

Architects for a Fourth Founding

Cynthia Richie Terrell

The United States has never achieved a truly representative democracy: women constitute half the population yet have never held close to half of elected offices. Responding to Chief Justice Wallace Jefferson’s case for a “fourth founding,” this response argues that the structural reforms he endorses – ranked-choice voting (RCV), multimember districts, House expansion – are all necessary but incomplete unless gender representation is treated as a foundational test of democracy, not an afterthought. Evidence from RCV cities, where women hold a majority of council seats, and from Australia’s RCV-elected Parliament shows what’s possible when electoral structure changes who can win. As the nation marks its 250th anniversary, the task is not to renew the democracy we inherited, but to build the one not yet realized.

Chief Justice Wallace Jefferson’s essay offers one of the most compelling arguments to date for the structural electoral reforms advanced in the American Academy’s 2020 report *Our Common Purpose: Reinventing American Democracy for the 21st Century*.¹ His invocation of Lincoln’s charge to “think anew and act anew” is not a rhetorical flourish but a necessary provocation in a moment when the gap between democratic ideals and democratic practice has widened to alarming proportions. Jefferson’s framing of this moment as the threshold of a “fourth founding” is particularly apt: our institutions – strained by polarization, mistrust, and imbalances in representation – require not incremental adjustments but a new imagining of their democratic foundations.

I appreciate Jefferson’s engagement with our work at RepresentWomen on ranked-choice voting (RCV), including our research on how RCV improves representational outcomes. His treatment of RCV correctly identifies it as a system that broadens voter choice and improves democratic responsiveness. What his analysis only begins to suggest, and what our findings make clear, is that these reforms also alter the demographic and relational dynamics of who can win elected office and how they govern. This response, therefore, builds on Jefferson’s foundation by demonstrating how the structural changes he endorses are inseparable from progress toward gender-balanced governance, and is grounded in my perspective on how we might best write the next chapter for American democracy.

My purpose in this response is to extend Jefferson’s arguments, starting with an essential dimension of equality: gender. In 1776, Abigail Adams wrote to her hus-

band urging him to “remember the ladies”; her warning is as urgent now as when the ink on the Declaration of Independence was drying.² I am heartened that Jefferson’s analysis rightly centers the architecture of representation as a means to a better future. Yet the structure remains incomplete until we consider whom that architecture has historically excluded – and what a modern democracy must do to repair these omissions. To fulfill the democratic promise Jefferson describes, gender must be understood not as an afterthought but as a foundational test of whether representation is fully manifested.

I agree with Jefferson that legitimacy depends on a lived sense of connection between the governed and those who govern. But a central truth remains: the United States has never experienced a truly representative democracy. Women make up more than half the population yet have never held close to half the seats in Congress, governorships, or positions of meaningful political power.

RepresentWomen’s Gender Parity Index, now in its twelfth year, documents this failure: Progress toward gender balance has stalled and remains uneven.³ At the current pace, parity at the federal level will not be achieved for generations. For a country that has long positioned itself as a global democratic exemplar, our ranking well below that of leading democracies on women’s representation has become a stark international warning sign.

The consequences are substantive. Research across decades shows that women legislators are more likely to cosponsor bills, build cross-party coalitions, and advance policy solutions that address the lived experiences of families, caregivers, working women, and communities whose needs are often sidelined. Electing women changes what legislatures debate, how they negotiate, and which issues reach the floor. As Jefferson argues, institutions must be both independent and responsive; the presence of women strengthens both qualities.

Jefferson is at his strongest when he warns about evaluating reforms in isolation. His assertion that “the success of individual reforms depends on understanding their interdependence” resonates deeply.⁴ Indeed, the history of women’s representation supports his insight: no single reform has ever been sufficient to produce gender-balanced governance. A system designed without women in mind requires systemic recalibration and, in doing so, upholds voting rights and a more responsive government for all.

Here, I extend Jefferson’s framework: Achieving representational equality requires both structural reform and institutional support for candidates. RepresentWomen refers to this as the “twin-track” approach. Voting systems, district design, and institutional rules shape who can win; recruitment networks, caregiving policies, proxy voting, and legislative culture shape who can serve. Both tracks must advance together. Structural reform without candidate support risks replicating inequality; candidate support without structural change leaves intact the systems that produce disparity.

Jefferson's emphasis on structural reform provides the necessary scaffolding for this broader vision. His acknowledgment that the 435-seat cap in the House is a political artifact, not a constitutional principle, is an essential corrective to the narrative. However, expanding the House without changing how representatives are elected risks amplifying distortions.

A larger House should be paired with multimember districts and RCV, as suggested by the Fair Representation Act in Congress. Implementing both would: 1) create more open seats, enabling more women and candidates of color to win; 2) provide representatives with smaller constituencies, enabling more meaningful engagement; 3) better align partisan seat and vote share, correcting disproportionality; 4) defang gerrymandering by design rather than litigation; 5) create incentives for candidates to find common ground and work collaboratively on behalf of their constituents; and 6) produce a chamber whose legitimacy derives from its resemblance to the public.

To underscore this, note that the country's 5,413 state legislative seats – despite smaller district sizes – have not produced more competition, reduced polarization, or strengthened civic engagement. Simply increasing the number of representatives does not automatically yield representative democracy; the electoral structure used to select those representatives determines whether new voices enter public life.

Jefferson is right to provide a robust case for RCV on its own. RepresentWomen's research shows that in single-winner elections, RCV reduces the spoiler effect, rewards coalition-building, and loosens the grip of traditional gatekeepers – with women holding 52 percent of city council seats in cities with RCV.⁵ Maine elected its first woman governor after its first use of RCV in primaries in 2017, and Alaska now has a majority of women in its House. In these jurisdictions, women run – and win – in greater numbers because the system allows multiple qualified candidates to compete and promotes more positive, civil campaigns. These improvements are not theoretical: they are observable, measurable, and transformative. And they are already reshaping candidate pipelines.

International evidence reinforces this point. Australia now elects its House through RCV and its Senate through RCV in multimember districts. The result is a national parliament in which women hold the majority of seats. It's no accident that Australia's prime minister earned reelection in 2025 on a platform commentators described as a "politics of kindness," and that it was the first nation to ban social media platforms for children. The presence of women in meaningful numbers changes governance, legislative culture, and the quality of deliberation. The value of electing women is not a footnote; it is central to building the collaborative, responsive democracy Jefferson envisions.

The same pattern is emerging in pockets of the United States. RepresentWomen's research on RCV confirms what democratic theorists have long intuited: when gatekeepers lose monopoly power over who can run, and when voters sup-

port candidates without fear of splitting the vote, women break through. New York City's first RCV election saw women increase their representation from thirteen to thirty-one seats on a fifty-one-member council. St. Paul, Minnesota, now has an all-women city council, and a woman won election as a late entry candidate under RCV in 2025. Another jurisdiction with RCV, Salt Lake City, Utah, elected a majority of women to its council last year. These are not anomalies; they are early indicators of what becomes possible when electoral structures reward candidates who find common ground, civility, and broad voter engagement.

Crucially, RCV matches the scale and character of American democracy and is best suited for nonpartisan local elections. More than 80 percent of the 520,000 elected offices in the United States are local, nonpartisan positions, making party-list proportional representation inapplicable to those elections. If we want fair representation across the ballot, RCV is essential. It keeps elections rooted in communities, preserves voter-centered competition, and ensures that every voice shapes representation.

At the same time, while roughly 420,000 of America's elected offices are well-served by single-winner RCV, the remaining seats – particularly legislative bodies where proportionality truly matters – require the added strength of proportional RCV (PRCV). This is where Jefferson's openness to multimember districts becomes essential. RCV provides the foundation; PRCV completes the structure. The task before us is not to choose between them but to apply each reform where it delivers the most significant benefit: RCV for the vast majority of local elections, and PRCV where fair representation requires proportional outcomes. In combination, these reforms respond directly to Jefferson's call for institutions that broaden participation, elevate underrepresented voices, and restore democratic legitimacy. PRCV has already launched in major cities like Portland, Oregon, and its long history in Cambridge, Massachusetts, suggests a powerful impact on policies to address needs like housing.

Where Jefferson gestures, I endorse emphatically: PRCV is the most viable American form of proportional representation. It preserves candidate-centric elections, supports independents, and aligns more effectively with Voting Rights Act jurisprudence than party-list systems – with the Supreme Court's likely gutting of traditional remedies for racial minority vote dilution making an alternative remedy all the more urgent. It also addresses Jefferson's foundational concerns: PRCV enhances responsiveness, accountability, and fairness. Giving parties control of their nominations is a nonstarter politically. Many state parties are run by dogmatic insiders who may not recruit and support women, men of color, young people, or party insurgents, and voters have grown deeply invested in choosing party nominees. On a practical level, for House elections, more than half of the states have fewer than seven House seats, meaning candidates often

need at least 16 percent of the vote to win; in fourteen states with one to three seats, they may need more than 25 percent. Small parties and emerging constituencies struggle under these conditions. PRCV is the most viable way to ensure real voter choice and fair representation.

PRCV also changes how legislators govern. Americans do not expect representatives to simply toe the party line; Congress functions best when leaders have individual agency. Illinois's one-hundred-year history with a similar system shows that PRCV supports this norm. Rather than proliferating small parties, PRCV allows major parties to breathe while enabling independents and smaller groups to hold them accountable.

In this way, PRCV does more than improve election mechanics; it operationalizes Jefferson's ideal of equality of voice. It creates conditions in which women, communities of color, and underrepresented constituencies can participate fully and lead effectively. It makes representation responsive and democratic legitimacy durable.

As Jefferson writes, moments of institutional crisis demand transformation. The 250th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence offers not commemoration but accountability. Two hundred and fifty years after declaring equality, the United States still relies on an antiquated winner-take-all system inherited from the very nation we sought independence from. Two hundred and fifty years after rejecting monarchy, our institutions face tests of executive power that would have alarmed Alexander Hamilton and Thomas Jefferson alike.

What we need now is not a renewal of the democracy we inherited but the construction of a democracy we were promised and have never fully built. This anniversary is therefore not a milestone but a mandate for action.

The 250th anniversary of American independence should not simply honor what has been achieved, but should challenge us to build what has never yet existed: a truly representative democracy. The following two hundred and fifty years must center women – fully included, wholly represented, and completely empowered to lead.

Jefferson is right: a “fourth founding” is within reach. But it will only succeed if women are not merely present but central; not merely beneficiaries but architects.

The representation-concerned reforms in *Our Common Purpose* – RCV, multi-member districts, House expansion, and Supreme Court term limits – are not just technical adjustments. They are the scaffolding for a democracy worthy of its people, one that reflects the nation it serves.

Let us, as Jefferson urges, disenthral ourselves from the dogmas of the quiet past. And let us do so with women at the table, shaping the future of American democracy; not as an afterthought, but as its foundation.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Cynthia Richie Terrell is the Founder and Executive Director of RepresentWomen, an organization that advances women's representation by researching, understanding, and championing evidence-based solutions that break down structural barriers to women's political leadership. She is also the Cofounder of FairVote, a nonpartisan champion of electoral reform. She writes a weekly column for *Ms. magazine* and has published in *The Washington Post*, *The New York Times*, and *The Nation*.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ 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>.
- ² Letter from Abigail Adams to John Adams, March 31, 1776.
- ³ Courtney Lamendola, 2025 *Gender Parity Index: A Weighted Measure of Women's Representation* (RepresentWomen, 2025), <https://representwomen.app.box.com/s/epcvgswnpgopz4oot196xnhkr13lxuyg>.
- ⁴ Wallace B. Jefferson, "Reimagining Democratic Institutions for a New American Century," *Dædalus* 155 (3) (Summer 2026): 22, <https://www.amacad.org/daedalus/reimagining-democratic-institutions-new-american-century>.
- ⁵ RepresentWomen, "Women Mayors and Council Members in RCV Cities—January 2025 Snapshots," January 23, 2025, <https://www.representwomen.org/research/women-mayors-and-council-members-in-rcv-cities-january-2025-snapshots>.