8

Conclusion

Richard H. Pildes, Larry Diamond, and Edward B. Foley

Addressing the toxic tribalism and political extremism that has arisen in recent decades requires action along many fronts. One of these is the institutional framework within which democratic politics and elections take place. This volume has brought together a highly distinguished group of academics from several disciplines who have spent much of their careers studying how the design of democratic processes shapes politics and the political culture more generally. Our task force also includes lawyers and others with substantial experience with the political process.

We do not believe there is a single institutional-design reform, or even a series of reforms, that could magically transform our political culture. But institutional reforms can matter at the margins in combatting political extremism, and those margins can make a significant difference in the kind of politics we experience and the larger political culture we inhabit. The institutional framework within which politics and elections take place creates incentive structures that shape which candidates decide to run, which are likely to win, and the relationship between political parties, candidates, officeholders, interest groups, and the general public. Moreover, because many citizens take political cues from those who hold public office, particularly the most visible public officials, the types of candidates who succeed also shape the larger political culture.

In this book, we have brought to bear the best current empirical knowledge on a variety of institutional reforms that have been offered to combat extremism. We believe it is critical to test reform proposals against the best data available, and, indeed, one aim of this book is to

show which reform proposals are *unlikely* to achieve their goals—or could even make things worse by fueling extremism. There can be a great deal of herding behavior within reform circles, as well as a reluctance to deviate from conventional wisdom. As academics, we have striven to marshal the current state of knowledge about various proposals and to highlight the lines along which future empirical work would be desirable.

We have explored reform proposals addressing the structure of primary elections, the types of voting rules, the potential use of proportional representation for legislative elections, the system of campaign finance, the presidential nomination process, and the presidential primary debate process. On some issues, we achieved substantial consensus regarding directions to take or to avoid. On others, we had significant disagreements, which we discussed. In some areas, we endorsed specific recommendations for reforms. In others, we offered what we characterize as suggestions—that is, proposals on which we hope to begin discussions, with less firm convictions about where those discussions should end up. A common theme across many of the proposals is that our politics has become too captured by factions and that we should aim for reforms that will help make the system more responsive to political majorities.

Most of the reforms we discuss can be undertaken at the state level. Indeed, some are on the ballot in several states in the fall 2024 election, as this volume goes to press. We believe the most significant political reform these days is much more likely to take place at the state level than the national level. The political process at the national level is too polarized over election-related issues to be a likely source of innovation. Even at the state level, prospects for reform on many of these issues are best in states where voters have the power to make changes through direct democratic processes, such as voter initiatives. Incumbent officeholders and political parties are often reluctant to make any changes to the rules under which they have been elected. If some of these changes are implemented and prove popular and successful at the state level, this can build momentum for eventually adopting such changes at the national level. Much of the history of political reform in the United States has followed this path.

There is currently much cynicism and despair about deepening political polarization and extremism in the United States. But such conditions can serve as catalysts for political reform, and, indeed, a great deal of successful reform has taken place in recent years. More states have adopted independent redistricting commissions, often led by citi-

zens' groups that push to get such measures on the ballot. A number of states have adopted automatic voter registration to shift the burden of registration from voters to the government.

In terms of specific reforms discussed in this volume, we believe the Alaska model of a single, all-candidate primary, with the top four or five candidates going on to a general election in which ranked-choice voting (RCV) determines the winner, offers a promising template for the type of reform capable of ensuring that candidates with the broadest support among the general electorate are able to get elected. Voters in other states will soon be deciding whether to adopt this model or variations of it. In 2022, voters in Nevada voted to amend their state constitution to adopt the Alaska model, modified slightly to allow the top five candidates to advance to the general election. The Nevada constitution requires that an amendment be adopted by voters in two consecutive elections, and so the amendment will be voted on a second time in November 2024. In those elections, voters in Idaho will vote on an initiative that would implement the Alaska system of a nonpartisan primary and a "top-four" general election with RCV. A similar measure is headed for the November 2024 ballot in Colorado.

Related reform measures include a proposed initiative in Arizona that would mandate an Alaska-style all-candidate primary while leaving to the legislature the choice of whether the general election should advance only two candidates, as in California, or more than two, in which case ranked-choice ballots will be required. The Arizona proposal is especially innovative insofar as it also leaves to the legislature the choice of which tabulation method to employ if ranked-choice ballots are used. This flexibility could serve the state well, given the findings in Chapter 2 of this volume. Arizona is a highly polarized state, and alternative forms of RCV are most likely to provide extra benefits in counteracting polarization and extremism under such conditions. Montana, too, is pursuing a similar constitutional reform that would give the state great flexibility in tailoring its electoral system to reduce polarization: a requirement that candidates win office with a majority, not just a plurality, of votes. This simple requirement tends to induce the adoption of electoral innovation that is less likely to cause polarized outcomes.

Ranked-choice voting is also being adopted in more jurisdictions. In a ballot measure, Maine became the first state to adopt it statewide; Maine now uses RCV for federal elections and for state primary elections. In 2019, New York City's voters adopted an amendment to the city charter to use RCV in primary elections for the city council and executive offices, including mayor. Since the Democratic primary often

determines the race for mayor of New York City, this was a significant development. A growing number of smaller American cities have also adopted RCV over the past decade. A ballot measure referred by the state legislature in Oregon for voter approval in the fall of 2024 would implement RCV in all state primary and general elections for executive offices at the state and federal levels, as well as for the US House and Senate. But RCV has recently come to be seen as a partisan issue, even though there is no reason it ought to favor one party or the other. As a result, several states have enacted laws prohibiting its use. (As noted in Chapter 2, there are ways to achieve the depolarizing benefits sought from Alaska-style reforms without the use of ranked-choice ballots.)

Many Americans are deeply troubled by our current political culture. But we need not passively accept this state of affairs as our inevitable fate. A variety of institutional reforms to various aspects of our political process and electoral system can help combat the political extremism and toxic tribalism that has arisen in recent years. This volume draws on the best knowledge we currently possess to suggest the most promising directions for institutional changes that would push back against political extremism.

Acronyms

AfD	Alternative for Germany
AI	artificial intelligence
BCRA	Bipartisan Campaign Reform Act
BTR	bottom-two runoff
CES	Cooperative Election Study
FEC	Federal Election Commission
FECA	Federal Election Campaign Act
FPTP	first-past-the-post
GDP	gross domestic product
IRV	instant-runoff voting
LPR	lowest-plurality runoff
MMD	multimember district
MPV	most-preferred voting
OECD	Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development
PAC	political action committee
PR	proportional representation
RCV	ranked-choice voting
RNC	Republican National Committee
SMD	single member district
SMDP	single-member-district, plurality
STV	single-transferable vote
V-Dem	V-Dem Institute

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About the Book

In the midst of the political ugliness that has become part of our everyday reality, are there steps that can be taken to counter polarization and extremism—practical steps that are acceptable across the political spectrum? To answer that question, starting from the premise that the way our political processes are designed inevitably creates incentives for certain styles of politics and candidates, the Task Force on American Electoral Reform spent two years exploring alternative ideas for reforming key aspects of the US electoral process. The results of their work are presented in this essential book.

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