

Multimember Districts? Ranked Choice? This Is How to Fix Our Elections

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This year's gerrymandering wars are the most vicious in recent memory. The sudden scramble to redraw electoral maps is all the more striking because it comes after a decade of concerted efforts — such as the creation of independent redistricting commissions — to curb partisan redistricting.

Some reformers are thinking bigger, and they should. Even in less partisan times, the country's traditional voting system distorts how citizens are represented. Gerrymandering exploits and worsens these distortions. Changing how Americans vote could make election results fairer — whether or not partisan redistricting is banned.

Unconventional ideas, such as shifting to a European-style proportional representation system, have gained adherents. Another option should top the list: a “majority rule” system that would preserve elements of elections that Americans are used to but make election results more representative of public opinion.

Proportional representation would fix many problems with the country's voting system. Some congressional districts would be merged, and each of these new, larger districts would elect multiple candidates. Americans would then vote for parties rather than individual candidates, and those parties would win seats in rough proportion to their vote totals.

In Nebraska, which is represented in the House by three members of Congress, all three of its existing districts might be combined into one. In its 2024 U.S. House elections, the state's 64-percent-to-36-percent vote split favoring the G.O.P. would

have yielded two Republican seats and one for the Democrats — a fairer outcome than sending three Republicans to Washington, which is what actually happened.

Many Americans would probably reject the idea of voting for parties, though, given that more than 40 percent of voters identify as neither Democrats nor Republicans. There are complicated ways to get around this problem. But they wouldn't fix another issue: Creating multimember districts would be a radical departure from our centuries-old system of electing single representatives accountable to the people in specific localities. This change, too, would be a hard sell to most Americans. And federal law has banned multimember districting since 1967.

Another option is the majority-rule voting method (also called Condorcet voting). This system is much like ranked-choice voting, which many American cities and two states, Alaska and Maine, have used successfully. As in those places, voters would rank candidates in order of their preference. But, unlike in ranked-choice voting, every candidate would be compared with every other. The winner would be the one who, according to the rankings, would defeat each opponent in a head-to-head matchup. (In the highly improbable event that no candidate beats all the others, a tiebreaking rule can determine the winner.)

The system is more complicated than the one Americans use now, and it would have to be introduced state by state or imposed by Congress nationally. But it takes just a few minutes of thinking to see why it would be better. Consider the case of nine friends who want to see a movie together. Four of them prefer superhero movies to mysteries and mysteries to rom-coms. Two of the friends like mysteries more than rom-coms, ranking superhero movies last. The remaining three prefer rom-coms to mysteries but also rank superhero movies last. If these friends voted on what to see, they would pick a superhero movie under the voting system Americans are used to, since superhero movies would have a plurality of four votes. But choosing a mystery would better reflect the group's preferences; five of nine would prefer a mystery to a superhero movie, and six out of nine would like to see a mystery rather than a rom-com.

In a House election, this system would empower the voter in the middle of a district's political spectrum, whose preference would determine which candidate wins. This doesn't mean that a majority-rule system would elect only centrists. The smack-in-the-middle voter is liberal in San Francisco and conservative in Lubbock, Texas.

But, in general, less extreme candidates would prevail. Imagine what would happen in Kentucky under a majority-rule system. Ed Gallrein, a Trump supporter, just won the G.O.P. primary over the independent-minded incumbent, Thomas Massie, in a district that is split with roughly seven Republicans for every three Democrats. If Mr. Massie were to run in the general election as an independent, he would probably finish a distant third under current rules: Most Republicans would vote for Mr. Gallrein, and all but a few Democrats would vote for the Democratic nominee, Melissa Strange. Mr. Massie would probably lose under ranked-choice voting, too.

Mr. Massie could well win under majority rule. He won 45 percent of the Republican vote in the primary. These voters would probably rank him first in the general election. If Mr. Massie attracted second-place support from the Democratic voters in the district, he could well defeat Mr. Gallrein by as much as 64 percent to 36 percent. Mr. Massie's politics are not centrist on a national level. But he better represents his district than the other candidates would.

Here's another example. The Ninth Congressional District in Tennessee has historically been strongly Democratic; in 2024, the Democratic-Republican split was 71.3 percent to 25.7 percent there. The Fifth and Eighth Districts heavily favored Republicans. Under majority rule, the results could look more like what occurred in real life: The state sent two conservative Republicans and one liberal Democrat to Washington.

Recent gerrymandering, however, has reconfigured Tennessee's districts, giving Republicans a 60-percent-to-40-percent edge in all three. Under majority rule, elections in the reconfigured districts would look much like the Massie hypothetical above. The margins between the candidates would be narrower. Candidates would have to worry about how voters of the other party would fill out their ballots. The state's representatives would be closer to the middle of Tennessee politics.

When partisan map drawers gerrymander, they often trade margin for seats. By spreading their supporters across the map, they cause their party's candidates to win by fewer points — but more of those candidates win. The current system enables them to make this trade without worrying that their candidates would have to be significantly more moderate to prevail.

Not so under majority rule. Only candidates in the most lopsided districts could afford to be ideologically extreme. Parties would face less incentive to manipulate maps to trade margin for seats. And the House would become a less polarized place, more reflective of the broad middle of the electorate that is too often voiceless in Washington.