] That is, in a multiparty landscape, those of different partisan affiliations are more likely to work together and to *change* with whom they work over time; in turn, partisans are more likely to learn to get along. Different coalitions can form to govern together—or simply to work on particular issues together. Moreover, even after coalitions dissipate, "warm affective evaluations linger long after."[94] By generating multiparty systems, proportional systems are associated with less severe degrees of affective polarization.

This relationship may have other important implications for democratic health. For example, proportional systems are associated with lower levels of political violence globally compared with winner-take-all.[95] Electoral losers also have greater levels of trust in their democratic institutions in proportional systems than those in winner-take-all. And proportional systems may be more likely to encourage "losers' consent"—the acceptance of losing an election and conferring legitimacy upon the winners.[96] Indeed, proportional representation typically results in far fewer actual "losers" in any election and a greater likelihood of securing some representation, as well as influence in government, even for those in the minority.[97]

Generally, cross-national evidence appears to support electoral system scholar Arend Lijphart's conclusion that proportional systems produce a "kinder, gentler" politics.[98] Political scientist Jennifer McCoy cautions that "changing the electoral system alone will not guarantee a more harmonious state of political affairs"—but, nonetheless, she concludes, "changing it is likely to help."[99]

Governance

Predicting the impact that STV or any other new electoral system might have on governance in the United States is an inherently difficult task for a range of reasons.

Proportional systems internationally tend to be multiparty systems. This variety gives voters more specific options when picking representatives, but it rarely leads to a majority in the legislature. As a result, party leaders usually form a governing coalition after the election, combining issue positions into a workable government. This is unfamiliar in the United States, and extrapolating from cross-national results to the American context requires some imagination.

Moreover, comparing countries can tell us that proportional systems on average perform better than, or as well as, winner-take-all systems on many key governance metrics, but "on average" masks considerable variation. Among the more proportional democracies, for example, are some cautionary tales (Italy and Israel frequently come to mind; few electoral system experts would recommend these countries' distinct approaches to proportional representation).[100] The specific design choices made by policymakers (especially with regard to district magnitude) matter immensely.[101]

Would electoral system reform in the United Sates encourage more and different parties, which would then open up the space and energy for more creative coalitions that could unlock more innovative approaches to solving some of our current governance gridlock? Certainly, it is possible. On balance, comparative research finds that proportional systems perform better across a wide range of policy dimensions related to good governance.

On balance, more proportional systems provide

- better public health outcomes, across a number of measures;[102]
- lower levels of economic inequality;[103]
- higher satisfaction with democracy;[104] and
- higher levels of subjective well-being.[105]

Generally, scholars who document these correlations argue that these outcomes arise because proportional systems provide more

precise representation across the ideological and issue spectrum, thus better representing the entire population, including traditionally marginalized groups. Proportional systems also appear to make longer-term investments in public goods, because policymaking is more incremental under coalition governments. In addition, multiparty democracies (which, again, proportional systems tend to be) perform slightly better on the World Bank's measure of effective governance.[106]

But details matter immensely.[107] Additionally, and beyond electoral engineering, certain best practices for governing could increase the likelihood of success should Congress choose to transition to a more proportional electoral system, and these demand further study.[108]

Proportional Representation and Presidentialism

Proportional representation and presidentialism were once viewed as incompatible, with scholars cautioning that fragmented party systems could lead to legislative gridlock and democratic breakdowns.[109] However, recent empirical evidence suggests that proportional systems and presidentialism can work effectively together under the right conditions.[110]

Presidents in multiparty systems typically build coalitions through cabinet appointments and policy concessions.[111] These coalitions may form before elections or emerge after election results are known. In general, pre-electoral coalitions provide more stable governments internationally; that is, coalitions that are less likely to break up prior to elections.[112] Coalition-building mechanisms, including pork-barrel politics and portfolio allocation, help facilitate cooperation between the executive and legislature, preventing deadlock.[113]

The success of proportional representation–presidential combinations is contingent on specific conditions. Moderate multipartyism, characterized by a limited number of parties and a balance between executive and legislative powers, tends to foster stability.[114] Excessive party fragmentation, however, can create difficulties in coalition-building and governance.[115] Strong institutions, including checks on executive power, are also essential to prevent presidential overreach.[116] Moderate multipartyism encourages negotiation and compromise, often producing more centrist and stable governance outcomes.[117] Thus, the success of combining proportional representation with presidentialism relies heavily on thoughtful institutional design.[118]

Summing up the recent literature in a 2023 paper, political scientists Scott Mainwaring and Lee Drutman write, "For well over a decade now, the growing conventional wisdom has been that presidentialism and PR [proportional representation] can work well together. The newer literature has shown that coalitional presidentialism, in which the president's party shares power with others through cabinet appointments and other mechanisms, is a common and perfectly viable institutional combination."[119]

CONCLUSION

Consistent with *OCP* Recommendation 1.3, this working group recommends that the U.S. House of Representatives discard constrictive mandates for winner-take-all elections of its members in favor of a more proportional system. The Commission on the Practice of Democratic Citizenship, whose work led to the *OCP* report, specifically recommended single transferrable vote, and we reinforce the value of that system here. However, we also characterize that system against a broader backdrop of proportional systems used by democracies around the world, and we recognize that lawmakers may want to experiment more widely.

In pursuing electoral reform, policymakers will need to consider four key components of any electoral system: district magnitude, assembly size, ballot structure, and allocation method. Of these, district magnitude may be the most consequential, and our working group recommends permitting states flexibility while generally adhering to a range of three to eight seats per district. Congress should also consider modifying the current assembly size by adding seats to the House, as discussed in more detail in a prior Academy publication.[120]

We recognize that implementing these recommendations would constitute a major change in a nation where single-seat, winner-take-all elections are a firmly entrenched part of our political culture. But we maintain that the benefits—improved representation, better governance, and reduced polarization—make this path well worth considering. American voters are open to change; the time has come for our policymakers to deliver it.

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ENDNOTES

1. See page 9 for a fuller discussion of the public opinion research from which these statistics have been gathered.

2. American Academy of Arts and Sciences, *Our Common Purpose: Reinventing American Democracy for the 21st Century* (American Academy of Arts and Sciences, 2020), https://www.amacad.org/ourcommonpurpose/report.

3. We generally use the classic term single transferable vote because it is better recognized than "emergent proportionality" and avoids confusion with the nonproportional version of ranked-choice voting. (The difference between these two forms of ranked-choice voting is discussed in the sidebar on page 10.) However, we recognize that none of these descriptors is perfect, and we welcome future innovations in terminology.

4. Michael Gallagher and Paul Mitchell, *The Politics of Electoral Systems* (Oxford University Press, 2005), https://doi.org/10.1093/0199257566.001.0001.

5. Erik S. Herron, Robert J. Pekkanen, and Matthew Shugart, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Electoral Systems* (Oxford University Press, 2017), https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780190258658.001.0001.

6. These two broad categories can obscure significant diversity of electoral system types. Nonetheless, "their diversity may still be reduced to a large extent to the majoritarian [winner-take-all]/proportional alternative, that is, to the choice between two alternative principles of representation that are historically embedded." Maurizio Cotta and Federico Russo, eds., *Research Handbook on Political Representation* (Edward Elgar Publishing, 2020).

7. More precisely, the German system is termed "mixed-member proportional," a type of electoral system that produces generally proportional results but includes design elements of winner-take-all. Matthew Shugart and Martin Wattenberg, *Mixed-Member Electoral Systems: The Best of Both Worlds?* (Oxford University Press, 2003), 9, https://doi.org/10.1093/019925768X.001.0001. See also David Farrell, *Electoral Systems: A Comparative Introduction* (Red Globe Press, 2011), 93–118. Particularly since the 1990s, an increasing number of democracies have adopted mixed-member electoral systems. See Richard W. Soudriette and Andew Ellis, "Electoral Systems Today: A Global Snapshot," *Journal of Democracy* 17 (2) (2006): 78–88, https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2006.0038; and Larry Diamond and Marc F. Plattner, *Electoral Systems and Democracy* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006), 21.

8. Vernon Bogdanor and David Butler, "Introduction," in *Democracy and Elections: Electoral Systems and their Political Consequences* (Cambridge University Press, 1983), 2. "It is . . . a mistake to refer to 'proportional representation' as if it denotes a single type of electoral system. 'Proportional representation' is in fact a generic term denoting a number of different systems sharing only the common aim of proportionality between seats and votes."

9. Of the fifty countries characterized as "liberal democracies" by the V-Dem Institute, twelve use a winner-take-all electoral system for their lower chambers, while thirty-eight use a proportional or mixed-member proportional electoral system. Daniel Pemstein, Kyle L. Marquardt, Eitan Tzelgov, et al., "The V-Dem Measurement Model: Latent Variable Analysis for Cross-National and Cross-Temporal Expert-Coded Data," V-Dem Working Paper 21 (V-Dem Institute, 2022), https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3595962. See also Soudriette and Ellis, "Electoral Systems Today"; and Diamond and Plattner, *Electoral Systems and Democracy*, 21.

10. Uniform Congressional District Act of 1967, 2 U.S.C. § 2c.

11. Grant Tudor and Beau Tremitiere, *Towards Proportional Representation for the U.S. House: Amending the Uniform Congressional District Act* (Protect Democracy and Unite America, 2023), 18–23, https://protectdemocracy.org/work/proportional-representation-ucda.

12. American Academy of Arts and Sciences, *Our Common Purpose*, 6.

13. Robert Dahl, *How Democratic Is the American Constitution?* (Yale University Press, 2003), 56.

14. "Where Is Proportional RCV Used?" FairVote, April 2025, https://fairvote.org/our-reforms/proportional-ranked-choice-voting-information/#where-is-proportional-rcv-used.

15. "Who Uses Fair Representation Voting?" Fair Vote, April 2023, https://fairvote.org/archives/fair_voting_in_the_united_states.

16. "State Legislative Chambers That Use Multi-Member Districts," Ballotpedia, 2025, https://ballotpedia.org/State_legislative_chambers_that_use_multi-member_districts.

17. Scholars initially distinguished three key components: district magnitude, ballot structure, and allocation method. See Douglas Rae, *The Political Consequences of Electoral Laws* (Yale University Press, 1967). Later scholarship included assembly size as a fourth component. See Rein Taagepera and Matthew Shugart, *Seats and Votes: The Effects and Determinants of Electoral Systems* (Yale University Press, 1989), 19–37.

18. Andrew Reynolds, Ben Reilly, and Andrew Ellis, *Electoral System Design: The New International IDEA Handbook* (International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, 2005), 81, https://www.idea.int/publications/catalogue/electoral-system-design-new-international-idea-handbook. "There is near-universal agreement among electoral specialists that the crucial determinant of an electoral system's ability to translate votes cast into seats won proportionally is the district magnitude, which is the number of members to be elected in each electoral district."

19. The "effective" number of parties is a measurement of the number of parties that win seats in a country's legislative assembly weighted by the relative electoral success of each party. For instance, a country with three dominant parties that win all but one seat, plus a fourth minor party that wins one seat, would feature three effective parties. See Markku Laakso and Rein Taagepera, "Effective Number of Parties: A Measure with Application to West Europe," *Comparative Political Studies* 12 (1) (1979): 3–27, https://doi.org/10.1177/001041407901200101.

20. Grant Tudor and Cerin Lindrensavage, "A Path to Multiple Parties," *Boston Review*, September 2024, https://www.bostonreview.net/forum/the-case-for-more-parties/a-path-to-multiple-parties.

21. Ferran Martínez i Coma and Ignacio Lago, "Gerrymandering in Comparative Perspective," *Party Politics* 24 (2) (2016): 99–104, https://doi.org/10.1177/1354068816642806.

22. Ibid.

23. D. J. Amy, *Real Choices/New Voices: The Case for Proportional Representation Elections in the United States* (Columbia University Press, 1993), 66–67. See also Arend Lijphart and Bernard Grofman, *Choosing an Electoral System: Issues and Alternatives* (Praeger, 1984), 7.

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26. Blaine F. Moore, *The History of Cumulative Voting and Minority Representation in Illinois, 1870–1919* (University of Illinois, 1920).

27. John M. Carey and Simon Hix, "The Electoral Sweet Spot: Low-Magnitude Proportional Electoral Systems," *American Journal of Political Science* 55 (2) (2011): 383–397, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-5907.2010.00495.x.

28. Reynolds, Reilly, and Ellis, *Electoral System Design*, 77. "Most scholars agree, as a general principle, that district magnitudes of between three and seven seats tend to work quite well. . . . However, this is only a rough guide, and there are many situations in which a higher number may be both desirable and necessary to ensure satisfactory representation and proportionality."

29. Carey and Hix, "The Electoral Sweet Spot."

30. Reynolds, Reilly, and Ellis, *Electoral System Design*, 82. "At the other end of the spectrum, PR [proportional representation] systems can be applied to situations in which there is a district magnitude of only two. For example, a system of List PR is applied to two-member districts in Chile. . . . this delivers results which are quite disproportional, because only two parties can win representation in each district. This has tended to undermine the benefits of PR in terms of representation and legitimacy."

31. Arend Lijphart, *Democracies: Patterns of Majoritarian and Consensus Government in Twenty-One Countries* (Yale University Press, 1984), 155. "Two member districts can therefore hardly be regarded as compatible with the principle of proportionality." See also Rein Taagepera, "The Effect of District Magnitude and Properties of Two-Seat Districts," in *Choosing an Electoral System: Issues and Alternatives* (Praeger, 1984), 98. "The emergence of third parties [in the United States] would become easier in principle, but . . . none would likely to be formed."

32. Matthew Shugart and Rein Taagepera, *Votes from Seats: Logical Models of Electoral Systems* (Cambridge University Press, 2017), 139–152, https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108261128. See also Yuhui Li and Matthew S. Shugart, "The Seat Product Model of the Effective Number of Parties: A Case for Applied Political Science," *Electoral Studies* 41 (2016): 23–34, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.electstud.2015.10.011; and Rein Taagepera, *Predicting Party Sizes: The Logic of Simple Electoral Systems* (Oxford University Press, September 2007), https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199287741.001.0001.

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37. Bowen, "Constituency Size and Evaluations of Government," 459.

38. American Academy of Arts and Sciences, *The Case for Enlarging the House of Representatives*.

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The New York Times, November 10, 2018, https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2018/11/10/opinion/house-representatives-size-multi-member.html; and Jesse Wegman and Lee Drutman, "How to Fix America's Two-Party Problem," *The New York Times*, January 14, 2025, https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2025/01/14/opinion/fix-congress-proportional-representation.html.

40. See, for example, Tudor and Tremitiere, *Towards Proportional Representation*, 51–52.

41. Jack Santucci, "A Modest and Timely Proposal," voteguy.com, December 9, 2020, https://www.voteguy.com/2020/12/09/a-modest-and-timely-proposal.

42. Andy Craig, *Counties and Representation in the Wyoming Legislature* (Rainey Center, 2024), https://www.raineycenter.org/policy-brief/counties-and-representation-in-the-wyoming-legislature.

43. For an explanation of the two classes of methods and their distinctions, see Tudor and Tremitiere, *Towards Proportional Representation*, 50. "Quota methods specify the number of votes that guarantee a party a seat within a multi-member district; any seats unfilled are allocated, one per party, to the parties with the largest remainders after deducting votes used up on quotas. Divisor methods divide the total number of votes won by each party by a series of divisors to produce quotients, with seats in a multi-member district allocated to parties in order from highest to lowest quotients. While various quota and divisor formulas exist, a handful are most common: the Hare quota and largest remainders method and the D'Hondt divisors method are the best known." See also Kenneth Benoit, "Which Electoral Formula Is the Most Proportional? A New Look with New Evidence," *Political Analysis* 8 (4) (2000): 381–388, https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordjournals.pan.a029822.

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