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Proportional Representation

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Electoral system choice is a central and extensively studied issue in political science. Recently, proportional representation (PR) has caught the attention of political reformers in the United States as a potential solution to multiple threats to US democracy.

Advocates believe that using multimember districts with PR for the US House of Representatives and state legislatures could reduce harmful polarization by breaking up binary conflicts. PR could help new center-right parties emerge, diminishing the influence of authoritarian extremism on the right. By allowing more parties, it could shift US politics away from its current hyperpartisan state. More directly, PR would blunt gerrymandering by eliminating the single-member district (SMD), which makes it possible to manipulate the boundaries of political constituencies to favor one political party.

However, some scholars and analysts are concerned that PR could fragment the US party system and make it harder to form majority coalitions. Others are concerned that the multimember districts needed for PR would weaken the direct connection between individual voters and their district representatives.

In this chapter, we aim to assess these claims by answering three key questions about proportional representation:

1. Can PR reduce affective polarization?

William Galston, Rachel Kleinfeld, Nolan McCarty, Jennifer McCoy, and Hans Noel contributed substantially to this chapter.

2. Can PR undermine the power of political extremists?
3. How might PR impact government performance and effectiveness?

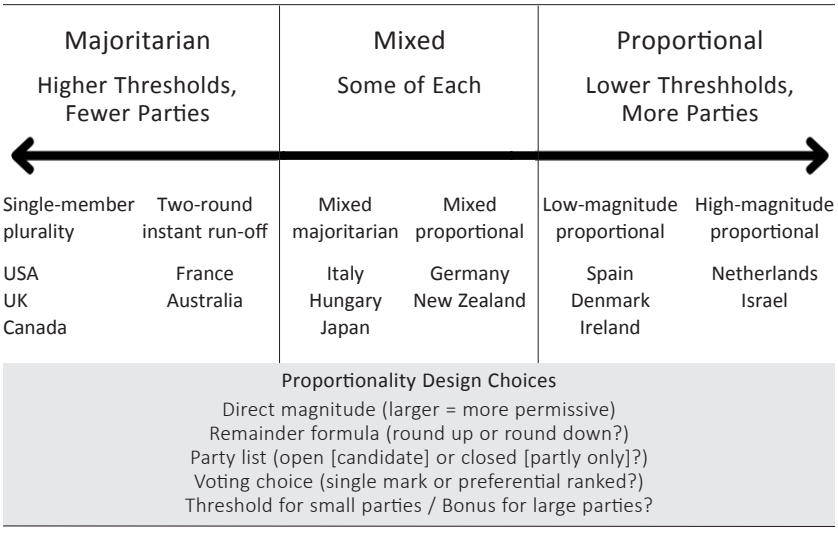
We also address how proportional representation could impact gerrymandering and constituency representation.

Electoral System Families and How to Measure Proportionality

Political scientists have categorized electoral systems into three main types: majoritarian, mixed, and proportional. Figure 3.1 lays this out, with some country examples. Briefly, however, the systems can be described as follows:

Majoritarian systems: Majoritarian systems use single-winner districts to elect representatives. A core property of such districts is that they can only have one winner and so tend to feature two dominant parties. We know this as "Duverger's law." However, it is more of a tendency than a law. For example, Canada and India both have multiparty systems, despite single-winner elections. This is because different parties in these countries have different regional strengths.

Figure 3.1 Electoral Systems and Party Systems



Some majoritarian systems use plurality voting. We call these single-member plurality, or "first-past-the-post," systems. France uses a two-round voting system, while Australia uses instant-runoff voting for its House of Representatives. The two-round system in France fosters modest multipartyism. In Australia, House elections usually involve two major parties, while Senate elections feature multiple parties because the Senate uses PR.

Proportional systems: Proportional systems use multiwinner districts to elect representatives and allocate seats by party. So, for example, in a ten-member district, a party that wins 20 percent of the votes will get 20 percent of the seats.

In most proportional systems, parties submit lists of candidates who run together, but voters can choose from the list. All votes count toward that party, and parties get seats in proportion to the total votes cast for all the parties' candidates. If a party wins two seats, its two most popular candidates will represent it in the legislature.

Some countries use a closed list, in which voters can only vote for the party. The party advances candidates from its own internal list. A few countries use an instant-runoff form of PR, called the single-transferable vote. This allows voters to rank candidates across multiple parties.

Proportional systems come in many varieties. No two countries use the same system, and systems change. The biggest variation across systems is district magnitude. Having larger districts lowers the threshold for parties to win representation. In a three-member district, for example, a party would need at least a quarter of the vote (plus one) to win a seat. In a ten-member district, a party would need only slightly more than 9 percent of the vote. Some other design choices include party list type, remainder formula, preferential voting options, national threshold, and treatment of coalition parties. In short, some proportional systems are more permissive and multiparty than others.

Mixed systems: Several countries use a combination of single-winner districts and PR to achieve a balance. Germany and New Zealand, for example, prioritize proportionality and are considered to have proportional systems even though they have some single-member districts. Hungary and Japan, by contrast, prioritize majoritarian features and are usually classified as more majoritarian despite having some multimember districts. The exact balance and the type of PR offer additional design choices.

Majoritarian and proportional systems are ideal types. In reality, countries exist along a continuum that can be measured in different ways. Some analyses use district magnitude, since larger districts create

more permissively proportional systems. Other analyses use effective number of parties, either in the legislature or in the electorate. Additional measures include legislative party fractionalization, electoral party fractionalization, and disproportionality.

Collectively, these measures describe a general continuum—larger district magnitudes create more permissive systems that encourage more parties to form and compete because they are more likely to win seats in proportion to their vote share. However, the relationship is not perfectly correlated, as Figure 3.1 shows. For example, more permissive systems can sometimes encourage more parties to compete, such that several smaller parties fail to meet the threshold and waste votes. The key point is that not only does proportionality exist on a continuum but the effects of voting rules on party systems vary across countries and over time. Thus, in evaluating the effects of voting systems on political outcomes, we should not treat all proportional systems as the same. Some systems work much better than others.

Measures of the proportionality continuum can be defined as follows:[1]

• District magnitude: This is the total number of seats allocated divided by the total number of electoral districts. Since this variable is heavily right-skewed (a few countries use the entire legislature as one district), we will use the natural log in analyses.

• Effective number of parties on the seat level (enps): This is calculated for legislative seats according to the formula proposed by Markku Laakso and Rein Taagepera.[2]

• Effective number of parties on the votes level (envs): This is calculated for vote shares according to the formula proposed by Laakso and Taagepera.

• Legislative fractionalization of the party system (leg_fractional): This is an index of legislative fractionalization of the party system according to the formula proposed by Douglas Rae.[3] The index ranges between 1 (maximal fractionalization) and 0 (minimal fractionalization).

• Electoral fractionalization of the party system (elect_fractional): This is an index of electoral fractionalization of the party system according Rae's same formula.

• Disproportionality: This is an index of electoral disproportionality, following the formula proposed by Michael Gallagher.[4] This compares parties' votes to the legislative seats they are given. Higher numbers on the Gallagher Index indicate a greater disparity between votes and seats, meaning that elections have produced more disproportionate outcomes.

All these measures correlate reasonably well with each other, although some do so more closely than others. All capture slightly different dimensions of electoral and party systems. The effective-number-of-parties and fractionalization measures are the most closely correlated. Considering our focus on governing, legislative fractionalization will be our main variable of interest, along with district magnitude. Legislative fractionalization describes the actual party and governance situation, while district magnitude captures the level of proportionality most directly. These two are related to each other. But legislative fractionalization more directly appears to affect measurable outcomes we care about.

Electoral Engineering in a Complex World

All political systems are complex, with many interacting structures and actors. The goal of electoral interventions should be to create a better political environment, not to guarantee a particular outcome. However, different electoral rules suggest different winning strategies, in the same way that different rules in any game shape player behavior. In politics, rules affect how people behave and strategize, and winners sometimes change the rules for future rounds.

Democratic resilience requires a balance between consistent and flexible rules. Ultimately, to survive, any political system must be considered legitimate. And to be considered legitimate, it must be both somewhat responsive and somewhat stable. However, responsiveness and stability are in tension with each other. A system that is too responsive is not stable, because it changes too much in response to demands. And a system that is too stable is not responsive. Thus, some volatility and change is a sign of a healthy system. But too much too quickly can cause a system to collapse.

It is especially important that elections are seen as legitimate, since most democratic breakdowns occur around elections. If a large and consequential political minority stops respecting the rules because it doesn't win, violence and authoritarianism may take over as alternatives to elections.

A healthy political system can withstand a fair amount of conflict and contestation. Risks arise when the conflict becomes too intense for losers to accept election results and winners to consider the possibility of losing in the future. Persistently high and growing levels of political extremism, deep levels of affective polarization (out-partisan hatred),

and the success of illiberal leaders are all signs of a democracy on the brink of collapse and in need of substantial intervention.

We should view political systems as having different states or dynamics, just as we do economic systems. We think of economies as being in depression, recession, recovery, or overexpansion. In each of these states, individual economic actors and firms make decisions based on their expectations of how others will behave. In a depression, investment slows because firms expect limited demand. To shock an economy out of depression, central bankers cut interest rates, and policymakers expand stimulus spending. In an economy that is booming, central bankers raise interest rates to suppress growth, and policymakers dial back economic stimulus. Modern economic management attempts to balance competing pressures using monetary policy interventions. Typically, these adjustments are minor. In extreme economic conditions, policymakers must take more dramatic measures to improve the state of the economy.

Our politics is currently in a more extreme state—a spiraling us-versus-them dynamic that undermines the shared faith in elections and government legitimacy on which healthy liberal democracy depends.[5] As Delia Baldassarri and Scott Page have explained, "Each type of polarization strengthens the other through feedbacks."[6] When everything reinforces everything else, they argue, "no sequence of small interventions will likely reverse our course." The core problem is a flattening of dimensionality, a fancy way of saying that everything has been reduced to a single us-versus-them dimension, distributed bimodally. And they stress, "As a rule, a bimodal distribution for anything suggests that something strange is afoot." Several papers in the December 14, 2021, issue of *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America* on the dynamics of polarization also note that bimodal distributions are almost always signs of impending collapse across many types of systems.

"So what is to be done?" Baldassarri and Page ask. "How do we escape our current situation? First, we must be aware of why we cannot chip away at this problem. We must take substantial actions."[7] Once politics tips into this bimodal state (of two separate distributions), small interventions become ineffective. Worse, they may even be counterproductive: "Once in a polarized state, well-intentioned attempts to improve interaction between groups may increase rather than decrease polarization, by encouraging the behaviors that pull people apart. . . . Even if we could turn tolerance up to 11, so to speak, the polarized equilibrium cannot be escaped."[8]

One factor unites almost all the causal processes driving polarization: "Once categorical boundaries between 'us and them' are drawn, a whole host of destructive social processes may kick in."[9] But try to break the causal chain apart, and everything affects everything. An exhaustive review of recent literature on political polarization similarly found a complex web of reinforcing causal mechanisms and cognitive biases driving partisan polarization.[10] Even perceiving the party system as polarized leads to higher levels of affective polarization.[11]

In this perniciously polarized state, extremism may become a property of the system as a whole, not of any particular actor. Certainly, some individuals respond more extremely to the conditions than others and stake out more radical, antisystem positions: "Extremism refers to the belief that an in-group's success or survival can never be separated from the need for hostile action against an out-group," writes J. M. Berger in attempting to define the concept. "The hostile action must be part of the in-group's definition of success."[12] High levels of group polarization and high uncertainty are core drivers of political extremism.[13] And closely divided razor's-edge elections contribute to high levels of uncertainty.

Extremists gain power by escalating conflicts and heightening contradictions. This further undermines effective governance. It drives distrust and antisystem attitudes, which further stoke hyperpartisan polarization and extremism. It is these dynamics we hope to arrest, and even reverse, through electoral system reform.

Can PR Reduce Affective Polarization?

Hyperpartisan polarization poses a significant challenge to American democracy. A growing share of partisans now deny the legitimacy and even the humanity of their political opponents. This antipathy, dehumanization, and openness to violence appears to follow from high levels of affective polarization: Democrats and Republicans, in particular, really dislike each other.

Can anything be done about this problem? A growing number of comparative studies have documented a relationship between voting systems and affective polarization. As a general pattern, more proportional systems, with more parties, have lower levels of affective partisan polarization than more majoritarian systems with fewer parties. In this section, we examine the threat affective polarization poses to liberal democracy and explore the observed relationships between party systems and affective polarization.

The Dangers of Affective Polarization

High levels of affective polarization pose a unique threat to democratic societies. Fear and loathing of out-partisans is associated with political intolerance, politicized facts, and less support for democracy.[14] The statistical relationship between affective polarization and democratic backsliding appears quite robust.[15]

The causal mechanisms that link affective polarization and democratic backsliding involve partisans tolerating, rationalizing, and even supporting antidemocratic actions by elites on their side. Although it is illiberal political elites who ultimately roll back democratic norms and freedoms (more on this in the next section), they are more likely to do so when they expect public support, or at least tolerance, for such transgressions.

This is now a well-documented pattern. Partisans tolerate or even applaud antidemocratic activities by their side, even when they report enthusiastic support for the underlying principles being violated. Whether we describe this as a "partisan double standard"[16] or "democratic hypocrisy,"[17] this pattern shows up across many surveys. The stronger the out-party hatred (at both an individual and a country level), the more pronounced the double standard.[18] As Suthan Krishanarajan concludes, "When violations of democracy are indisputably clear, many citizens find ways to not perceive undemocratic behavior as undemocratic if they agree with it politically. This might provide one explanation for why democratically elected leaders in today's democracies are so often able to get away with violations of democracy without facing electoral backlash."[19]

Partisans often justify their actions by claiming their political opponents are undermining democracy. Alia Braley and colleagues explain that "aspiring autocrats may instigate democratic backsliding by accusing their opponents of subverting democracy. . . . Would-be authoritarians' ability to weaponize the subversion dilemma may depend on a larger set of mutually reinforcing polarizations. These include increasing partisan identity strength, polarized views on policy, dislike of opposing partisans, dehumanization of opposing partisans, stereotypes of opposing partisans, and ethnic antagonism."[20] Braley and colleagues warn that this dilemma can "result in a death spiral for democracy."

Higher affective polarization leads to stronger perceptions of extremism from the other side.[21] Affective polarization also sharpens partisan cue taking: in a deeply polarized partisan environment, voters are more likely to rely exclusively on informational cues from one side,

which heightens the power of such cues.[22] When partisans have strong negative views of their opponents, they are often ready to believe the worst about them.

The threat arises specifically from affective polarization in this context; ideological polarization is something separate and only weakly correlated to affective polarization.[23] The United States, for example, is not as ideologically polarized as many other democracies.[24] In these democracies, the ideological range of policy views represented in the legislature is much wider. A relationship between ideological polarization and affective polarization exists. More ideological polarization leads citizens to see sharper differences between parties, thus changing how they feel about the stakes of elections and which parties they perceive as on their "side."[25] The larger the divides, the more political elites can harness disagreements and frame them in existential terms.[26]

Multiparty democracies have long been associated with more ideological polarization. More parties make room for wider ideological dispersion of policy platforms.[27] The dispersion reaches its maximum at five parties; beyond that, additional parties do not bring forth a wider range of policy platforms.[28]

Nevertheless, majoritarian systems are more sensitive to dispersion of parties. When mainstream parties move away from the center, the polarizing effects are more pronounced.[29] In a two-party system, you can think of the main political parties as big magnets in a field where voters are small pieces of metal. When the magnets are in the middle, they attract lots of metal pieces from all around. But if one magnet moves toward an edge, it pulls many metal pieces with it. This makes the field look very divided. By contrast, a more proportional system can be thought of as having more magnets of varying sizes. So if one small magnet moves to an edge, the metal pieces (voters) have other magnets nearby and don't all follow the one that moved.

In simple terms, when the dominant parties and most voters are moderate, the voting system doesn't matter. But when major parties have diverging opinions, a majoritarian system amplifies these differences. That is because in this type of system, voters often follow the lead of the big parties, creating a more ideologically polarized electorate.

Can PR Reduce Affective Polarization?

Scholars have noticed that countries with proportional voting systems and more political parties have less affective polarization than countries with majoritarian systems and fewer parties. This finding is robust

across different measures of affective polarization. As Jennifer McCoy and Murat Somer have observed, "The most extreme cases of polarization among our countries emerge in contexts of majoritarian electoral systems that produce a disproportionate representation for the majority or plurality party, and . . . once in power, the polarizing parties and incumbents attempt, and often succeed, in engineering additional constitutional and legal changes to enhance their electoral advantage."[30]

In *American Affective Polarization in Comparative Perspective*, Noam Gidron, James Adams, and Will Horne find a clear link between voting system proportionality and affective polarization. Simply put, the more disproportional the system, the stronger the dislike for opposing parties and even one's own party.[31]

Jonathan Rodden offers another way of viewing this. He considers voters' perceptions of their proximity to their preferred party and to other parties. In both cases, the United States stands out. Americans feel furthest from the party they support among citizens of comparable countries. Americans also feel furthest from the parties they oppose. Americans are the most cumulatively alienated from all parties. Higher alienation correlates with fewer parties.[32]

Here is one way to understand this dynamic: Assume any ideological distribution in the electorate. The more parties, the more evenly the parties can locate themselves throughout the electorate. With more parties, more voters will find a party close to their values—and perceive other parties as less far away. The consequences for affective polarization are significant. When partisans view each other as distant, elections feel more intense and threatening. This increases affective polarization. Perceived distance is the accumulation of issue differences between parties, not their average distance. So the more policy disagreements, the further the opposing parties seem, making them more threatening and hated. This corresponds to flattened issue dimensionality. Ideological and affective polarization, although distinct, mutually reinforce each other by amplifying perceptions of distance and disagreement.

The relationship between party system and affective polarization has become more pronounced in recent years as social and cultural issues have dominated politics more. The United States has had a remarkably sharp increase in affective polarization since 1990, even as affective polarization has remained roughly flat (or even decreased) in many other Western democracies.[33] The United States also appears unique in the extent to which voter antipathy is directed at individual candidates rather than parties.[34] This is likely because the United States has a distinctly candidate-centered politics.

Measuring affective polarization can be challenging in a multiparty context, because of the abundance of potential dyads and the various measures available. However, one consistency across all multiparty systems is that far-right parties are universally disliked by the rest of the electorate, and the feeling is mutual (supporters of far-right parties hate other partisans).[35]

Affective polarization is also increasing in Canada[36] and the United Kingdom,[37] both of which have majoritarian electoral systems, but not as fast as in the United States.[38] The comparison with Canada and the United Kingdom raises the obvious question: Why have neither of these countries experienced similarly dramatic spikes in affective polarization?

One possible reason is that affective polarization in the United States is driven not solely by first-past-the-post elections but rather by the interaction among first-past-the-post elections, geographic sorting of parties, and persistently close national competition that fuels intensifying two-party rivalry. After all, until relatively recently, the United States had a perfectly functional two-party system, with broad geographic overlaps among the parties. Canadian and British parties may be moving in the direction of American parties, although they are not as geographically separated.

A second possible reason is that Canadian and British parties control their own candidate nominations, unlike American parties. The direct primary system in the United States makes American parties distinctly weak and uniquely vulnerable to extremist takeovers. Relatedly, the US system of private financing of elections also makes parties (and candidates) uniquely vulnerable to extremist donors. (See discussions of campaign finance and primary elections in Chapter 7.)

A third possible answer is that Canada and the United Kingdom are both parliamentary systems, so they always, by definition, have unified government, which allows them to govern more effectively, with clearer accountability. The United States is a presidential system. This system often produces divided government, which can undermine effective governing in polarized times. The United Kingdom is essentially unicameral as well. Canada has a Senate, although one not nearly as formidable as that of the United States. When two major parties are evenly matched, the US system of separately elected chambers and a separately elected president may be particularly ill equipped to manage divisions.

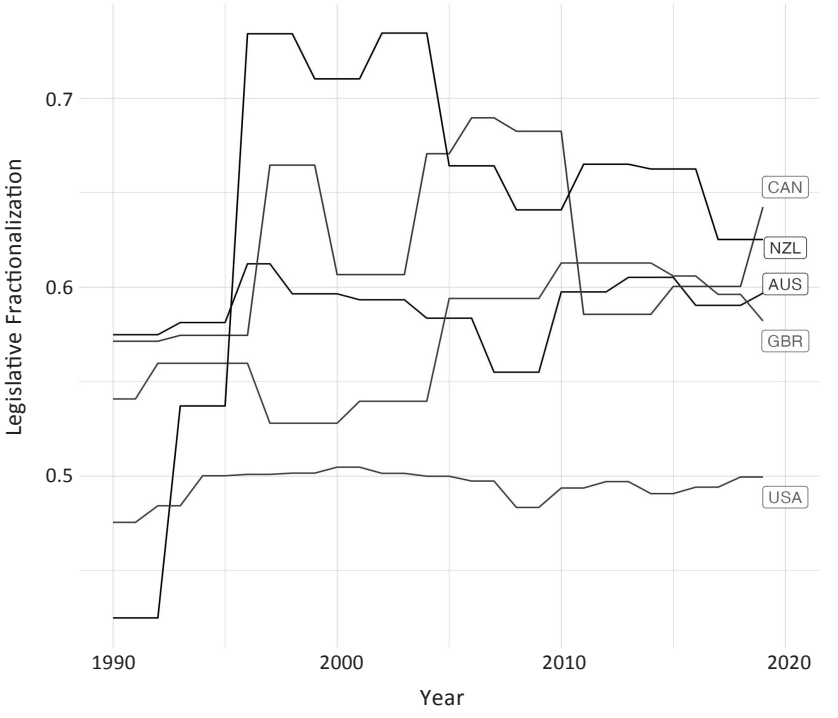
A fourth possible answer is that both the United Kingdom and Canada have modest multipartyism, despite their first-past-the-post systems, giving frustrated voters the option to channel extremist activity into smaller fringe parties instead of pushing them to take over major

parties. Canada also benefits from more variety in local parties and more political power at the provincial level. In the United States, federalism was long a source of political harmony through diversity—until the recent nationalization of US politics.

Figure 3.2 shows legislative fractionalization among Anglo countries, adding Australia and New Zealand for comparison. Australia uses PR for its senate while New Zealand moved to PR in 1996. The United States is the most dominantly binary political system.

Notably, there are active campaigns in both the United Kingdom and Canada to advance PR. Following a highly disproportionate 2024 election, in which Labour won 411 out of 650 seats in the House of Commons (63.2 percent) with just 33.7 percent of the vote, British commentators began discussing electoral system reform again. And Cana-

Figure 3.2 Legislative Fractionalization Among Anglo Countries, 1990–2020



Source: Quality of Government Institute.

dian prime minister Justin Trudeau campaigned in 2015 on ending first-past-the-post elections but has since backtracked on this promise.[39]

It is likely that all four possible explanations (and perhaps others as well, such as the racial diversity of the country and the role of a single national public media) factor into the United States' uniquely high levels of affective polarization. This is an important enough question to merit a separate research project. It also shows the difficulty of comparing countries based solely on their electoral systems, without considering other important institutional factors.

Can PR Reduce Affective Polarization?

What explains the relationship between the electoral system and affective polarization? Broadly speaking, scholars have put forward four major hypotheses linking proportional multiparty democracy to lower affective polarization:

1. PR generates an "affective bonus" of parties being in coalitions together.
2. PR keeps geographic and partisan polarization somewhat distinct.
3. PR allows for more multidimensional issue politics.
4. PR makes it more likely that race and ethnicity crosscut partisanship.

The "affective bonus" of being in coalition together. Multiple recent studies have found that proportional multiparty governments have shifting coalitions with few permanent enemies and many occasional allies. In multiparty systems, parties form coalition governments and voters feel warmly toward other parties in their coalition.[40]

When coalitions shift, as they typically do from election to election, the positive feelings remain. As Will Horne and colleagues explain, "Governing parties' supporters feel much more warmly toward their coalition partner(s) than we can explain based on policy agreement alone. Moreover, these warm affective evaluations linger long after the coalition itself has dissolved."[41] Put another way, parties in the same coalition gain an "affective bonus" that endures even after the coalition dissolves. This also applies to parties that are in a shared opposition.[42]

The basic mechanisms here are straightforward. Being on the same team creates a sense of shared fate and superordinate identity.[43] Parties in a coalition share resources and say nice things about each other. They work together to compromise on policies. Voters view coalition partners in a positive light, assuming they share values.[44] Because proportional

systems have "much denser networks of (current and past) co-governance than do disproportional systems . . . proportionality is associated with warmer aggregate levels of out-party evaluations across Western publics," Horne and colleagues conclude.[45]

In a majoritarian system with two nonoverlapping parties, each election reinforces the same conflict and psychological dynamics. This is particularly true in a majoritarian presidential system, such as the US system, where so much attention is focused on an extremely powerful winner-take-all office. Although the United States often winds up with a kind of coalition government (or what we more commonly call "divided government"), partisan conflict centers on winning one-party dominance. Potential compromises fall prey to political leaders believing they need to sharpen the differences between the parties ahead of the next election.

The relationship between geography and partisanship. In the United States, a leading explanation for the worsening of partisan polarization is that the two major parties have "sorted" by geography, values, and ideology.[46] In an earlier era, the two major US parties were broad, overlapping coalitions, each with liberal and conservative factions. But the nationalization of US politics led to the isolation and disappearance of conservative Democrats and liberal Republicans. Democrats became the party of urban, cosmopolitan cultural liberalism; Republicans became the party of rural, traditionalist conservatism. In a politics defined by a cosmopolitan/urban versus traditional/rural divide over moral values and national identity, a compromise middle ground is harder to find. When social identities align with partisan, geographic, and cultural sorting, affective polarization increases, turning party affiliation into a "mega-identity" that combines multiple identities.[47] Even though many battleground districts are in the suburbs, these districts have neither more moderates nor more swing voters than other districts. They are merely districts where both sides of the partisan density divide are represented in roughly equal proportions.[48]

The urban-rural divide and the rise of "postmaterialist" cultural-issue cleavages are not unique to the United States. They appear nearly universal among advanced democracies. Urban-rural cultural divides in majoritarian democracies reinforce partisan divisions, exacerbating disagreements.[49] Without crosscutting cleavages, politics collapses into a single dimension, and affective polarization increases.[50]

This political realignment also maps onto the economic effects of globalization. In many Western countries, "rust belts" and more rural areas that once provided manufacturing jobs are struggling. They are

thus most vulnerable to a "politics of resentment"[51] and the appeals of far-right populism.[52]

Over two generations, cities have attracted more highly educated individuals, many of whom have "open" personality types and seek the novelty and variety of urban living. By contrast, rural areas have remained home to more "closed" personality types who do not wish to leave for cities or even for higher education. And to some extent, outer suburbs have drawn individuals out of cities who prefer a more predictable environment. This sorting by personality type and living preference does not always amount to an intentional partisan choice. Yet it has strengthened divisions between urban and rural areas by reinforcing cultural and lifestyle differences.[53] This, of course, makes affective partisan polarization much worse in a two-party system that reinforces these divides.

The multidimensionality of issue politics. The range of issues that national governments deal with has expanded in recent years. When new issues such as today's cultural issues become nationally salient, political parties must respond and take positions on them. The two parties in the United States take opposite positions as they compete. Thus, partisan polarization has grown through a process of "conflict extension."[54]

However, many issue extensions make procrustean pairings within party coalitions (for example, there is no obvious reason why opposition to abortion and opposition to higher taxes naturally go together). In two-party systems, parties must pitch very big tents to negotiate compromises.

Parties represent the diversity of public opinion in a society. In two-party systems, major parties are limited by their competing support coalitions. If these coalitions do not overlap, the parties will not converge. In two-party systems with nonoverlapping partisan support coalitions, the average distance between parties is likely to be higher, even if the overall dispersion among all parties is lower. In multiparty systems, parties can locate more evenly across an ideological spectrum so that no party is too far from its closest competitor.[55]

In the United States, leaders in both parties try to form alliances and make compromises by downplaying certain issues or highlighting differences with the opposing party on others, such as abortion, guns, immigration, or tax policy. In other words, rather than seeing parties as pulling apart on a single left-right continuum, we should see politics as a multidimensional issue space and treat polarization as the sum of parties' differences across all issues. Thus, a politics in which parties differ on twenty issues feels much more divided than a politics in which they differ on ten. If we simplify the ideology score, the distance

between the parties would appear the same. But to voters, it feels more intense when there are twenty disagreements instead of ten. As Jonathan Rodden explains,

> Affective political polarization intensifies when new issue dimensions are added. In a two-party system, the parties will appear to be moving further from the average voter, and further from one another, if they offer ever-more heterogeneous and incoherent bundles of platforms over time as new issues are politicized. In the United States, as a result, increasing hostility toward the out-party goes hand in hand with increased ambivalence about the in-party. Meanwhile, the parties become increasingly internally fractious. In a multi-party system, on the other hand, when new issues emerge, parties can position themselves throughout the multi-dimensional issue space. As a result, voters feel closer not only to their in-party but also to the average out-party. In this way, I suggest that multi-party systems can reduce overall levels of affective polarization.[56]

Perception feeds reality. The more affectively polarized voters are, the more likely they are to misperceive the extremism of their political opponents. And when voters overestimate the extremism of their opponents, they view politics as a more intense group conflict.[57] Affective polarization has a reinforcing quality, especially within the constraints of a majoritarian system. Proportional multiparty systems offer greater variety of issue combinations and less limitation on issues than two-party majoritarian systems. Parties can compete on differing issues without demonizing one another, since they are not overextending their natural support base. Moreover, demonizing an opposition party is not always a winning strategy in a multiparty system.

Negative campaigning is thus less overwhelming in multiparty systems. This could reduce affective polarization,[58] since high-stakes elections with negative campaigning appear to be the most consequential force fueling this type of polarization.[59] High levels of negative campaigning also reduce feelings of political efficacy and undermine popular support for the political system, suggesting another consequence of sustained negative campaigns.[60]

Partisanship and race. A final and crucial aspect of affective polarization in the United States involves the question of race. As social and cultural issues have come to the center of American politics, questions around changing demography have collided with the party system in a zero-sum manner, leading to two competing visions for the country's future.

Whereas majoritarian democracies tend to collapse political conflict into a single dimension, proportional democracies tend to multiply dimensions through shifting coalitions and alliances, so that no electoral contest feels so all-or-nothing. For this reason democracy scholars have typically recommended proportional systems for diverse societies that might be prone to ethnic conflict.[61] As Frank Cohen explains,

> Under proportional arrangements, conflict is likely to take more frequent but less intense forms due to the institutional means available and accessible to dissatisfied minorities. By dispersing authority and victory, proportional institutions endear dissatisfied ethnic groups to the regime—that is, to the institutional status quo. They socialize them enough to prevent their use of extreme measures to engage the regime. . . . Under majoritarian arrangements, dissatisfied ethnics will not have the proximity to authority and victory they would have under proportional arrangements.[62]

Additionally, more proportional systems tend to allow for the kinds of shifting coalitions and crosscutting cleavages that reduce affective polarization, as described above. Rather than encourage ethnic voting, proportional systems spread ethnic voting across parties.[63] Cohen finds proportional systems do better at managing ethnic conflict than plurality systems, an empirical finding that is generally replicated,[64] although not entirely.[65] Obviously, there is only so much an electoral system can accomplish.

In *Designing Democracy in a Dangerous World*, Andrew Reynolds offers this nuanced assessment:

> Proportional electoral systems are akin to antibiotics. In the vast majority of cases PR systems are helpful aids in fighting the social ailments of minority exclusion and interethnic hostility. They tend to help stabilize unhealthy states and if used appropriately can bring a different and more constructive tone to political competition. But just like antibiotics PR elections systems will not be successful in every case. Sometimes the social ailment is antibiotic resistant, while in other cases the body politic has learnt how to counter the effects over time. Politicians and voters may find new ways of evading the incentives for accommodation and inclusion that proportional systems offer.

This is the important caution to any form of electoral engineering. Institutions can only change so much. Thus, as David Lublin and Shaun Bowler conclude in a review of the literature on electoral systems and ethnic minority representation,

> While the sense of the literature as a whole leans more toward PR as a conflict management tool, there are two important caveats to make. First . . . it is far easier to address issues of racial and ethnic division before society descends into ethnic violence. It is much easier to keep Humpty Dumpty on the wall than to put him back together again. . . . Second, and following on from that, it is hard to see that electoral institutions alone are enough to head off ethnic conflict. It is crucial to think about electoral institutions in combination with other institutions.[66]

While there are many reasons to believe PR might be better able to restrain racial conflicts, there are no guarantees. Still, this logic follows the long-standing political science wisdom that the best way to manage societal diversity is through crosscutting cleavages. When racial, ethnic, and other core identities align with partisan affiliation, affective polarization is much worse. When identities cut across partisanship such that different members of the same ethnic group support different political parties, politics becomes less all-or-nothing.[67] Thus, crosscutting political identities generate the "capacity to see that there is more than one side to an issue, that a political conflict is, in fact, a legitimate controversy with rationales on both sides."[68]

American racial and ethnic groups are not monoliths, a fact that recent Republican gains among minorities have made clear. Were more parties to exist in the United States, we would expect to see more heterogeneity in voting patterns among racial and ethnic groups. Such diverse voting is an important aspect of making multiracial, multiethnic democracy successful.[69]

Importantly, the governing institutions of the United States reflect the ideal of crosscutting coalitions, with multiple institutions sharing power and checking one another, both within and across different levels of government. James Madison's political theory got this crucial insight of democratic stability. Unfortunately, the partisan nationalization of American politics (unforeseen by Madison or any of the Framers) clashes with this institutional design principle, fostering all-or-nothing partisan electoral conflict atop institutions that make all-or-nothing partisan governing more difficult and leading to deep frustrations and gridlock.

Still, fragmented authority across levels and branches of government also makes the United States more resistant to capture by one dominant faction than more unicameral, centralized parliamentary democracies. This may be the result of a mismatch between the country's electoral and party systems (which are decidedly majoritarian) and its governing institutions (which are more oriented toward negotiation and consensus).[70]

Could Moving to PR Reduce Affective Polarization in the United States?

Let us consider the causal mechanisms that appear to be driving the empirical patterns. One possible causal mechanism is identified by the "shifting-coalitions" theory, which argues that high affective polarization is a downstream effect of repeated partisan opposition. Partisan voters feel warmly toward other parties that govern in coalition with their preferred party—or even perhaps in opposition. These warm feelings last beyond the duration of the coalition. If PR in the United States caused different parties to form coalitions and govern together in various ways, it could decrease polarization among voters.

When the United States was less affectively polarized, Democrats and Republicans worked together in Congress, and voters learned from politicians that bipartisanship was a good thing. When political elites publicly praise opposing partisans and openly work with them, voters are more likely to conclude that opposing partisans are decent and even good people. Affective polarization is lower under such circumstances. When political elites publicly demonize opposing partisans, however, voters are likely to infer that they are evil and dangerous. This learning process may take a few electoral cycles to sink in, but it can heighten affective polarization.

These party dynamics would change with a multiparty House, even though presidential and Senate elections would still be single winner. The overwhelming majority of presidential democracies use PR in their legislatures. However, their presidential elections typically center around two major preelectoral coalitions, reflecting a two-bloc dominant politics that provides some fluidity across electoral cycles. Indeed, given the Senate and the presidency, US multiparty politics would likely retain this two-bloc dominance common among many proportional systems. However, by being more flexible with coalitions, a multiparty system could avoid rigid partisanship.

The second possible causal mechanism is the relationship between geography and partisan alignment. In proportional multiparty systems, parties of the Left and the Right vie for votes across geographic regions. In majoritarian systems, left-leaning parties focus more on urban areas, while right-leaning parties focus more on rural areas. This divide has become clearer in an era in which social and cultural issues have grown more salient in national politics, and it seems likely to endure as long as these issue cleavages remain dominant. If rural-left and urban-right votes are given more weight, this could reduce polarization between Left and Right.

The third causal mechanism is the gradual buildup of issues that widen the gap between parties. A multiparty system could create room for more issue bundles, potentially leading voters to feel closer to multiple parties even if they are particularly enthusiastic about one. Demonization and negative campaigning would be less effective under such conditions, and voters may come to see opposing partisans in a less negative light.

The fourth mechanism explores how a two-party system can reinforce racial and ethnic divides through ongoing partisan conflict along those lines. Again, a multiparty system could foster partisan splits within racial and ethnic groups, which are often more heterogeneous than two-party politics might allow for. Although some may worry about the emergence of "ethnic parties," the evidence suggests that these rarely form in proportional systems.

Thus, this literature suggests that two things would need to happen for affective polarization to decline in the United States. First, more parties would have to form. Second, to change citizens' partisan views, parties would have to introduce new issue bundles and disrupt existing coalitions. This would be a gradual unwinding that might take several electoral cycles.

Would or could this happen? The presence of latent demand in both the electorate and the elite political class determines the extent of new party and issue-bundle formation. One sign of latent demand in the United States is that for more than a decade, polls have shown that around 45 percent of the electorate self-identifies as "Independent," and between 60 and 65 percent of the electorate expresses a desire for more than two parties. We can also observe factions within the major parties during primary elections.

The main question is whether different coalitions would form under an alternative voting system, thereby changing the nature of US politics. Models of multiparty systems suggest a fair amount of issue dynamism—parties evolve and change to adapt to shifting political opportunities.[71] But much of this behavior depends on the entrepreneurship of political elites, who can mobilize and alter public opinion.

This leads to new research questions: What coalitions or parties might form, and how might they realign the political system? What principles should guide electoral reform to reduce affective polarization? If PR can dampen affective polarization, it will do so through certain mechanisms. To prevent democratic backsliding, PR systems should reduce the link between geography and partisanship and encourage diverse political issues and flexible coalition governments.

Can PR Reduce Political Extremism?

The rise of political extremism and authoritarianism poses a challenge to democracy in the United States and around the world. But democracies have varied in their resilience to this threat. The question here is whether PR improves the resilience of democracies in handling the threats of extremism.

Theorizing the Relationship Between Electoral Systems and Political Extremism

For decades, comparative democracy scholars have argued over what type of political system better manages extremism. A common argument for a two-party system is that it prevents extremism by encouraging parties to create broad coalitions. To win elections, both parties must converge on the median voter. A party that moves to a political extreme will pay an electoral price. Thus, major parties should have an incentive to police extremism in their ranks.

A common argument for a proportional multiparty system is that if support for extremism exists, it is better to isolate that support into its own party. In a proportional multiparty system, extremist parties will sometimes have electoral success. This is a feature of PR. If extremist views exist within the population, a party will organize to represent that sentiment. However, the existence of a fringe party with extremist views does not necessarily present a serious problem for democracy. Some scholars have argued that it is better for antisystem voters to feel represented and have a stake in the system than for them to turn their frustration into more radical action, including violence.[72] A presence in a legislature, even in opposition, can help curb extremism by giving citizens an outlet to cast protest votes and be represented.[73] However, in societies where politics is both divided and fragmented, small parties on the extremes can sometimes have disproportionate leverage.[74]

In proportional multiparty systems, mainstream parties have two ways of responding to extremist parties. The "cordon sanitaire" is one approach. The second is the "taming" approach: mainstream parties invite extremist parties into government coalitions but effectively tame them by sharing the responsibility of governing, draining away some of the support for extremist parties that merely reflected a desire for change.

Implicit in both approaches is the idea that the overall political system is self-correcting and that enough voters prefer moderation to extremism to make the latter a political loser, while enough political

elites are motivated to preserve the democratic system that they will reassess their partisan commitments and strategies in the face of extremist threats. Managing political extremism depends on the choices of voters and elites: Will they oppose extreme behavior?

However, much depends on the extent to which an extremist party is gaining support. An extremist party with 5 or 10 percent support is different from one with 25 percent support, which is where the danger zone starts. In a more proportional system, an extremist party with the support of a quarter of the electorate will get 25 percent of the seats in the legislature. This is high, but it still gives other parties opportunities to maneuver. In a two-party system, however, an extremist faction with 25 percent support could take over a major party.

Let's imagine a two-party system in which Party A wins 51 percent of the vote to Party B's 49 percent, thus gaining control of the government. However, Party A is split between two factions, Faction 1 and Faction 2. Faction 1 represents 51 percent of Party A, giving it control of the party. In a simple majority system, this faction, which represents just 26 percent of the country's electorate, would have total control of the government.

To be fair, this assumes that none of Faction 2 would defect to Party B, which may not be realistic. A minority faction may need to be larger to gain total control. But an even smaller faction could gain total power if only a plurality of support is needed because a few smaller parties take away votes without winning seats. Let's say Party A gets 45 percent of the vote, giving it control of a majority of seats. If Party A has three factions—one with 40 percent support and two with 30 percent—it would be possible for a faction with the support of just 22.5 percent of the electorate to gain total power.

There are many ways to shift around the math. But a general problem is that when a more extreme minority faction gains control of a major party, the losing moderate faction may wind up politically homeless. This describes the trajectory of Republican moderates in the United States over the last decade. Few have joined the Democratic Party. Most have remained reluctant Republicans, updating their positions to align with their party's in order to remain in good standing. They cannot operate as their own party in a two-party system.

If an extreme minority faction gains control of a major party, it often labels its opposition as more extreme to keep its moderate supporters. Again, this has happened with the Republican Party. Once Donald Trump took hold of the party, he provoked conflicts to exacerbate differences. Polarization is a common strategy of extremist authoritarians. They strategically choose conflicts designed to push their political oppo-

nents into more extreme positions in response. They force moderates to choose sides. This can tip a political system into escalating extremism.

It is easy to see this problem through the lens of primary elections, in which the "base" selects nominees who come from the political extremes—or at least have to cater to the extremes (see Chapter 5 on primary elections). But distortion from narrow candidate selection is a more generalized problem in a two-party system. Two parties will have separate "selectorates"—networks of donors, elites, activists, and voters who are responsible for elevating particular candidates over others. If a party is divided into competing factions, as a big-tent party in a two-party system is likely to be, those factions will compete for dominance, with the winner likely to set the agenda and priorities for that party. Even if it is a majority of a majority, the dominant faction will still be a minority. The US system, which strips party leaders of any formal authority in candidate selection, appears uniquely prone to this problem of an extremist faction taking over a major party in the current political climate.

In a two-party system, failure to eliminate extremism within either party can have devastating effects. Party leadership acts as a defense against extremism, and breaching this defense puts the system in grave danger. In a proportional system, by contrast, the failure of a single party to police its ranks against extremism is not catastrophic in the same way. In this sense, there is more resilience in a multiparty system, such that if one party becomes extreme, other parties can adjust. It is very unlikely that a single party will gain a majority of seats in the legislature in such a system, which means that parties typically have to form governing coalitions. Thus, far-right parties cannot govern on their own unless they win a majority of seats.

As noted above, mainstream parties have two ways to deal with extremist parties: the cordon sanitaire, in which mainstream parties form a "grand coalition" to keep extremist parties out of power, and the taming strategy of inviting extremists into coalition to force them to moderate. The latter approach appears to have two distinct advantages.

First, being part of a government coalition typically has a moderating effect on smaller far-right parties. Such parties usually soften their positions in exchange for governing responsibility.[75] This compromising, in turn, blunts their appeal. Populist parties that start off as political outsiders shed their antisystem credibility by becoming political insiders.[76] Because public opinion is thermostatic, parties in power often lose support in the following election. This makes for a double hit to far-right parties. Meanwhile, parties that moderate their positions typically gain back seats in the next election.[77] Extremist parties cannot deliver on their

impossible promises of dramatic change, thus leaving their supporters disappointed in the next election.

Crucially, both strategies depend on the strength and democratic commitments of mainstream parties. The taming approach can work if a mainstream party is strong enough to keep the upper hand in the coalition. A cordon sanitaire approach can work if mainstream parties can navigate challenging times together. If mainstream parties are weak and hollow, neither approach will work very well.

Choosing the right approach depends on the specific country situation and election results.[78] Because the cordon sanitaire can lead to backlash, mainstream parties must be careful to take extraordinary measures only when the extremist party is truly illiberal and antisystem. Casting disagreement and dissent as extremism can reinforce alienation and extremism.[79]

But one benefit of a multiparty PR system is that mainstream parties have options and flexibility. The taming strategy can work in part because mainstream parties do not need extremist parties to form a governing majority. Mainstream parties can instead build a grand coalition to exclude extremist parties, which have nowhere near a majority of support and so depend on more mainstream parties to govern with them. The result is that mainstream parties have more bargaining leverage. Crucially, this is because the bargaining happens *between* parties, so different possible coalitions can form.

Proportional democracies are obviously not immune from democratic backsliding. But when they do backslide, it is typically under conditions of high societal polarization. Center parties struggle under such conditions, leading to the collapse of party systems into two governing coalitions—left and right. When only two governing coalitions are possible, extreme factions gain power and push moderate parties to adopt more radical positions, leading to increased polarization in society.[80]

If a PR system does collapse into two distinct and polarized blocs, there is still an opportunity for a new center party to form without displacing a major party, because a new center party could gain representation with as little as 10 or 15 percent of the vote. By contrast, in a two-party first-past-the-post system, a new center party would be unlikely to win any seats with that level of support, unless it had a particularly strong geographic concentration.

Measuring and Charting Extremist Parties

Extremism, such as polarization, is a problem much discussed but rarely defined clearly. As with polarization, extremism has multiple dimen-

sions. A political party can be ideologically extreme (because it holds views far from the mainstream) but also supportive of liberal, pluralist democracy. Conversely, a political party can be ideologically moderate on most issues but extreme in its opposition to liberal, pluralist democracy. However, this second combination is unlikely. Typically, policy extremism goes along with illiberalism. Nationalism and xenophobia often go with authoritarian extremism. And populism, which is more appropriately described as a style of politics than as an ideology, also tends to go with authoritarianism. On their own, populism and nationalism can be compatible with liberal democracy. But when combined with authoritarianism, they become a threatening package that challenges key tenets of liberal pluralism, including minority rights and dissent.

Western democracies are currently experiencing a "fourth wave" of populism, with populist parties emphasizing anti-immigrant and antiglobalization views. The first wave (1945 to 1955) comprised "neofascist" parties that represented the last gasp of totalitarian movements from the 1930s and faded quickly. The second wave (1955 to 1980) reflected a more antiestablishment mood with a few "flash parties," such as the Farmers Party in the Netherlands and the Poujadism movement in France, which came and went swiftly. The third wave (1980 to 2000) occurred during a time of economic disruption and high unemployment. It was marked by the rise of the Front National in France and the Freedom Party in Austria.

The current wave has been the most successful so far, but it is much more heterogeneous than previous ones. It features more diverse types of parties and organizations, although these generally focus on cultural concerns, particularly a backlash against immigration. Most new populist parties in Europe have distanced themselves from violence and antidemocratic norms, despite their ethnonationalist rhetoric.[81]

Entrepreneurial populist leaders have seized on preexisting concerns about immigration and globalization. These issues became salient during the financial crisis of 2008–2009 and the migrant crisis of the mid-2010s.[82] However, the relative success of these parties does not reflect a sudden change in public opinion. If anything, citizens in European democracies have become more supportive of immigration, although public opinion is mostly flat. As Larry Bartels has documented, "The familiar specter of a 'populist wave' sweeping contemporary Europe is, at least when it comes to overall public opinion, wholly illusory." Instead, populist nativist right-wing sentiment has been consistent for decades. A reservoir of support has always existed. It is just that new parties have emerged to make these issues more salient. Still, as Bartels notes, "to suppose that a reservoir of right-wing

populist sentiment is enough to constitute a crisis of democracy is unduly alarmist." The danger, Bartels notes, is when mainstream parties turn antidemocratic. Few voters in democracies want to support authoritarianism outright. But sometimes, they do without realizing what they are doing.

Multiparty democracies have long been associated with more ideological polarization.[83] However, ideological dispersion does not equate to success for extremist parties. Repeated studies have found no link between proportionality and extremist party success.[84] Nor are proportional systems associated with more success for anti-immigrant parties.[85] Most effects are null. However, at least one study found that majoritarian systems were associated with more party extremism.[86] Multiparty systems may even slightly benefit moderate parties.[87]

Evidence for these claims can be found in recent data from the V-Dem Institute, which asked country experts to assess the extent to which the parties in question show a lack of "commitment to democratic norms prior to elections."[88]

The V-Dem experts find the US Republican Party to be more illiberal than such European populist parties as the Austrian Freedom Party, the Danish People's Party, the True Finns Party, the Front National, the Dutch Party for Freedom, and the Swedish Democrats. This is largely because, although these parties are strongly anti-immigration, they have retained support for basic aspects of liberal democracy. The US Republican Party is more in line with the German Alternative for Deustchland, the Italian Northern League, the Hungarian Fidesz, and the Polish Law and Justice Party. Of these parties, only Fidesz and Law and Justice have been as successful as the Republican Party.

A more comprehensive measure of illiberalism's reach within a country is the overall amount of liberalism in its party *system*. To measure this, we take a weighted average of the antipluralism index across all parties in a system, which averages the scores of all parties that gain seats in the legislature and then weights the average by each party's share of seats. Looking at the relationship between district magnitude and the weighted illiberalism (antipluralism) index in the party system, we find that there appears to be a slight relationship, with more proportional systems having less party-system illiberalism, but considerable variation exists that district magnitude alone cannot explain.

Legislative fractionalization is more closely related to the overall success of illiberal parties than is district magnitude. Put simply, the more binary a legislative party system (closer to 0.5 on the fractionalization score), the more illiberalism exists within the party system. This

relationship became especially pronounced in the 2010s, the decade in which Western democracies came under the most stress.

Legislative fractionalization is a property of the party system and a second-order property of the electoral system. The observed patterns are consistent with the theory. In a less fractionalized party system, with fewer parties and more binary competition, if one party becomes illiberal, it represents a much larger share of the legislature. In a more fractionalized party system, illiberalism can more easily be contained in one party without contagion. However, at the extremes of fractionalization, there does appear to be more illiberalism. In other words, a system that permits too many parties can give extremism too much of a foothold or make it too hard for liberal parties to coordinate against a concentrated threat.

Thus, the V-Dem data suggest that a moderate level of fractionalization might be best at managing extremism. However, we need to better understand the relationship. In the following section, we look briefly at the trajectories of two countries where backsliding occurred, Hungary and Poland. Both trajectories suggest a potential causal relationship, because in both countries the party system became much more binary (less fractionalized) immediately before the backsliding took place. We also look at a third country, Colombia, where the party system became more fractionalized prior to a democratic improvement.

Can PR Limit Political Extremism?

In a two-party system, moderates battle against extremism *within* their own parties. In a sense, mainstream partisan leaders who oppose extremism have the same two options—either cast extremists out of the party (the cordon sanitaire) or moderate extremism through responsibility (taming). The internal cordon sanitaire can work for a while, but it raises the same problems of backlash. With no smaller "release-valve" party, extremists nurture their disaffection and gain strength from it.[89]

If extremism can intensify in the absence of a release valve, it can grow within a party. In pursuit of a narrow majority, a major party may need to placate and even indulge the demands of an extremist faction to win elections. This leads to major parties courting extremists, which then polarizes the electorate. As the electorate polarizes, leaders of mainstream parties have fewer options to build a broad coalition, making them more reliant on extremists.

In a two-party system, coalitions are much longer lasting and less flexible. If we assume parties represent distinct policy perspectives and politicians care about policy as well as winning elections, sophisticated

models and consistent empirical evidence show no median convergence. Instead, two-party competition leads just as easily to extremism.[90]

This is broadly the story of the Republican Party. For a long time, moderates had the upper hand. But starting in the 1990s, extremism within the party grew. Party leaders could not ignore the more extreme elements within the coalition. They tried but failed to manage these elements through messaging and symbolic politics. By 2010, the extremists had built a new movement within the party, the Tea Party, and had enough leverage to exert significant pull. By 2017, they had taken over the presidency in the person of Donald Trump. Other members of the party had two equally unappealing options: capitulate or leave. Most stayed and appeased Trump because they enjoyed being in power (or had convinced themselves that they could do more good by sticking around than by leaving).

Trump was not initially popular among most Republicans. There are still many Republicans, particularly Republican elites, who would like to move on from Trump's distinct brand of confrontational, polarizing politics. But polarization and conflict escalation have been Trump's reliable strategy. Over his political career, he has constantly tested the limits. When confronted, he always doubles down on a polarizing conflict strategy. Each time, other Republicans have rallied to his side rather than give Democrats a "victory."

Trump's success here depends on affective polarization and the two-party system. He can only rally support to his side because, for many Republicans, the possibility of letting Democrats win is simply intolerable. In reluctantly backing Trump, Republicans rationalize that Democrats are even worse, thus compounding affective polarization. Eric Groenendyk identified the "lesser-of-two-evils" defense as a key factor in partisan animosity in the United States.[91]

The Republican Party shares similarities with successful right-wing parties in Hungary and Poland. All three countries share two important things in common: they have grown perniciously polarized across geographic divides in the twenty-first century, and their turn toward political illiberalism has been a top-down process. In none of these countries did a majority of voters want a democratic rollback, and many to this day have rationalized developments as appropriately democratic.

The United States has long had a two-party system, but since 2000 the geographic sorting of the two political parties has increased the level of polarization significantly. Meanwhile, Hungary and Poland both followed a trajectory of legislative consolidation before falling into illiberalism. First, the level of legislative fractionalization declined.

Then, the countries' V-Dem scores fell. The timing suggests a possible causal relationship (consolidation, then decline), but the reality is obviously more complicated than that. Likely, the legislative consolidation was a symptom of societal polarization, which in turn contributed to democratic decline.

Hungary is a paradigmatic case of "pernicious polarization" across urban-rural lines. Although Hungary has had a multiparty system since the end of the Cold War, the divide between its right and left blocs has never been bridged. That divide has been primarily cultural and symbolic, not economic. Starting in the late 1990s, the cleavage moved towards a stronger "us-versus-them" logic. Prior to the 2010s, Fidesz was a moderate party, and Viktor Orban showed few signs of being an autocrat. Fidesz supporters did not willingly vote to weaken democracy. They voted for change at a time of political scandal.[92] Upon gaining a majority, the party strengthened executive power and weakened checks and balances considerably, centralizing power.

Poland followed a similar trajectory. Law and Justice won the presidency and majorities in both chambers of parliament in 2015, going on to overhaul the judiciary, limit civil rights, increase surveillance, and fill state jobs with party loyalists. Decision-making power was consolidated by the party chairman, Jarosław Kaczyński. In a "change" election, the party campaigned around child-tax credit, prescription drugs for the elderly, and frustration with the status quo—not widespread illiberalism. But with polarizing elite rhetoric, Law and Justice split the country, drawing support overwhelmingly from the poorer and more rural eastern half.

One notable explanation for why Fidesz has been successful in Hungary is that it united a heterogeneous coalition of diverse interests who all opposed the political Left, but for different reasons. In a polarizing party system organized around two blocs, mobilizing a heterogeneous coalition based on fear became a winning strategy.[93] Nothing unites like a common enemy. When political conflict is flattened into two issue bundles and one dimension, "us-versus-them" political strategies are at their most potent.

Bartels notes another commonality across the United States, Hungary, and Poland: "Popular support for authoritarian nationalism was greatly magnified in two distinct respects—first by co-opting the existing support of established mainstream conservative parties, and second by benefiting from significant disproportionality in the translation of electoral seats into political authority."[94]

How much can be explained by electoral system design? In Hungary, Fidesz gained majority control in 2011 under a mixed system in

which roughly half of seats were elected through single-member districts and half through proportional representation. Fidesz then used its majority to transform the electoral system. It increased the share of single-member districts, gerrymandered many of those districts, and reduced the overall number of seats in the legislature. The gambit worked. In the next election, Fidesz won 67 percent of the seats with 45 percent of the vote. This "majoritarian turn" in the rules of the electoral system almost certainly helped Fidesz solidify power.[95] In 2022, the party won 135 out of 199 seats in the legislature, benefitting from a favorable electoral law.

Poland has a 5 percent national threshold atop a system of multimember districts, such that a party that does not get 5 percent nationally does not get any seats.[96] Poland also has an 8 percent threshold for parties campaigning as a bloc. Seats that go unclaimed as a result go to the largest parties. This threshold was put in place to prevent excessive fragmentation and encourage more majoritarian outcomes. However, in the 2015 election, it had a perverse effect. A group of center-left parties campaigned as a bloc that year but fell just short of the threshold with 7.7 percent of the vote nationwide. Because this bloc and other smaller parties forfeited their seats, Law and Justice was able to win 51.1 percent of the seats in the Polish Sejm (parliament) with just 37.6 percent of the popular vote. It was again able to win 51.1 percent of the seats in the Sejm in 2019, despite winning 43.6 percent of the national vote. This disproportionality allowed Law and Justice to govern without partners, imposing a form of minority rule.

A driving force of democratic backsliding is deep societal polarization, fueled by opportunistic political elites. Under certain circumstances, polarizing strategies can be very effective for parties hoping to win majority control. However, it is important to note that neither Fidesz nor Law and Justice began as far-right illiberal parties; nor were they elected on a promise to build a more authoritarian society. Instead, once they gained single-party majority power, they used it to further entrench their control. The more concentrated the party system is into two dominant parties, the more likely it is that one party can win an outright majority and control of government. Certainly, the United States is not Poland or Hungary. The United States has a more robust democratic history and culture, and both separation of powers and federalism provide some bulwarks against one-party dominance across the entire country. But one party can do considerable damage to political institutions if it gains unified control of Congress, the Senate, the presidency, and many state governments.

In a divided society, PR provides the flexibility for unlikely coalitions of pro-democracy parties to campaign together by appealing to different societal groups and interests. This is the story of Poland's 2023 election, held under a proportional rule, in which three opposition parties ran as a loose coalition and won a majority of seats. As Anne Applebaum observed, "The existence of three opposition parties meant that different messages were heard by different parts of the electorate, on the center-right as well as the center-left. Some of the candidates attacked [Law and Justice]. . . . Some used the language of unity and called for an end to polarization."[97]

In both Poland and Hungary, leaders were much more successful in eliminating checks and balances and strengthening executive power than they have been in the United States. The United States has the advantage of more deeply institutionalized checks and balances. However, it is notable that in all three countries, the electoral system allowed a political party to win majority control without winning a majority of the votes, and in a binary party system, few voters believed they were voting against democracy.

Democratic backsliding is a complex phenomenon with many causes. The party system and the electoral system merely provide one institutional framework. Ultimately, much depends on how political elites respond to challenges and on the strength and democratic commitments of major-party leaders. However, the core question here is whether different electoral systems dampen or amplify threats of extremism, particularly in the current era, in which urban-rural polarization poses a significant threat to democratic stability. In a recent study of democratic backsliding, Michael K. Miller argues that winner-take-all elections make democratic backsliding more likely because of the ways in which they allow winners to consolidate power.[98]

One notable exception to the democratic backsliding of recent decades is Colombia, a country that has been on the democratic upswing. Colombia's politics were deeply polarized in the 1990s, the peak years of the FARC Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia) conflicts.[99] But starting that decade, the country adopted a series of electoral reforms that opened up its political system, effectively breaking up the dominance of its two major parties by denationalizing politics, reducing corruption, and expanding participation. Particularly consequential was a 2003 reform that moved the system in a much more party-proportional direction, replacing a candidate-centered electoral system that was akin to the single nontransferable vote but slightly different. Although the once-dominant parties remained players after 2003, new parties become important too.

Colombia's democratic improvements and party-system expansion followed the exact opposite trajectory of Poland and Hungary, where party-system narrowing preceded democratic decline.[100] Again, we should be cautious about interpreting these changes. Much else was happening in Colombia at the time, including an effective crackdown on guerillas, which enabled more people to participate in politics without fear of violence. There was also a fair amount of decentralization and localism, which encouraged more parties and sectors to get involved in politics.

A more detailed analysis would demand more research on the other factors driving change in these countries' party systems. However, it is notable that the three Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) countries that have seen the most significant changes in their V-Dem scores in recent decades (two negative, one positive) all show the same suggestive patterns across these two variables, although in opposite directions. Hungary changed its electoral laws to move in a more majoritarian direction. Colombia changed its electoral laws to move in a more proportional direction. While party systems alone cannot explain the democratic shifts in these countries, they did provide significant opportunities for actors to behave as they did.

Extremism, Losers' Consent, and Satisfaction with Democracy

Democracy depends on the consent of losers, who must accept the outcome of elections. One of the most robust findings in political science is the gap between electoral winners and losers. Electoral winners report being more satisfied with democracy than electoral losers do. This is especially true in majoritarian democracies, because the distinction between winners and losers is much sharper in such countries. The satisfaction gap is even wider under conditions of polarization.[101] By contrast, in proportional democracies, the difference between winning and losing in elections is less stark, and the divide between opposition and governing coalitions is sometimes less clear. Thus, PR is associated with more satisfaction with democracyand more confidence in the electoral process.[102]

Certainly, context matters here. Countries with high-quality governments experience lower satisfaction among winners and higher satisfaction among losers. This indicates the influence of government quality on closing the gap. Presumably, this is because a robust civil service and strong rule of law place guardrails on what any governing majority can accomplish.[103] Low levels of corruption also help close the gap.[104]

The information environment matters as well. In divided democracies, electoral losers more often hear arguments claiming the election was unfair. Biased and polarized media are more commonly found in low-quality democracies.[105]

Currently, a major threat to American democracy concerns electoral legitimacy. Trump's campaign against the 2020 election result has turned into a broader partisan fight, causing significant harm to the US electoral system. This high-stakes presidential election environment interacts with affective polarization in ways that make it more easily exploitable by an authoritarian who wants to abuse it to stay in power. To be sure, all presidential elections are winner-take-all, which makes presidential democracies more vulnerable to the losers' consent problem. But under circumstances of high affective polarization, a close election can be dry tinder for an illiberal autocrat who wants to burn down democratic structures.

Could PR Reduce the Power of Illiberal Extremism in the United States?

Different systems create different strategic landscapes for moderates to build coalitions. Regardless of the system, much depends on party leadership. Multiparty systems provide more flexibility to manage extremism when it gains representation.

Adopting a more proportional system in the United States would likely lead to the emergence of a far-right extremist party, as it has in other proportional democracies. A more proportional system would also allow a center-right party to organize and provide voters with an alternative right-of-center option. Historically, pushbacks against antisystem extremism have depended on broad cross-ideological coalitions, which are more difficult to build in binary two-party systems. Poland's recent election proves that proportional systems can allow multiple parties to unite and win as a pro-democracy coalition.

Illiberal extremists have had the most success in deeply divided party systems with high levels of affective polarization. In such polities, citizens are most likely to overlook democratic norm violations by their own side.

To the extent illiberal extremist parties have achieved government control, it is not because their illiberal extremist policies or governing approaches were popular. It is because they won majority government control with banal promises of political change and then became more extreme. They have maintained their power both by making institutions

more biased in their favor (typically, more executive centered and thus more majoritarian) and by pursuing a polarizing strategy to make their political opponents seem more dangerous and extreme. As long as affective polarization is high, they face a low electoral price for antidemocratic activity.

Extremist parties running on extremist platforms are unpopular throughout Western democracies. Although such parties may sometimes gain the support of up to 20 percent of the electorate, the other 80 percent strongly opposes them. Extremist parties can't take over governments without support from mainstream parties, so they have to either stay in opposition or make compromises to join a coalition. This reduces their power to harm democracy, even if it leads to more anti-immigrant or isolationist policies. Only under certain conditions, such as extreme polarization, do mainstream parties capitulate to the demands of small extremist parties in exchange for support in forming governing coalitions.

Without electoral reform, two unlikely possibilities exist for managing extremism within the American two-party system. Either moderates regain the upper hand within the Republican Party or Democrats become a dominant big-tent moderate party. Perhaps these outcomes are more likely than passing reforms to adopt PR; perhaps not. But given the current trajectory of American politics, MAGA's continued dominance within the Republican Party, and the likelihood of more close national elections, neither of the above possibilities seems likely.

Reducing political extremism is challenging in a society where it has gained significant power. But a proportional system offers more possibilities.

How Does PR Impact Quality of Governance?

Theories of Governance Under Majoritarian and Proportional Systems

In this third section, we assess the relationship between electoral systems and government performance. Do proportional or majoritarian systems provide for more effective governance? One argument for majoritarian systems being more effective focuses on accountability. The argument is that under a majoritarian system, voters can empower a single party to govern. A unified party can enact its program, and then voters can judge the result. If voters are happy, they can re-empower the governing party at the next election. If voters are unhappy, they can vote in the opposition party, assuming they like its proposals better. The

threat of being tossed out of power should make parties more responsive in the majoritarian system.

An argument for proportional multiparty systems is that they allow for more diverse representation, leading to effective policymaking through bargaining. By providing voters with more choices, a proportional system can create a more representative legislature. Elected lawmakers can then negotiate to reach broadly accepted policies that represent diverse constituents.

This argument for proportional multiparty systems also involves a critique of the case for majoritarian systems. First, it suggests that the supposed accountability benefits of majoritarian systems are merely theoretical. The state of the economy, the most important factor in electoral outcomes, is often influenced by factors beyond the control of the party in power. However, the governing party does have levers to stimulate short-term growth ahead of an election (such as major stimulus), which can encourage irresponsible fiscal policy. Second, if most voters are partisans, they will not be neutral observers. They will cheerlead the policies of their party no matter what. Instead, a small group of mostly uninterested voters will decide elections, driven by a "throw-the-bums-out" mentality. If the parties are far apart, this can lead to wild swings in policy.

In the United States, moreover, the electoral system might be majoritarian, but the governing rules are antimajoritarian. Therefore, voters struggle to evaluate party performance as compromise is prevalent across governing institutions, often controlled by opposing parties, making it difficult to assess policy and performance. Voters might blame the president, but especially under divided government, the president is limited by the legislature. This could prompt the opposition-led legislature to oppose the president, with the goal of achieving unified government for its side. All of this becomes very confusing for voters: Whom do they hold accountable in a system that is supposed to encourage accountability?

Supporters of majoritarian systems argue that such systems provide clear choices for potential governing coalitions, as they must form into two competing parties prior to elections. In contrast, proportional systems often form coalitions after elections, giving voters less influence and making it harder to achieve electoral accountability. Because majoritarian systems give parties a majority, the government can get to work immediately, whereas in proportional systems, parties can sometimes take months to form a government.

Supporters of proportionality could respond that their preferred system provides greater flexibility to stay aligned with the political center.

Preelectoral coalitions are common in proportional systems, especially in proportional presidential systems. This helps voters understand their options and gives them more control over which part of the coalition they want to support. Furthermore, a proportional advocate may claim that the two choices seem arbitrary and voters should have more options for better responsiveness.

The theory debate could go back and forth for pages. Much also depends on the parties, their leaders, and their disagreements. Electoral systems can shape the parameters of negotiation and affect the conditions and motivations for reaching compromises.

Next we turn to the evidence, starting with the differences between presidential and parliamentary PR systems. PR presidentialism has some distinct governing dynamics.

How Does PR Work with Presidentialism?

Europe's parliamentary systems are commonly used as a reference point for proportional multiparty democracy. But the United States has a presidential system. The main difference between presidential and parliamentary systems is that, in presidential systems, presidents are elected independently from the legislature. In parliamentary systems, the legislature chooses the head of government. Some parliamentary systems are majoritarian, such as that of the United Kingdom

Among relatively stable liberal democracies, majoritarianism is much more common in parliamentary systems than in presidential systems (see Table 3.1).

The overwhelming majority of presidential systems are either proportional (fifteen of twenty-four) or mixed (five of twenty-four). Only four presidential democracies use a majoritarian electoral system for the legislature. Alongside the United States, the other three are Ghana,

Table 3.1 Distribution of Liberal Democracies by System of Government and Lower-Chamber Electoral System

	Majoritarian	Proportional	Mixed
Parliamentary	12	15	3
Presidential	4	15	5
Semipresidential	2	17	5

Note: Liberal democracies are defined as countries whose V-Dem liberal democracy scores have consistently exceeded .50 for the past decade.

Liberia, and Sierra Leone. And the second two barely make the cutoff. France has a majoritarian semipresidential system.

Thirty years ago, the combination of presidentialism and a multiparty legislature was widely viewed as "difficult."[106] The worry was that presidents would have a hard time garnering legislative support for their programs, resulting in immobilism and gridlock, which in turn could lead to either corrupt vote buying, executive overreach, or both. Without a doubt, there were occurrences of this, especially in the 1970s and 1980s.

But more recent evidence suggests these assessments were too pessimistic. For at least a decade now, the growing conventional wisdom has been that presidentialism and PR can work well together. Examples of robust, stable democracies that use this combination include Costa Rica, Cyprus, Chile, and Uruguay.

Recent scholarly assessments are similarly positive. As Paul Chaisty and colleagues observe, "Twenty years of research have shown presidentialism to be remarkably durable, and in particular its multiparty variant has vastly overperformed relative to early predictions."[107] José Antonio Cheibub and coauthors likewise note, "Government coalitions are less frequent under presidentialism than under parliamentarism, but the difference is one of degree, not of kind. Highly fractionalized legislatures turn out to promote coalitions in both systems. Single-party minority governments are not less successful in the legislature than coalition governments, minority or majority. Legislative paralysis appears to be a rare phenomenon."[108]

According to Carlos Pereira and Marcus André Melo, "The ability of multiparty presidentialism to subsist with sustainable democracy is beyond dispute. . . . [M]ultiparty presidentialism has boosted political stability, and has not degenerated into systemic corruption as long as robust political competition and a set of strong autonomous institutions exist alongside it to keep its potential excesses within bounds."[109]

Responding to Juan Linz, who warned of the dangers of presidentialism, Christian Arnold and colleagues argue, "The Linzian interpretation of presidentialism is probably too pessimistic. Presidents in Latin America are not always the inflexible and imperial leaders previously characterized by Linz."[110] And Eduardo Alemán and George Tsebelis conclude, "We do not find dominant or deadlocked presidents; instead, we observe differences in the extent to which presidents succeed in enacting their programs and, perhaps more interestingly, how this is achieved."[111]

Naturally, some multiparty presidential countries have performed better than others. Some presidents have been more successful than others.

Since presidential democracies vary considerably across institutional design and economic conditions, it is possible to offer some tentative conclusions. Broadly speaking, they are as follows:

1. Presidents with fewer formal constitutional powers must bargain more with legislators, which might lead to more democratic stability.[112]
2. A modest multiparty system without excessive fragmentation seems to work best. Some party diversity is helpful. Extreme party-system fragmentation is more problematic.[113]
3. Binary political divisions and high levels of polarization are dangerous no matter what.
4. Individual presidential character and talent matter.

In multiparty systems, presidents have various ways to build majorities. The most common and effective way is through multiparty cabinets. To help facilitate a governing coalition in the legislature, presidents typically allocate positions and portfolios in their cabinet, often in proportion to party strength. Scholars refer to this as coalition presidentialism.

Often presidents can hold together multiparty coalitions across the executive and legislative branches, which allows them to pass preferred policy and govern. Cabinets form more easily when coalitions are smaller and have more ideological overlap.[114]

But a "minority government" does not necessarily lead to immobilism. On the contrary, presidents can bargain with opposing parties on an ad hoc basis.[115] In some ways, this can be desirable. A minority government that forms coalitions around each individual issue is more likely to represent the majority's views on those issues. However, this situation can also lead to deadlock.

Preelectoral coalitions are common in multiparty presidential democracies and regularly affect how cabinet posts are allocated. Parties endorsing candidates from another party provide infrastructure, connections, and funds. In exchange, they get policy concessions and coalition appointments, including at the cabinet level.[116]

Presidents can use pork barrel politics to build coalitions. Plenty of coalition partners are available for a price.[117] To be sure, "particularistic benefits" can sometimes grow indistinguishable from outright corruption. This is one reason an overly fragmented or weak party system can be problematic.

Still, the broad takeaway is that concerns about immobilism and deadlock in multiparty presidential systems have been overblown: As

José Antonio Cheibub and colleagues conclude, "Whatever is wrong with presidentialism, is not due to the difficulty of forming coalitions."[118] The real perils of presidentialism stem from illiberal elites, not from multipartyism—and in this sense, the situation is similar to parliamentary democracies.

The United States presents a different environment for building coalitions. A president who confronts a Congress with one chamber controlled by the opposing party will encounter significant opposition and more limited legislative leeway.[119] With just two parties and elections that are always neck and neck, this is a regular event. It is unlikely that a president will win opposing-party support through cabinet appointments or policy concessions when facing an adversarial Congress. The effectiveness of pork barrel politics has significantly diminished. Due to high polarization, the binary US party system limits presidents' ability to form cross-party alliances.

Thus, the most dangerous threat to a presidential democracy appears to be deep partisan polarization—a dynamic that raises the already high stakes for winner-take-all presidential elections to impossible levels. In a recent essay, Lee Drutman and Scott Mainwaring explain why PR can be successful with presidentialism:

> The United States now experiences many of Juan Linz's warned-about "perils of presidentialism." Gridlock, immobilism, and the problem of "dual legitimacy" (presidents and legislatures claiming competing mandates) are present under divided government, and are weakening US democracy. Conversely, when the same party controls the White House and Congress in this era of intense polarization, congressional checks on the president are too weak. . . .
>
> Whatever concerns about presidentialism exist, there is no evidence that a two-party system makes presidentialism function better. If a two-party system works well with presidentialism, it is only when that two-party system produces non-ideological, moderate parties. Whatever risks exist in combining presidentialism and multipartyism in the United States, they are far fewer than doing nothing and maintaining the divisive us-against-them status quo.[120]

How Governing Coalitions Form in Multiparty Systems

All legislatures require majority votes to pass legislation. In multiparty systems, multiple parties join to form a governing coalition. Sometimes, these multiparty coalitions form before elections, particularly in presidential multiparty systems. In parliamentary systems, coalitions

usually come together after elections, although in some instances they form beforehand.

The postelection coalition-formation process is often high drama, full of political wheeling and dealing. Typically, the party that wins the most seats plays the role of "formateur"—and gets the first shot at building a coalition. The process of coalition formation involves much public and private back-and-forth, some of it performative, some of it genuine. In the end, a governing coalition forms, often with a written agreement (which takes time to work out).[121]

On average, the postelection negotiation process takes less than a month (shorter than the two-month period between US elections and the seating of a new Congress). However, the duration can vary. The Netherlands, which has the most proportional system in Europe and typically the most legislative parties, usually takes the longest to form a government—on average, about three months.[122] Generally, high polarization and excessive legislative fragmentation contribute to longer negotiation periods.[123] Parties form coalitions more easily when they mostly agree on the important issues or have different issues they care about and so can effectively logroll. Coalitions also form more easily when individual leaders have more experience in office.[124] Generally, partisan coalitions reflect a broad agreement that strikes a compromise among parties based on their vote share.[125]

Although postelection coalitions are more common in parliamentary systems, about a quarter of all governments that form in such systems emerge from preelection coalitions. That is, multiple parties agree that if they win a majority of seats between them, they will govern as a coalition. This helps voters pick the government they want to support early on and improves the chances of a smooth coalition formation postelection.[126]

Preelection coalitions are more common in multiparty presidential systems. According to one recent study, 56 percent of multiparty presidencies were supported by a preelectoral coalition.[127] Because presidents are elected by a majority vote, this puts a higher premium on preelectoral coordination. If different parties work together for one presidential candidate, these efforts boost that candidate's chances of winning. Supporting a presidential candidate can give smaller parties benefits such as policy concessions, support for lower-level candidates, cabinet positions, and other appointments.[128]

Generally, coalitions that form more easily stay together more easily. Since most parliamentary democracies do not have fixed elections, the collapse of a coalition can bring about a new election, while a "caretaker" government keeps the lights on until a new government is formed. Presi-

dential systems are more rigid (or stable, depending on your perspective), so a broken-down coalition can mean immobilism and gridlock.

Occasionally, proportional multiparty countries have failed to form governments. For example, in the Netherlands, it took a record 225 days (nine months) to form a new government following the 2021 election. After the 2017 Dutch election, forming a government took seven months. But during these periods, caretaker governments still operated, as is typically the case in parliamentary systems during the coalition-formation process.

As a general pattern, governments in western Europe form relatively quickly, usually within a few weeks. However, the average formation time has been creeping up lately, and the number of coalitions taking more than sixty and even ninety days to form has increased.

Another general trend in recent years has been toward more new party activity in proportional systems. However, this has only translated into modest increases in legislative fractionalization.

In the United States, a new Congress is not seated until two months after an election, which would give American parties time to work out potential coalitions if the country adopted a more proportional system. However, the recent drama around the selection of the House Speaker has prompted some to question whether such a system would make this even more difficult.

Yet there are two things to keep in mind. One is that the role of the House Speaker has varied over time, and the current role is uniquely powerful. At various times, the Speaker has been a much less powerful actor. For example, from 1937 to 1961, the House was effectively led by a powerful Rules Committee, which itself was led by a (mostly conservative) coalition across party lines. Individual committees were also more powerful.

The second consideration is that in an era of narrow congressional majorities and two polarized parties, small groups can have tremendous leverage. Given that there are many ways for the House of Representatives to operate and many possibilities for a more committee-based internal governance system, we should be able to imagine alternative organizing structures that would work better with a more proportional system. Indeed, our own history suggests many recipes from periods in which our party system contained multitudes.

Nonetheless, the dynamics of changed legislative organization under PR would merit further study. Shifting to a more proportional system of voting without thinking through legislative organization would be extremely shortsighted and potentially disastrous.

Can Proportional Systems Better Govern from the Center?

Once a government is formed, there are many ways to evaluate its performance. One common evaluative framework asks whether government policymaking corresponds broadly to citizen preferences. Typically, this is measured by correspondence with the median voter.

In a majoritarian two-party system, the expected convergence mechanism is strategically electoral, or "Downsian": major parties are expected to converge on the political middle, with both parties offering moderate, center-oriented policy programs in accordance with the theory proposed by Anthony Downs. Obviously, this convergence mechanism is not operative in the American party system.[129] It also does not appear to be operative in other majoritarian democracies, casting considerable doubt on the theory.[130] There are many potential reasons for this disconnect. There is also considerable debate over the underlying prediction of the theory and whether it is flawed, either because it makes too many unrealistic assumptions about how parties and candidates behave or because various institutional mechanisms are standing in the way of convergence.[131] We will put those debates to the side for now and only observe that parties in the United States are clearly not converging on a political middle.

In a proportional multiparty system, the expected convergence mechanism is mathematical and coalitional. A winning multiparty coalition on a single dimension must, by definition, include the median party. The median party represents the policy of the median voter (or something close to it). This gives the median party considerable leverage.[132] Thus, Michael Laver and Norman Schofield argue, "the party controlling the median legislator . . . is effectively a dictator on policy. . . . It makes no difference if it goes off on holiday to Bermuda and sits on the beach getting a suntan. If we confine ourselves to one-dimensional accounts of coalition bargaining, then the core position of the party controlling the median legislator implies that its policies should be enacted whatever it does."[133] The formal results correspond to empirical evidence. Policy outputs in proportional multiparty systems do, on balance, correspond better to median voter preferences than policy outputs in majoritarian two-party systems.[134]

Of course, the reduction of politics to a single dimension is an oversimplification. As previously discussed, multidimensionality is crucial for resilience in all systems, including political ones. If we value multidimensionality, a two-party system becomes more brittle, since it can really only handle one dimension of conflict at a time, leading to more dramatic realignments as issue dimensions change.[135] One-dimensional

politics is especially prone to binary polarization, as, ironically, Downs showed. He spells out his median voter theory on page 118 of his 1957 *An Economic Theory of Democracy*. On page 119, Downs lays out a different distribution, one that is more bimodal. In this case, single-winner elections give extremists too much power.

Here is the logic: "If voters' preferences are distributed so that voters are massed bimodally near the extremes, the parties will remain poles apart in ideology," Downs writes. Under such conditions, "abstention is rational for extremist voters who are future oriented. They are willing to let the worse party win today in order to keep the better party from moving towards the center, so that in future elections it will be closer to them. . . . Abstention thus becomes a threat to use against the party nearest to one's own extreme position so as to keep it away from the center."[136]

Once the center collapses, parties move to extremes:

> In such a situation, unless voters can somehow be moved to the center of the scale to eliminate their polar split, democratic government is not going to function at all well. In fact, no government can operate so as to please most of its people; hence the situation may lead to revolution. . . . The once centralized distribution begins to polarize into two extremes as the incumbents increasingly antagonize those who feel themselves oppressed. When the distribution has become so split that one extreme is imposing by force policies abhorred by the other extreme, open warfare breaks out.[137]

In this way, a minority massed at the extreme of one party can effectively rule by strategic use of leverage.

This pattern resembles the "base"-dependent strategy of mobilization now dominant in American politics, particularly on the right. The base—a political minority—can threaten to withhold support from a more moderate candidate. The fewer moderates in the electorate, the more potent this threat becomes. And the more parties pull to extremes, the fewer moderates remain. Under such circumstances, a logical partisan strategy is "demonization" (discussed above), in which party leaders try to mobilize extreme voters not by moderating themselves but by demonizing their political opponents and raising the stakes of the election. This leads to more affective polarization, which further threatens democratic stability.

Multiparty systems allow for more multidimensional coalitions, such that politics is more likely to stay around the political center—the so-called heart of politics. This is because when coalitions are more flexible, extreme positions on any single dimension are harder to sustain.[138]

How Does PR Relate to Government Quality and Effectiveness?

Theories of coalition formation and governing provide admittedly indirect ways of understanding the core question here: How do voting systems relate to government performance? Thus far, the literature has suggested mostly that coalition formation is different under different types of systems, all of which have pros and cons. There are also differing theories on median convergence. Proportional systems are better at achieving a policy orientation toward the political middle.

Now we turn more directly to measures of government performance. A challenge here is that government performance is subjective. Nonetheless, democracy scholars have developed many metrics for measuring performance. Here, we assess how three measures of performance are related to district size and legislative fragmentation.

The first is the "Good Governance" measure of the Quality of Governance Institute, which assesses "a political system in terms of its executive capability and accountability."[139] The relationship between good governance and district magnitude (a measure of proportionality) in the 2010s suggests no significant relationship, save that countries with very large district magnitudes have worse governance on this measure. The relationship between legislative fragmentation and good governance is relatively weak, although as a general pattern, OECD countries with greater legislative fragmentation perform marginally better on the Good Governance measure.

The second measure is the same institute's "Government Effectiveness" score, which focuses on the capacity of government to "to produce and implement good policies and deliver public goods." Its components include "the quality of public service provision, the quality of the bureaucracy, the competence of civil servants, the independence of the civil service from political pressures, and the credibility of the government's commitment to policies."[140]

Looking first at district magnitude, the relationship suggests a slight boost in effectiveness in the mid-range of district magnitude, although nothing approaching statistical significance. With regard to legislative fractionalization, we see a statistically significant relationship in the 2010s, with more legislatively fragmented OECD countries performing better on the Government Effectiveness score. This relationship appears to continue into the current decade, although with fewer observations, statistical significance disappears.

The third measure is the "Functioning of Government" score from Freedom House, which assesses the accountability, openness, and

transparency of governments.[141] Here again, there is a slight boost in the middle range of district magnitude, although short of statistical significance. In the first decade of the twenty-first century, the most legislatively fragmented countries had slightly worse functioning than those in the middle range. But in the 2010s and into the 2020s, it is the most legislatively fragmented countries that have the highest degree of government functioning.

All these measures show considerable variation across electoral systems, even though a relationship exists. Indeed, the strongest predictor of government quality, effectiveness, and functioning is gross domestic product (GDP). Rich countries perform better on all these measures than poor countries.[142] However, if we plot per capita GDP against each measure of government performance, we see a steady pattern. The United States consistently falls short of the level of government performance one would expect for a nation of its wealth. This underperformance is highest in the 2010s, reflecting worsening hyperpartisan polarization and the Republican Party's drift toward illiberalism (at least according to V-Dem scores). The overall relationship is a steady linear increase up to a point. Once a country hits a per capita real GDP of around $50,000, there are no additional gains in government quality from additional wealth.

What conclusions should we draw from these relationships? As with the previous analysis of extremism in the party system, we see that party systems in the upper-middle range of fractionalization perform the best. The relationship between district magnitude and performance variables is more tenuous and unclear.

To the extent these analyses can guide us, they strongly suggest that legislative fractionalization, not proportionality directly, is the key variable for a healthier political system. However, legislative fractionalization is difficult to engineer, and too much fragmentation can be problematic as well. Moving toward a more modestly proportional system could facilitate healthy levels of legislative fractionalization.

However, concerns about fragmentation undermining the functioning of governing are not supported here or in other studies.[143] If deep polarization is the most vexing problem, there is also no evidence that more fragmented party systems are more polarized.[144]

The Bottom Line: Party System and Quality of Government

Majoritarian and proportional systems organize around different theories of governance. The majoritarian vision believes that governance works best when one party has majority control, can implement its preferred

policies, and is directly accountable for its performance. The proportional vision believes that effective governance involves considering numerous perspectives, even if doing so makes it difficult for voters to deliver a decisive mandate.

Practically, the United States is not a fully majoritarian system, given the many veto points in the system. The United States is also a presidential democracy. Although PR and presidentialism together were once viewed negatively, recent studies indicate that the combination can function effectively. Contrary to earlier assessments, it is no longer considered a difficult combination.

Majoritarian and proportional systems have different approaches to coalition formation, but the distinctions are often overstated. Many proportional democracies, especially presidential ones, form preelectoral coalitions. And in the United States, frequently divided government means that, in practice, much governing winds up being done by reluctant de facto coalitions.

Various measures of government performance do not show that proportionality (as measured by district magnitude) has any statistical correlation with government performance. Moderate to high levels of legislative fragmentation are linked to better government performance, indicating that the party system is more important than proportionality per se.

Eliminating Gerrymandering and Improving Constituency Representation

Two other issues related to PR do not fit neatly into any of the sections above. The first is an important benefit of proportional representation: its ability to eliminate gerrymandering. The second is a commonly raised concern about PR: that it will undermine constituency representation.

Single-Member Districts and Gerrymandering

Under single-member districts, the translation of national party votes into congressional seats depends on how voters are spread across districts. This enables gerrymandering. It also leads to distortions even without intentional gerrymandering.[145] As one literature review sums up the problem, "One well-evidenced feature of electoral systems that employ single-member districts is that legislative contest outcomes are almost invariably disproportional, irrespective of any explicit political involvement in the drawing of district boundaries."[146] Recent US elec-

tions have been roughly proportional at the national level. But within many states, representation is extremely disproportional.

Under certain conditions, it is possible for a party that wins a minority of votes statewide to still win a majority of legislative seats. This is called a "plurality reversal," and it is a documented feature of single-winner districting. It does not happen often, but it can happen enough to raise questions about electoral fairness.[147] The Electoral College demonstrates the same dynamic of accumulated winner-take-all elections. A candidate can prevail, even if he or she did not win the popular vote, by gaining support in specific geographic areas.[148] A similar electoral inversion happened in 2012, when Republicans won a majority of seats in the House of Representatives, even though Democratic candidates received more votes than Republican candidates.

Typically, state-level plurality reversals are a product of active gerrymandering, which usually exacerbates the disproportionality of vote-to-seat ratios. But some of this distortion happens naturally. Sometimes, voters distribute themselves "inefficiently." For example, if Democratic voters overwhelmingly cluster into urban districts, many Democratic votes will be "wasted."

Single-member districts make gerrymandering especially profitable. Mapmakers can draw tens of thousands of possible maps and then choose the one that maximizes their preferred metric. If that metric is partisan bias, they can maximize it, as many have. Sometimes, extreme partisan gerrymanders wind up being struck down by courts.

However, because single-member districts generate many naturally occurring distortions in proportionality, scholars have struggled to find a clear standard to differentiate between normal bias and gerrymandering. Despite at least eighteen proposed metrics, scholars have not agreed on a standard for deciding where to draw the line between expected distortions within a normal range and obviously intentional gerrymandering.[149] This failure reflects the reality that some distortion is inherent in single-member districting. The party that more efficiently distributes its voters has an unfair advantage.

Attempts to make maps "fair" are also complicated by other normative values of districting: competitiveness, compactness, keeping communities of interest together, and ensuring adequate minority representation through majority-minority districts. Competitiveness poses the biggest challenge to partisan fairness. Imagine a scenario in which every district is a 51–49 district. In this scenario, every district would also be very competitive. However, the smallest national swing would dramatically shift the balance of power—a hypermajoritarian result.

Or consider the opposite end of this spectrum. To ensure a 51–49 balance of power based on voter registration data, Party A could get 51 districts that are safe for Party A, and Party B could get 49 districts safe for Party B. Under such a scenario, perfect proportionality would be achieved, but not a single seat would be contested. In this respect, partisan fairness and competitiveness are often in tension. The more districts that are evenly balanced, the greater the potential distortion from small shifts in partisan support.

In the United States today, the reality is far closer to the partisan-fairness end of this continuum, although it may not feel that way. By most estimates, about 90 percent of districts are uncompetitive. This puts a ceiling on how big a majority either party can hope to win in Congress. However, control of the chamber rests on the remaining 10 percent of districts. Moreover, because most single-member districts are uncompetitive, primary elections become disproportionately important.

How might this change under proportional representation? PR in legislative elections allows for multiple candidates and multiple parties to represent the same district. Seats are won by parties in close proportion to their share of the vote. The larger the district magnitude, the lower the percentage of the vote a party needs to win at least one seat. Lower thresholds make districts more proportional but also allow more viable parties.

Cross-nationally, gerrymandering is a much more significant problem in majoritarian democracies than in proportional ones. As proportionality increases, gerrymandering becomes irrelevant and insignificant.[150] Single-member districts lead to more wasted votes and increase the chances of districting manipulation. Larger districts waste fewer votes, because they allow for more winners. Single-member districts often result in only two parties, making it easier for mapmakers to predict election outcomes based on past voting patterns. In multiparty systems, voters are less predictable, making it harder to anticipate the consequences of alternative districting schemes.

Were the United States to adopt PR for House elections, the number of wasted votes would decline. Parties would be motivated to compete more extensively, allowing more voters to have a say. Gerrymandering would become irrelevant.

District Size and Constituency Service

A commonly voiced concern about PR is that multimember districts undermine constituency-representative relationships. Certainly, a single

representative is easier for voters to identify, and single-member districts clearly incentivize the cultivation of a "personal vote" by doing good constituency service—for instance, by helping citizens navigate federal programs and services. Several studies have shown that representatives from single-member districts prioritize constituency service more than those from multimember districts.[151]

However, the quality of constituency service in single-member districts can be highly variable, especially in safe districts. Representatives from competitive and swing districts prioritize constituency service. With greater electoral safety, representatives place less importance on serving their constituents and are less likely to respond to their requests.[152] Since around 90 percent of elected US representatives come from safe districts, prioritizing constituency service is largely optional. Some representatives do; others don't.[153] As Brian Crisp and Scott Desposato note, "In SMDs, incumbents only compete with challengers who often lack experience, funding, and other perks necessary to pose a real threat. In MMDs, incumbents have to face other incumbents in the same district."[154]

In the United States, minority constituents are also less likely to receive responses to constituent service requests, particularly from Republican legislators.[155] Latino constituents are especially likely to be ignored.[156] However, when the legislator is a member of a minority community, response rates for that community go up.[157]

In an exhaustive study, Daniel J. Butler finds that "politicians exhibit favoritism toward some constituents over others" and "are less responsive to constituents who are not from their racial group."[158] Importantly, Butler argues that much of this unresponsiveness cannot be explained by strategic behavior, suggesting significant limits on the ability of competition to drive better constituency service. As Butler explains, "Politicians come to office with different information, knowledge, and sets of experiences that make it easier for them to work on issues important to people like them. . . . [P]oliticians' personal knowledge allows them to more easily help those most like them. This is exactly the behavior we expect from rational officials: they should work on the issues for which their personal knowledge makes it is less costly to do so."[159]

Butler suggests that multimember districts can improve representation by providing diverse citizens with more diverse representation. "A major benefit of multi-member districts is that each legislator comes to office with unique experiences and information on different topics. Legislators in multi-member districts can use that knowledge to specialize

in different issues that are important in the district and provide Pareto-improving representation."[160] (i.e., better representation for everyone)

In a single-member district, the quality of constituency service depends on both the characteristics of that district (is it competitive?) and the particular experiences and demographics of the representative (which constituent groups does he or she care about?). By contrast, in a multimember district, constituents have multiple representatives and thus a greater chance of finding one who shares their values and concerns.

The level of emphasis representatives place on constituent service in multimember districts depends on the presence of "candidate-specific" voting on ballots. Open-list PR and single-transferable vote (STV) systems enable voting for specific candidates and incentivize constituency service. Closed-list systems do not. Thus, under open-list and STV systems, where representatives can pay a price for poorly attending to their districts, candidates spend more time addressing the concerns of their constituents.[161] If they don't, they are more likely to lose.

The idea behind multimember districts is that having a diverse group of representatives is beneficial for a large and diverse population. Rather than splitting a large geographic area into several smaller constituencies, each with one representative, it is better to let several representatives simultaneously represent the entire geography. Different representatives will inevitably bring different perspectives and better represent different subconstituencies.

The US Congress has long had multimember districts for the Senate: each state is a two-member district whose senators are usually elected nonconcurrently. Historically, many states have elected senators from opposing parties, although this has become rarer recently. Senators from the same state often have different representation styles, focusing on different issues and constituencies. As Wendy Schiller concludes in discussing multimember district representation in the US Senate, "If we incorporate the two-person nature of Senate delegations and the multidimensionality of legislative behavior into our evaluation of Senate representation, we can conclude that representation in the U.S. Senate is better than it is commonly believed to be. When two senators from the same state are viewed as a pair, it is clear that their combined representational agendas include a wide range of interests and opinions that exists among constituents in their state."[162]

Schiller finds that senators from the same state establish a distinct identity, particularly when they come from the same party. Same-state senators seek out different voter groups, sectors, interest bodies, and geographical constituents. Their campaigns, committee assignments,

sponsored bills, senate speeches, and roll-call votes all provide evidence of this.

In a single-member district, each party can only choose one representative. This means that parties (or party voters in a primary) often choose the most generically "electable" representative. Practically, this means somebody who meets the stereotypical view of what a representative should look like: white, male, older, and personally wealthy. By contrast, in a multimember district, parties can offer a slate of candidates that appeal more broadly to distinct subsets of voters in the hope of improving their overall vote share.[163] In turn, individual candidates can more specifically prioritize the concerns of subconstituencies that might otherwise have their issues ignored.[164] By contrast, "focusing on issues that are not salient for all voters is not a viable strategy where a candidate must win a large proportion—a plurality or even a majority—of votes to get elected."[165]

The US Congress has certainly become more diverse across race and gender over time. However, the United States lags behind many peer nations in equal representation, particularly across gender.

A related feature of constituency representation involves bringing federal spending to home districts. Like constituency service, this is a nonideological means of serving a district and cultivating a personal vote. However, to the extent that cities are split into separate districts, individual representatives may have a more difficult time coordinating to secure citywide funding projects. James Snyder and Michiko Ueda find that "dividing large 'natural economic communities' into many single-member districts may reduce the effectiveness of these communities' legislative delegations, providing an argument for the use of multimember districts."[166]

Similarly, Justin Kirkland finds that having shared responsibility for a multimember district creates a basis on which representatives can work together. As he explains, "Multi-member districts provide legislators with natural allies that should help them swing legislative outcomes in favor of their home district. Legislators from single-member districts lack allies expressly interested in helping them benefit their home districts. Additionally, by creating an electoral environment where legislators have incentives to work across party lines the party cohesion within a legislature (a result supported by Adams 1996) and create more ideologically diverse political parties."[167]

In a study of multiple European democracies, Audrey Andre and Sam Depauw find that under open-list systems (where candidate-specific voting is allowed), larger district magnitude increases representatives'

"likelihood of promoting the collective needs of a territorial or social sub-constituency" and "probability of engaging in project work and social group representation."[168] However, larger district size is associated with "a negative impact on the perceived effectiveness of assisting constituents in their private dealings with public authorities in open-list and closed-list systems alike."[169] Although arguments for single-member districts highlight the importance of direct constituency linkages, a recent study concluded, "(Perhaps surprisingly) single-member (SM) district systems do not have more geographically representative legislatures than multi-member (MTM) district systems."[170]

The bottom line is that in a single-member district, both parties settle on one candidate, and the two nominees compete to be the sole representative of that district. This provides clarity and unity of direct representation, but at the expense of diversity (across multiple dimensions). A multimember district allows more diversity of representation for a geographic area.

Moreover, because many single-member districts are not competitive, many voters in those districts will not have voted for the representative who won. In early 2024, only 55 percent of Americans said that their representative was deserving of reelection.[171] However, most incumbent members of Congress win by much larger margins because most districts are not competitive.

Many single-member districts also do not necessarily correspond to meaningful constituencies. Within larger catchment areas, representatives can serve different constituency groups with distinct identities.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The consequences of electoral system design have been the subject of innumerable political science studies. Yet electoral system change is never entirely predictable. All electoral systems interact with the underlying dynamics of societies. Electoral systems also reflect choices among values and priorities. As the 2013 American Political Science Association task force on electoral system design argued, "The choice of an electoral system has normative consequences, requiring a clarification of priorities, acceptance of tradeoffs, and perhaps even the sacrifice of a competing value. Electoral rules go a long way toward shaping the way democracy develops. They determine whether relevant perspectives are included in decision making, the nature of the government that emerges, the ways in which the public can hold this government

accountable, and the pressures on parties to pursue certain modes of socioeconomic redistribution (or not)."[172]

Each country is different, and the United States is especially different.[173] Moreover, no reform is truly exogenous. The existing political system affects what kinds of reforms are even possible and how they are likely to be implemented. Changing from a majoritarian to a proportional system is a consequential change, and one that should be approached with significant caution.

Implementing a proportional system in the United States would give a center-right party the chance to organize. The essential assumption here is that enough voters on the right would support such a party, were there an opportunity to do so in a way that would lead to getting a proportional share of seats in the legislature. There are reasons to expect this would be the case, given the growing desire that many Americans express for more parties and the frustrations many report having with partisan extremes. However, much would depend on the ability of leaders to step forward and organize new parties with pro-democracy values. The recent elections in Poland show how a diverse pro-democracy coalition can unite under a proportional system while still targeting different voter groups.

On balance, we see evidence that a more proportional multiparty system could have significant benefits. It would offer a framework for realigning partisan politics in ways that could reduce affective polarization (which is driven by the repeated binary zero-sum nature of sorted partisan conflict) and marginalize extremist factions (the extremist faction on the right has a significant advantage in having captured one of the two major parties and not having to face a more center-oriented conservative party). Implementing a PR system in the United States is arguably the best way to counter the extreme Right and empower a pro-democracy center-right party.

The relationship between PR and quality governance is less certain, although countries with medium to medium-high legislative fractionalization score highest on various measures of effective and functioning government. However, to the extent one believes, first, that much of the recent deterioration of US governance flows from hyperpartisan affective polarization and political extremism and, second, that PR can ameliorate these concerns, it may follow that a proportional system could improve governing quality. At the very least, there is no systematic evidence that countries with more legislative fractionalization are performing worse across measures of government quality, functioning, and effectiveness.

Although a more proportional, multiparty system could create opportunities for political actors to realign and moderate US politics, there are no guarantees. There are also lots of institutional design choices to consider, which we do not weigh in on here because we do not agree sufficiently, although we encourage further and more extensive research on the trade-offs of different design choices, such as district magnitude, voting methods, and remainder formulas. The analyses presented in this chapter suggest that a PR system with moderate legislative fractionalization would be effective for promoting healthy governance.

Ultimately, however, we can only go on the evidence we can observe. We can assess the data, but we must also let ourselves think about the behaviors that are possible under different rules. In politics, there are no guarantees. But there are tendencies and probabilities.

Broadly, the group agrees on two main recommendations.

1. *Congress should amend the 1967 Uniform Congressional Districting Act and allow states to choose PR for their congressional delegations if they wish to, prohibiting at-large bloc voting.* Currently, states are prohibited from electing their congressional delegations under multimember districts by a 1967 law that was intended to curb at-large bloc voting, which posed a significant risk to Black voters in the South. We agree this law should be updated to allow states to choose to elect their delegations through proportional multimember districts. Such a reform would enable ballot initiatives on behalf of PR. It would also enable state courts to impose PR as a remedy in gerrymandering cases. The Constitution is silent on district magnitude. Congress has repeatedly passed legislation instructing states on districting, including the 1967 law. None of these laws have been challenged as unconstitutional. Up through the 1840s, states regularly elected congressional delegations through multimember districts.

2. *Individual states should move toward proportional, multimember districts for their legislatures.* PR would be applicable for any state legislature. States could demonstrate how PR could work by electing their legislatures under a proportional voting rule.

We disagree on other options. Some of us agree on the value of a national mandate for PR for Congress, while others would prefer an incremental approach right now. We reached no universal recommendation.

We also acknowledge the limitations of our initial recommendation. Moving toward PR on a state-by-state basis could temporarily disrupt the balance of power, depending on which states implement these changes.

But state experimentation can also facilitate a gradual transition. By putting this option on the table, we encourage a new pathway for reform.

Additionally, to the extent we move toward a system of PR in the United States, our group would encourage different states to make institutional design choices most appropriate for their geographies and political cultures.

We would like to see future research into and exploration of different approaches to PR, including the appropriate district magnitude and whether to use the single-transferable vote, a party-list system, or other variations of proportional representation. We recognize that each of these systems has pros and cons, and there is no perfect system for elections.

We have questions about how different rules could affect party systems and how PR in the House would work with single-winner elections for the Senate. The question of how Congress might function under a multiparty system also demands further study.

We would encourage more research into how governance might change under PR and how a multiparty House might interact with the presidency and a Senate that would still be elected under a single-winner electoral system.

We believe more research should be devoted to all these questions. Given the trajectory of American democracy, an opportunity for significant electoral change may open up. The more research and thought we put into institutional design in advance, the more thoughtful the national debate will be.

Notes

This chapter is the product of deliberations among the Task Force Working Group on Proportional Representation, which was chaired by Lee Drutman and included Larry Diamond, William Galston, Rachel Kleinfeld, Nolan McCarty, Jennifer McCoy, and Hans Noel.

1. The source for the data in all these measures but the last one (disproportionality) is the Quality of Government Institute.

2. Markku Laakso and Rein Taagepera, "'Effective' Number of Parties: A Measure with Application to West Europe," *Comparative Political Studies* 12, no. 1 (April 1, 1979): 3–27. https://doi.org/10.1177/001041407901200101.

3. Douglas Rae, "A Note on the Fractionalization of Some European Party Systems," *Comparative Political Studies* 1, no. 3 (October 1, 1968): 413–418. https://doi.org/10.1177/001041406800100305.

4. Michael Gallagher, "Proportionality, Disproportionality and Electoral Systems," *Electoral Studies* 10, no. 1 (1991): 33–51. This formula uses the standard least squares method for comparing the relationship between two samples. The source for

this index is Christopher Gandrud, "Gallagher Electoral Disproportionality Data, 121 Countries, 1945–2014, Current version: v2, Data Updated: 20 March 2015."

5. See, generally, Jennifer McCoy and Murat Somer, "Toward a Theory of Pernicious Polarization and How It Harms Democracies: Comparative Evidence and Possible Remedies," *ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 681, no. 1 (2019): 234–271. https://doi.org/10.1177/0002716218818782; Murat Somer, Jennifer L. McCoy, and Russell E. Luke, "Pernicious Polarization, Autocratization and Opposition Strategies," *Democratization* 28, no. 1 (2021): 1–20. https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2020.1865316.

6. Delia Baldassarri and Scott E. Page, "The Emergence and Perils of Polarization," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America* 118, no. 50 (December 14, 2021). https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.2116863118.

7. Delia Baldassarri and Scott E. Page, "The Emergence and Perils of Polarization," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America* 118, no. 50 (December 14, 2021).

8. Delia Baldassarri and Scott E. Page, "The Emergence and Perils of Polarization," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America* 118, no. 50 (December 14, 2021).

9. Keith E. Stanovich, Richard F. West, and Maggie E. Toplak, "Myside Bias, Rational Thinking, and Intelligence," *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 22, no. 4 (August 2013): 259–264. https://doi.org/10.1177/0963721413480174.

10. Such is the takeaway from an exhaustive review on "cognitive-motivational mechanisms of political polarization." The review cites 345 articles documenting causal pathways in every direction and a long list of cognitive biases that exacerbate binary partisan polarization once it gets underway. For example, as the authors note, "longitudinal research demonstrated that ideological consistency at time 1 predicted affective polarization at time 2, and affective polarization at time 1 predicted ideological consistency at time 2, all other things being equal." Keith E. Stanovich, Richard F. West, and Maggie E. Toplak, "Myside Bias, Rational Thinking, and Intelligence," *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 22, no. 4 (August 2013): 259–264. https://doi.org/10.1177/0963721413480174.

11. Aida Just, "Partisanship, Electoral Autocracy, and Citizen Perceptions of Party System Polarization," *Political Behavior*, December 2, 2022. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11109-022-09839-6.

12. J. M. Berger, *Extremism* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2018), 43.

13. J. M. Berger, *Extremism* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2018).

14. Eelco Harteveld et al., "The (Alleged) Consequences of Affective Polarization: Individual-Level Evidence and a Survey Experiment in 9 Countries," OSF Preprints, October 1, 2022; Eli J. Finkel et al., "Political Sectarianism in America," *Science* 370, no. 6516 (October 30, 2020): 533–536.

15. Yunus Emre Orhan, "The Relationship Between Affective Polarization and Democratic Backsliding: Comparative Evidence," *Democratization* 29, no. 4 (May 19, 2022).

16. Matthew H. Graham and Milan W. Svolik, "Democracy in America? Partisanship, Polarization, and the Robustness of Support for Democracy in the United States," *American Political Science Review* 114, no. 2 (May 2020): 392–409. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055420000052.

17. Gabor Simonovits, Jennifer McCoy, and Levente Littvay, "Democratic Hypocrisy and Out-Group Threat: Explaining Citizen Support for Democratic Erosion," *Journal of Politics* 84, no. 3 (2022): 1806–1811.

18. John Carey et al., "Who Will Defend Democracy? Evaluating Tradeoffs in Candidate Support among Partisan Donors and Voters," *Journal of Elections, Pub-*

lic Opinion and Parties (July 7, 2020): 1–16. https://doi.org/10.1080/17457289.2020.1790577; Caterina Chiopris, Monika Nalepa, and Georg Vanberg, "A Wolf in Sheep's Clothing: Citizen Uncertainty and Democratic Backsliding," *Journal of Politics* (forthcoming); Matthew H. Graha, and Milan W. Svolik, "Democracy in America? Partisanship, Polarization, and the Robustness of Support for Democracy in the United States," *American Political Science Review* 114, no. 2 (May 2020): 392–409. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055420000052; Zhaotian Luo and Adam Przeworski, "Democracy and Its Vulnerabilities: Dynamics of Democratic Backsliding," SSRN Scholarly Paper, Rochester, NY, December 31, 2021. https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3469373; Jennifer McCoy, Tahmina Rahman, and Murat Somer, "Polarization and the Global Crisis of Democracy: Common Patterns, Dynamics, and Pernicious Consequences for Democratic Polities," *American Behavioral Scientist* 62, no. 1 (January 2018): 16–42. https://doi.org/10.1177/0002764218759576; Michael K. Miller, "A Republic, If You Can Keep It: Breakdown and Erosion in Modern Democracies," *Journal of Politics* 83, no. 1 (January 1, 2021): 198–213. https://doi.org/10.1086/709146; Jon Kingzette et al., "How Affective Polarization Undermines Support for Democratic Norms," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 85, no. 2 (October 1, 2021): 663–77. https://doi.org/10.1093/poq/nfab029; Yunus Emre Orhan, "The Relationship Between Affective Polarization and Democratic Backsliding: Comparative Evidence," *Democratization* 29, no. 4 (May 19, 2022): 714–35. https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2021.2008912; Elisabeth Gidengil, Dietlind Stolle, and Olivier Bergeron-Boutin, "The Partisan Nature of Support for Democratic Backsliding: A Comparative Perspective." *European Journal of Political Research* 61, no. 4 (2022): 901–29. https://doi.org/10.1111/1475-6765.12502.

19. Suthan Krishnarajan, "Rationalizing Democracy: The Perceptual Bias and (Un)Democratic Behavior," *American Political Science Review* 117, no. 2 (2023): 474–496. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055422000806.

20. Alia Braley et al., "The Subversion Dilemma: Why Voters Who Cherish Democracy Participate in Democratic Backsliding" (working paper, OSF Preprints, August 18, 2022), 45.

21. Dalston G. Ward and Margit Tavits, "How Partisan Affect Shapes Citizens' Perception of the Political World," *Electoral Studies* 60 (August 1, 2019).

22. Affective polarization heightens the power of such cues (see James N. Druckman et al., "Affective Polarization, Local Contexts and Public Opinion in America," *Nature Human Behaviour* 5, no. 1 [January 2021]: 28–38. https://doi.org/10.1038/s41562-020-01012-5).

Affectively polarized partisans feel a need to signal their partisan identity, distinguishing themselves from the other party. This leads to directional motivated cognition and more partisan cue taking Lavine, Johnston, and Steenbergen 2012; Lavine, Johnston, and Steenbergen 2012). When a Republican is in the White House, the more affectively polarized Republican voters are, the less they will support democratic norms, particularly those concerning constitutional protections that limit executive power (see Kingzette, Jon, James N Druckman, Samara Klar, Yanna Krupnikov, Matthew Levendusky, and John Barry Ryan. "How Affective Polarization Undermines Support for Democratic Norms." *Public Opinion Quarterly* 85, no. 2 (October 1, 2021): 663–677. https://doi.org/10.1093/poq/nfab029).

Under high affective polarization, "partisans may take cues from the behaviour of party elites" (Elisabeth Gidengil, Dietlind Stolle, and Olivier Bergeron-Boutin, "The Partisan Nature of Support for Democratic Backsliding: A Comparative Perspective," *European Journal of Political Research* 61, no. 4 (2022): 901–929. https://doi.org/10.1111/1475-6765.12502).

23. "It is crucial to recognize that affective polarization is distinct from ideological polarization—the extent to which citizens disagree on matters of ideology and issue positions. This relation is endogenous and not straightforward (Iyengar et al. 2018; Ward and Tavits 2019). While affective polarization has grown according to most accounts, there is less evidence for surging ideological polarization: regarding most topics, Americans' and Europeans' actual views have become less, rather than more, divided (Baldassarri and Gelman 2008; Adams et al., 2012; Nuesser et al., 2014). Indeed, Reiljan (2020) and Gidron et al. (2019a) find a weak or inconsistent relation between ideological polarization on affective polarization. Individual-level evidence is mixed too (Rogowski and Sutherland 2016; Bougher 2017). All in all, it is clear that affective polarization depends partly—perhaps mostly—on other factors than the strength of ideological disagreement between camps. This points the way towards explanations rooted in the relations between political camps as social groups, including their social sorting. Still, ideological polarization functions as a key benchmark to compare any other correlate of affective polarization to." Eelco Harteveld, "Ticking All the Boxes? A Comparative Study of Social Sorting and Affective Polarization," *Electoral Studies* 72 (August 1, 2021): 2.

24. Ideological polarization at the mass level is not exceptionally high in the United States. Anthony Kevins and Stuart N. Soroka, "Growing Apart? Partisan Sorting in Canada, 1992–2015," *Canadian Journal of Political Science/Revue canadienne de science politique* 51, no. 1 (March 2018): 103–133; Andres Reiljan, "'Fear and Loathing Across Party Lines' (Also) in Europe: Affective Polarisation in European Party Systems," *European Journal of Political Research* 59, no. 2 (2020): 376–396.

25. Jon Rogowski and Joseph Sutherland, "How Ideology Fuels Affective Polarization," *Political Behavior* 38, no. 2 (2016): 485–508. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11109-015-9323-7; Paul M. Sniderman and Edward H. Stiglitz, *The Reputational Premium: A Theory of Party Identification and Policy Reasoning* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012).

26. Andres Reiljan, "'Fear and Loathing Across Party Lines' (Also) in Europe: Affective Polarisation in European Party Systems," *European Journal of Political Research* 59, no. 2 (2020): 376–396.

27. PR systems produce "greater ideological dispersion." Jay K. Dow, "Party-System Extremism in Majoritarian and Proportional Electoral Systems," *British Journal of Political Science* 41, no. 2 (April 2011): 341–361. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0007123410000360. "The empirics show that more proportional systems support greater ideological dispersion, while less proportional systems encourage parties to cluster nearer the centre of the electoral space. This finding is maintained in several sub-samples of national elections and does not depend on the inclusion of highly majoritarian systems (such as the United Kingdom)." Konstantinos Matakos, Orestis Troumpounis, and Dimitrios Xefteris, "Electoral Rule Disproportionality and Platform Polarization," *American Journal of Political Science* 60, no. 4 (2016): 1026–1043. https://doi.org/10.1111/ajps.12235.

28. Josephine T. Andrews and Jeannette Money, "The Spatial Structure of Party Competition: Party Dispersion Within a Finite Policy Space," *British Journal of Political Science* 39, no. 4 (October 2009): 805–824. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0007123409990172.

29. Lawrence Ezrow, "The Variance Matters: How Party Systems Represent the Preferences of Voters," *Journal of Politics* 69, no. 1 (2007): 182–192. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2508.2007.00503.x.

Ezrow's Voter Diversity Hypothesis (H1) suggests that changes in the diversity of voters' policy preferences cause corresponding changes in the diversity of policy positions presented by the competing parties. This concept of dynamic distributional representation is significant as it impacts party positioning strategies. The Electoral Laws Result (H2), another key finding, posits that party system dispersion is more responsive to voter dispersion in countries with less proportional electoral systems. However, this does not imply that parties in proportional systems are completely unresponsive to shifts in the diversity of their voters' policy opinions.

30. Jennifer McCoy and Murat Somer, "Toward a Theory of Pernicious Polarization and How It Harms Democracies: Comparative Evidence and Possible Remedies," *ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 681, no. 1 (January 2019): 234–271. https://doi.org/10.1177/0002716218818782.

31. Noam Gidron, James Adams, and Will Horne, *American Affective Polarization in Comparative Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020) (noting, "Partisans residing in countries with majoritarian, single-winner voting systems tend to dislike opposition parties more intensely, and like their own party less, than do partisans in countries with proportional voting systems").

32. Jonathan Rodden, "Keeping Your Enemies Close: Electoral Rules and Partisan Polarization," in *Who Gets What? The New Politics of Insecurity*, ed. Frances Rosenbluth and Margaret Weir. SSRC Anxieties of Democracy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 129–160.

33. Levi Boxell, Matthew Gentzkow, and Jesse M. Shapiro. "Cross-Country Trends in Affective Polarization," *Review of Economics and Statistics* 106, no. 2 (2024); Noam Gidron, James Adams, and Will Horne, *American Affective Polarization in Comparative Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020); Diego Garzia, Frederico Ferreira da Silva, and Simon Maye, "Affective Polarization in Comparative and Longitudinal Perspective," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 87, no. 1 (spring 2023): 219–231. https://doi.org/10.1162/rest_a_01160. Gidron, Adams, and Horne similarly report, "Since the mid 1990s, affective polarization has intensified more sharply in the United States than in most other Western publics. . . . We find that American affective polarization has intensified over time, and moreover, that this rise is driven by Americans' growing dislike of partisan opponents, rather than by warming attachments to their own party. Furthermore, our comparative analyses suggest that America's intensifying affective polarization is not part of a cross-national trend: instead we find that affective polarization in other Western publics has remained steady (on average) across this period." Garzia, da Silva, and Maye also find that the United States is the most affectively polarized, and the trends in the United States are strongest, among similar countries.

34 Diego Garzia and Frederico Ferreira da Silva, "The Electoral Consequences of Affective Polarization? Negative Voting in the 2020 US Presidential Election," *American Politics Research* 50, no. 3 (May 1, 2022): 303–311; Andres Reiljan et al., "Patterns of Affective Polarization Toward Parties and Leaders Across the Democratic World," *American Political Science Review*, June 29, 2023, 1–17. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055423000485.

35. Markus Wagner, "Affective Polarization in Multiparty Systems," *Electoral Studies* 69 (February 1, 2021): 102199. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.electstud.2020.102199.

36. Anthony Kevins and Stuart N. Soroka, "Growing Apart? Partisan Sorting in Canada, 1992–2015," *Canadian Journal of Political Science/Revue canadienne de science politique* 51, no. 1 (March 2018): 103–133. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0008423917000713.

37. Sara B. Hobolt, Thomas J. Leeper, and James Tilley, "Divided by the Vote: Affective Polarization in the Wake of the Brexit Referendum," *British Journal of Political Science* 51, no. 4 (October 2021): 1476–1493. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0007123420000125; Nahema Marchal and David Watson, "The Rise of Partisan Affective Polarization in the British Public," SSRN Scholarly Paper, October 25, 2019. https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3477404.

38. Levi Boxell, Matthew Gentzkow, and Jesse M. Shapiro, "Cross-Country Trends in Affective Polarization," *Review of Economics and Statistics* 106, no. 2 (2024): 557–565.

39. "Justin Trudeau Vows to End 1st-Past-the-Post Voting in Platform Speech," CBC News, October 6, 2015.

40. Hyeonho Hahm, David Hilpert, and Thomas König, "Divided We Unite: The Nature of Partyism and the Role of Coalition Partnership in Europe," *American Political Science Review* 118, no. 1 (February 2024): 69–87. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055423000266.

41. Will Horne, James Adams, and Noam Gidron, "The Way We Were: How Histories of Co-governance Alleviate Partisan Hostility," *Comparative Political Studies* 56, no. 3 (2023). https://doi.org/10.1177/00104140221100197.

42. Noam Gidron, James Adams, and Will Horne, "Who Dislikes Whom? Affective Polarization Between Pairs of Parties in Western Democracies," *British Journal of Political Science* 53, no. 3 (July 2023): 997–1015. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0007123422000394.

43. Hyeonho Hahm, David Hilpert, and Thomas König, "Divided We Unite: The Nature of Partyism and the Role of Coalition Partnership in Europe," *American Political Science Review* 118, no. 1 (February 2024): 69–87. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055423000266.

44. Citizens employ a coalition heuristic to infer that cogoverning parties share more similar ideologies than is implied by their manifestos. David Fortunato and Randolph T. Stevenson, "Perceptions of Partisan Ideologies: The Effect of Coalition Participation," *American Journal of Political Science* 57, no. 2 (2013): 459–477. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-5907.2012.00623.

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