

THE NEW YORK TIMES – 19 MAGGIO 2026

How to End the Gerrymandering Doom Loop Forever

Conversazione tra Ezra Klein e Lee Drutman

This is an edited transcript of “The Ezra Klein Show.” You can listen to the episode [wherever you get your podcasts](#).

Until the last couple of weeks, Democrats thought they were drawing nearly even with Republicans in the gerrymandering wars. Yes, Texas had tried this aggressive midcycle redistricting, but California had countered it. That was the pattern we were seeing: For every red state that was doing a big redistricting, there was a blue state trying to match it.

But then, over the past couple of weeks, Democrats caught a series of very bad breaks. One was the Supreme Court decision in *Louisiana v. Callais*, which gutted the Voting Rights Act, one of the last boundaries on what you could do in terms of partisan and racial redistricting.

The second was that Virginia, which had paused its commission and drawn new maps, had its new maps thrown out by its courts.

Now Democrats are going to be down something like seven to 10 seats from these redistricting fights.

So I think there are two questions here: One is what this means for the midterm elections and the fights over gerrymandering that will come after them. And the second is: How can we actually put an end to this?

Because this is a disaster for our democracy. This is exactly how our system is not supposed to work.

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Doom Loop: The Case for Multiparty Democracy in America” and writes the newsletter Undercurrent Events.

Drutman is one of the most persistent and thoughtful advocates for proportional representation — something you see in a lot of other countries and that might be the answer we need to turn to here.

Ezra Klein: Lee Drutman, welcome to the show.

Lee Drutman: Hey, it’s a real treat to be having this conversation, Ezra.

Before we get into everything that has happened with gerrymandering over the past couple of weeks, months, years — what is gerrymandering?

What is gerrymandering? That is a great question that nobody has the perfect answer to.

“Gerrymandering” is an old word. It goes back to 1812, when The Boston Gazette popularized the phrase for Elbridge Gerry, who was actually one of the signers of the Declaration of Independence. He was a big pooh-bah in Massachusetts politics, and as governor he approved these maps that looked like crazy shapes. One of them looked like a salamander, so The Boston Gazette called it a gerrymander.

We’ve used that term for more than 200 years to describe messing with district lines for partisan or incumbent advantage. But it’s a good question because nobody has a clear definition of what counts as a gerrymander.

But I think we know what is being attempted with gerrymandering, and I think it’s worth walking through that.

Imagine a state where you have a 60-40 Democrat-Republican split in the electorate. If you have 10 House districts in that state, you might think: Well, that should give you a distribution where you get some Republican ones, a little bit more Democratic ones.

But it turns out, if you’re smart and you’ve got computers and you’ve got algorithms, you can cut that up so functionally there are no Republicans, or very few, who get elected in that state.

Right. And you can be an even bigger state like California and be a roughly 65-35 Democratic state and cut up 52 districts in a way that potentially gives you 52 Democrats.

This is what is a problem and somewhat offensive about gerrymandering to me: It is an act of effective disenfranchisement, at least in House elections. The people in power are choosing their voters — rather than the voters choosing the people in power.

There have been efforts to ask: Isn't this illegal or unconstitutional in some ways? A couple of years ago, there was a series of cases brought to the Supreme Court that basically wanted the court to hold that there were levels of partisan gerrymandering that were unconstitutional. What happened in those cases?

That series of cases culminated in the Rucho decision of 2019, in which the conservative majority said: We can't find a standard that would be justiciable to declare what is partisan gerrymandering. And anyway, it's not our role. It's up to the states, and it's not something that we should be ruling on.

That cleared the way for more aggressive partisan gerrymandering, I think.

States also have their own constitutions, and some challenges are brought under state constitutions. But broadly, in the 2019 decision, the Supreme Court gave a green light to partisan gerrymandering.

It's worth noting that there were a bunch of states where this was unpopular. People do not like gerrymandering. So places like California and Virginia had created independent commissions to make the maps nonpartisan.

And then there is this other thing happening in the political system, which is that Trump and Texas kick off what's called a midcycle redistricting effort that then begins to ping-pong back and forth between red and blue states.

Explain to me what has been happening just in the past year and how it's different from what we normally see.

Usually, districts are drawn after a census, every 10 years. So if a state grows and another state shrinks, maybe some congressional districts shift between states, and that means that the states get to redraw the maps.

There are various approaches to how states have done that over the years, none of which are great. But the standard was you do it once, those maps last for the decade, and then, after the next census, you get another turn to draw those maps.

But what President Donald Trump did last summer was say: Hey, I'm looking at Texas, and I think if they were a little more aggressive in their maps, Republicans would win even more seats. So, hey, Texas, why don't you do this thing that is pretty outside of what we normally do?

Not illegal, but outside the norms.

Not illegal, but outside the norms. This is an important distinction. There's a certain amount of restraint.

And he says: Why don't you get a little bit more aggressive and redraw the map?

This is a big fight. Eventually, Texas does this. They get up to five more Republican seats.

So in California, Gavin Newsom says: Hell, no. We're going to run a ballot initiative, and we're going to get rid of our redistricting commission, at least for the time being, and we're going to redraw maps that give Democrats more seats. That passes.

There's also a challenge in Indiana, where some Republicans in the state legislature say: Actually, we're not going to do what Trump wants us to do. We're not going to redraw the maps to give us two extra Republican seats.

Then Virginia passes this ballot measure where it narrowly approves also overriding their independent redistricting maps that were fair to give Democrats 10 out of 11 seats. Although then the state court says: Actually, you violated some obscure procedure about what counts as an election, so we're invalidating that.

Now, as we speak, the Supreme Court will rule on who's right there.

The Virginia Supreme Court?

No, the U.S. Supreme Court. They've brought a challenge to the U.S. Supreme Court.

OK. So the Texas move and the fight for House control lead to a situation where blue states are one after the other now destroying their independent redistricting commissions — whether or not those are holding. Like, in Virginia, we'll see.

But it's an all-out redistricting war, which means if you are a voter in the minority — and here I mean the minority party in a state — you are becoming more likely to be functionally disenfranchised. It is becoming more likely that you will just not have a voice in House elections because they will have drawn your district in a way where you don't matter.

This is true for Democrats in red states, true for Republicans in blue states.

Then there is a series of fights around the Voting Rights Act, culminating in this Louisiana v. Callais case that just came before the court.

Right.

What is that set of previous restrictions on gerrymandering that are now gone?

Section 2 of the Voting Rights Act basically said that there are prohibitions against racial gerrymandering. So partisan gerrymandering is OK as of 2019, but racial gerrymandering — which is basically depriving minority voters of a chance to elect their candidate of choice — is still illegal.

A state like Louisiana couldn't draw districts that prevented Black voters in Louisiana from being able to elect their candidate of choice. So there's no one standard. It's been litigated on and off over the years.

But basically, what the Supreme Court said in the Callais decision is that unless you are wearing a K.K.K. mask and saying: I don't want Black people to be allowed to vote — like, a high standard of intentionality — racial gerrymandering is not something that's able to be proved. You can just draw maps however you want.

It's worth noting that part of the case here was an argument that this was illegally disenfranchising white voters — who would be straightforwardly more powerful if they could gerrymander out these minority districts.

Yes, and also that racism was no longer a problem in America, and therefore, the Voting Rights Act had outlived its usefulness. [*Laughs.*]

I mean, you can argue with the logic of this case from any number of directions.

But the Supreme Court gets to decide because they're the Supreme Court, and we are left with a landscape in which there are no prohibitions on partisan gerrymandering, no prohibitions on racial gerrymandering, and it's just a free-for-all.

So any guardrails that might have come from the Constitution or the courts have been bulldozed over the past decade.

Gone. Gone. Gone.

Walk me through what's likely to happen, particularly in the Southern states, in this post-Callais era.

OK. We've got Louisiana, where the governor had immediately said: We're going to redraw the districts. Forget about the primaries — postpone them.

It looks like they've settled on a map that's 5-1 Republican, so they didn't go for the most aggressive gerrymander.

Mississippi is currently 3-1 Republican. They will probably wind up eliminating that one Democratic district and go 4-0.

East Alabama is currently 5-2 Republican. They're going to redraw their maps — whether it's 6-1 or 7-0, we'll see how aggressive they get.

In Florida, DeSantis already had it ready to go, and they have redrawn their maps to go from an expected 20-8 Republican to 24-4 Republican. Pretty aggressive.

South Carolina just announced they're going to 7-0 Republican.

Tennessee is going all Republican. They're eliminating the one Democratic district that was Memphis.

Georgia could go more aggressive. That's uncertain.

There are some estimates that Republican-controlled legislatures across the South could target as many as 19 majority-minority districts, all held by Democrats.

I don't know. They may be a little cautious in some places, given that it's not a great year for Republicans. But it's basically eliminating a lot of majority-minority districts.

They're going fast.

Which is eliminating a huge amount of Black representation in Congress.

Yes.

The term that Hakeem Jeffries has been using is “maximum warfare, everywhere, all the time.” What does that mean to have maximum gerrymandering warfare everywhere, all the time?

It basically means we're turning the House into the Electoral College, in that whichever party controls the state legislature and is the majority party in the state, no matter how narrow, they're going to maximize the seats that they can get.

That basically means we'll have no competitive elections. I think the latest analysis suggests we'll only have 15 meaningful toss-ups in this November election, out of 435.

What was that 20 years ago?

Twenty years ago, it was closer to 50.

That's amazing. We've gone from House elections where routinely you'd have 50 House elections in a cycle to, you said, 15?

Fifteen. Some of that is gerrymandering. A lot of it is partisan sorting. You think of 20 years ago, 2006. You had Blue Dog Democrats who were winning in a lot of districts that are now completely safe Republican districts.

There's been this increasing nationalization of partisanship. I think I remember a book by a guy named Ezra Klein. He wrote a book about this polarization thing that has been happening to America.

Great book. [Laughs.] Great book. Gets more relevant every day, unfortunately.

Yes. It's just the geography that Democratic places have become more Democratic. Republican places have become more Republican. And because we have these place-based districts, that means just a lot of them are safe naturally, and then gerrymandering is another level on top of that.

In your best guess, given where things would have been if nothing had changed, what does this mean this year for the midterms?

If nothing had changed, I would say Democrats easily take the House. Donald Trump is unpopular. Enthusiasm among Republican voters is down. Enthusiasm among Democratic voters is up.

And every incumbent president loses, his party loses, seats during a midterm unless there's a war or some extraordinary circumstance. That is just how the electorate moves. With the latest shifts in the maps ———

How many seats do you think this has taken away from Democrats?

Probably 10 or so.

Yes, it's interesting. I've seen estimates around nine, and then I've talked to Democrats who run me through the way they think about it, and they've pegged it closer to seven.

But it's a significant number, whichever of those you're looking at. Maybe not enough to keep them from taking the House, but it shifts the math of the competition significantly.

It does. Now the one thing about spreading out your advantage, as Republicans are trying to do in states like Florida, is that it could backfire.

I know Democrats who think they were way too aggressive in the Florida gerrymander, specifically. And these maps that they're putting out now, that it's going to be all red, they're going to break that map.

Right. So if you think: I want to have a bunch of 55-45 Republican seats — if it's a really bad year for Republicans, those could all go Democratic.

I want to draw out something you're saying here. When you're gerrymandering, there is a choice you have to make as the gerrymandering party, which is that you can draw extremely safe districts — a 60-40 Republican-Democratic district — or you can try to draw more districts where you have an advantage. But maybe that means you're drawing 45-55 districts or 53-47 districts.

So the more you spread your voters to make sure you have the maximum number of districts, the less safe you are making every individual district.

If you're in an incredibly lopsided state, that may not matter. But if you're in a state that is in any way competitive in a bad year, you might lose a bunch of those elections.

This is what's sometimes known as a dummymander, where in trying to maximize your gerrymandering advantage, you do a thing that dummies do, which is you overreach and then that backfires.

OK. So there is then a question of what happens after this election. There's only so much that the Democrats and Republicans can do before 2026. You can tell me if you think this is wrong, but the forecast from people I talk to is that this doesn't end in 2026, absent changes.

If nothing changes, this goes on into 2028. This goes on into 2030 as people keep torquing the maps for more and more advantage — because if the other side is doing it, aren't you an idiot to not do it, as well?

Yes, you would be an idiot. [*Laughs.*] That's the logic of our trench warfare politics. Absolutely, unless Congress outlaws mid-decade gerrymandering, which I doubt they will do, there will be a whole bunch of other attempts after the 2026 midterms to redraw the maps and get rid of the independent commissions.

Colorado has an independent commission.

There's also a reality that after the Voting Rights Act, there are blue states that were maintaining minority districts.

And I think this is an under-noticed way this might play out, but Hakeem Jeffries and others have been talking about needing to maximize partisan advantage here. The end result of this might be much more partisan maps and less minority representation in Congress.

Right, because one way to get more Democratic maps is to split up majority-minority districts.

In blue states.

In blue states, yes. And that's a real tension within the Democratic coalition.

I'm just going to say it: This system is a disaster and broken.

I know people who are deeply involved in the effort right now to do counter-gerrymandering, to gerrymander the blue states, and they will tell you that this is bad for everyone.

They have to do it, but they think this is bad. They think it is bad for America's politics. They think it is bad to disenfranchise these voters. Being locked into the system where they don't see a choice is not what they want.

I don't see a way to repair the system. It is fundamentally broken.

So the question is: What could be built to replace it?

You are an advocate for something called proportional representation. What is that?

Proportional representation describes a family of voting systems widely used throughout the world in which the party gets seats in the legislature in direct proportion to the vote share.

This is your intuitive sense of proportionality, which is that a party that gets 40 percent of the votes in a state should get 40 percent of the seats.

Now, in a proportional representation system, proportionality is generally achieved by having larger districts that elect multiple members, typically through party lists.

So you could imagine New York State, instead of being 26 districts, maybe being three districts, split between the north, the mid and the New York City area. You might have an eight-member district, a nine-member district and a nine-member district. And then parties would put forward lists of candidates.

Say, in a midstate eight-member district, if Republicans get 50 percent of the vote, their top four candidates on their party list go to Congress. And if Democrats get 50 percent of the vote, their top four candidates go to Congress.

Now, under the current system, if you get 51 percent, you get 100 percent of the representation. Under a proportional system, if you get 51 percent of the vote, you get 50 percent of the representation, which seems intuitively fair.

There are a bunch of different ways to do proportional representation, and there are better ways to do it and worse ways to do it.

But the big thing that people should know is that this is a system in which we are mechanically doing what we think is fair, which is that parties should get seats in the legislature in direct proportion to the share of votes that they get in the election.

OK, but walk me through this at a more granular level. Let's say that we do the Drutman proportional representation plan, and I'm here in New York City. I'm in an eight-member district.

Right now, when I walk into the voting booth for a general election, I have a choice between a single Democratic representative, a single Republican and then sometimes some other parties and so on.

But really, there are two candidates whom I'm deciding between.

And really, there's only one candidate you're deciding between.

Well, I could vote for the Republican, but they're just not going to win here in New York City.

Yes.

What am I looking at? And am I just marking Democrat or Republican or Working Families or whatever it might be? Or am I voting for individual candidates on these lists? How does it work?

The most commonly used form of proportional representation is an open list party system, and I think that's probably the best system. That would be the one that I would choose.

What that means practically is that you go into the voting booth, and the Democratic Party has a list of candidates and the Republican Party has a list of candidates. And you can choose the candidate from the party that you like.

All of the candidates are essentially running together. Their votes get added together, and that's the party's vote share, and then the party gets seats in the legislature in proportion to its vote share.

But am I marking a box for the Democratic versus the Republican Party, or am I individually voting for candidates?

Under an open list system, you're voting for a candidate on a party list. You're getting to choose the party and the candidate.

But I still only have one vote.

But you still only have one vote.

OK. I have a couple of questions about this.

First, who is choosing this list of party candidates? If Democrats are now running in this eight-seat district, I assume they're running eight candidates — something like that?

Yes, they probably run eight candidates. Maybe fewer, depending.

Is there a primary where those candidates get decided? Is it just up to party bosses now? Who is choosing?

There are a few ways that parties under this system choose their candidates. One is to have some sort of convention. Two is if you're a party member, you get to vote.

You could have a primary in which the top seven or eight finishers go on to the general election. But this sort of obviates the need for a primary.

I don't understand at all why this would obviate the need for a primary. In the situation you're talking about, it seems incredibly important who ends up on the party list and who is choosing.

If there's no primary and I'm just expecting the local Democratic Party convention to do it, or the local Democratic Party bosses, that's a lot of power moving to the party structure.

It is.

Which maybe you think is a good idea.

It really matters who we're voting for. Right now, I'm in a district where Dan Goldman and Brad Lander are running against each other to be the Democratic Party's nominee for the House, and they are different candidates who have different views on things. It is meaningful which one of them advances in the primary.

So how, under these systems, do you become the nominee or get on the list?

You would participate in your local Democratic Party, and there would be a convention, for example. Candidates would put themselves forward, and then whoever is part of that convention would say: These are the candidates we want.

If we're sticking within the two-party framework for now, and I'm the local Democratic Party, I want to appeal to a lot of different people. I want somebody who's going to appeal to progressives and somebody who's going to appeal to moderates.

So I don't want to load it with just moderates or just progressives. I want to run candidates who are going to appeal to different groups within the electorate because I want to maximize the total vote for the party.

OK, I want to go through some of the arguments for this, and then I want to go through some of the arguments against it.

Let's just start with where we began this conversation: What does this do about gerrymandering? If the thing we're trying to fix here is the maximum warfare

gerrymandering world we have entered, what is the proportional representation answer to that?

Well, the thing that we don't like about gerrymandering is that it's highly disproportional. Take Louisiana: You have six districts, and you can draw them in a whole lot of different ways to maximize your advantage if you're the Republican State Legislature.

If you make Louisiana one six-member proportional district, there are no lines to draw. There's no possibility for gerrymandering.

OK. What happens in a state like California, where you currently have more than 50 districts? Let's say you're doing five-member districts. You now have 10-ish districts. You have to draw those somehow. Can you just gerrymander that?

I mean, you can. But if you're drawing a five-member district where Republicans have 40 percent, well, they still have two seats.

The whole idea that anything over 50 percent gives you 100 percent and everything under 50 percent gives you zero goes away. The results are going to be proportional within those districts, so you can't marginalize the opposition party.

So even though there are lines to draw and somebody has to draw those lines, and probably they should be drawn by an independent redistricting commission, the consequences of drawing those lines become less predictable and less clearly partisan.

All right, then I want to get to the second major implication here. If I'm just being blunt about my own views, this is why I support proportional representation.

In this world, let's say you're the Democrats in California. Right now, you have to worry in every single district about getting to 51 percent. But it doesn't actually benefit you at all to get to 60 versus 51, to get to 70 versus 60, etc. And same thing for, say, Republicans in Louisiana.

But all of a sudden, it does begin to matter whether or not you appeal to people who are skeptical of you, who are not totally sold. And conversely, the minority party is not competing ineffectually.

It actually matters for them if they get 30 percent of the vote, 40 percent of the vote, 45 percent of the vote. It creates competition for voters who are currently disenfranchised.

We do have proportional representation all over the world in other countries. How do we see political parties acting, competing, differently in places where they have to compete for these votes — versus in the United States? Like, Texas Republicans don't really have to worry about doing anything to moderate or to win over Texas Democrats.

Right. One thing we know comparatively is that systems of proportional representation have much higher voter turnout, and that is for a couple of reasons. Perhaps the most important reason is that parties are actively seeking out different parts of the electorate, because every vote matters equally.

Right now, in our current system, votes only matter in swing districts, essentially, or a handful of states.

The 15 districts you mentioned earlier.

If I'm the majority party — say, the Republicans in Louisiana — why do I need to expand my electorate? I already have the majority, and people are just voting for partisanship.

Voters are not stupid. They know that in these lopsided districts their vote doesn't matter. The idea that we're just going to tell people: Vote harder — when there are all these districts where it doesn't matter how hard you vote, you're still the minority party — that is just insulting to voters.

When elections are competitive, voters are more engaged and parties are more engaged, and that brings a larger share of the electorate in, it brings more underrepresented groups into the electorate. Because parties are going to look and say: Where are the underserved groups?

When you look comparatively, actually, parties that control their nominations do a much better job of elevating diverse candidates, because they have a strong incentive to try to appeal to different groups in the electorate.

Whereas in our current system of primary elections, which are very candidate-centric, it's often the loudest and brashiest and most overconfident folks who advance, as opposed to folks who are just maybe good team players.

Do you think it would be better if people who are just good team players advanced?

Yes.

What do you say to somebody who says: No, no, no, I prefer a Zohran Mamdani to a Brad Lander. I prefer a Graham Platner to a Janet Mills. Or that what you're describing here is going to charge up the power of party establishments I already don't trust?

Well, that's because there's only one party on the left and only one party on the right. There's no competition.

I think the point that you're getting at here is Graham Platner and Janet Mills are not really in the same party. Brad Lander and Dan Goldman are not really in the same party.

Maybe Brad Lander and Zohran Mamdani are in the same party. But politics is a team sport, ultimately, and if you want to get anything done, you need to be part of a team. Parties are really the essential institutions of modern democratic governance, and they are absolutely broken in the United States right now.

But the idea that we're going to give up on party democracy is like saying: We're going to give up on Congress.

This gets into another big point about proportional representation, which is: We are not a two-party system in America by accident. We are a two-party system in America by structure.

And proportional representation, at least at the House level, might break that structure.

So why is proportional representation friendlier to a multiparty system? Why would it break the two-party system compared to what we have now?

The reason we have the two-party system is not because Americans want just two parties. You see in poll after poll Americans say: I'd like to have more choices.

But the structure of single-winner elections is such that third parties become spoilers and wasted votes. So all of the energy concentrates in both of the major parties because they essentially have a monopoly on opposition to each other, and there's a lot of pressure to join one of the two teams.

We also have a primary system where, if you're a dissenter, it's better to run as a Democrat or a Republican.

Bernie Sanders could have run as a third-party candidate. He's not even a Democrat, but he's going to run in the Democratic primary.

Donald Trump ran as a Reform Party candidate the first time he ran for president. Then he realized: I can run as a Republican, and I can control the Republican Party if I win.

So under a proportional system, you don't need to get 51 percent of the vote to represent a district. If it's a five-member district, 20 percent would give you a seat.

So you could have a situation where you have the Republicans winning most votes, Democrats coming in second and a third party coming in third — and the third party has a seat in Congress, as opposed to just making the Democrats lose.

Right, exactly. You could, in theory, have five different parties winning a seat in a five-member district.

So Donald Trump wins the Republican nomination in 2016. There is, at that time, a fairly large faction of Republican voters who are dissatisfied with that choice. But really, they are then offered a choice between, particularly at the House level, voting for Republicans, which is their party, or voting for the Democrats, with whom they disagree on everything.

Now you could have imagined a conservative party emerging, saying: We're the real conservatives. We hold traditional Republican Party views on a bunch of different issues. Vote for us at the House level, and we'll represent you in Congress and work with Republicans and Democrats as needed.

The issue right now is that to vote for that party would be to throw your vote away. Because even if it did really well, if it got 10 percent or 15 percent in, say, Utah, it wouldn't get any representation, and it might have just made Democrats, whom you really disagree with, win the election.

But the theory now is that new parties could emerge, because getting 20 percent of the vote somewhere is actually enough to begin building a party and have power and maybe get 30 percent next time. It creates a different dimension of possibility.

Yes. That's exactly right. But it's even worse than that. It's not that you're throwing away your vote. You don't even have the choice of voting for that party, because that party doesn't exist, because nobody is organizing that party, because they know that it is a fool's errand under our current system.

There is a dimension of this that is interesting for the major parties, too.

Something I've covered on the show before is the degree to which Democrats have been annihilated in rural areas of the country. Now, if you imagine a proportional representation system, they would be getting at least some rural seats, which would mean there would be rural representation inside the Democratic Party, which would — at least in theory — make the Democratic Party more able to continue thinking about what it needs to do to appeal to rural voters.

There is a way in which it makes sure you have members from the kinds of places where you are losing overall. And it means you don't get quite as out of touch with what it means to compete in those places.

I think that's actually important. I think that it is a bad thing that Republicans are so bad at competing in urban areas right now. I think it's bad that Democrats are so bad at competing in rural areas.

You can name this down for a lot of different forms of American division and difference. Whereas if you're able to do this system where you get something for getting 35 percent of the vote, then you still have representation inside your party from those kinds of places.

Yes. That is a tremendous benefit and something that you see in multiparty democracies throughout the world: There is a party of the right that competes in urban areas in most multiparty countries and a party of the left that competes in rural areas, and that makes the coalition broader. It makes the government also seem more legitimate to folks in these places.

That is part of this animosity and this sense that Americans view each other as immoral. It's not just that Democrats are the party that Republicans disagree with — it's that

Democrats are dangerous Communist Marxists who want to turn everybody transgender and let immigrants get all the social benefits.

Yes, but that bill hasn't passed yet.

Well, not yet — but we're working on it. [*Laughs.*]

We've been making what I would call the minimalist case for proportional representation, which is to say that it re-enfranchises people who are being disenfranchised by gerrymandering on the one hand, and by winner-take-all districts on the other.

Yes.

You make what I would call the maximalist case for proportional representation, which is that we are in a two-party doom loop in which the form of competition between the parties has become toxic. And it has collapsed what you call dimensionality in the electorate in a dangerous way.

Walk me through that argument.

OK. So if you went back to, say, 1965, when the Voting Rights Act passed, you had a coalition of Democrats and Republicans supporting this, and you had liberals in both parties. You had liberal Republicans who were supporting the Voting Rights Act. You had liberal Democrats who were supporting the Voting Rights Act. You also had a lot of conservative Democrats who were opposed, and some conservative Republicans who were opposed.

What you see in that is that there is a way that people thought about social issues, a way that people thought about states' rights issues, that was different from the way that the parties were structured.

It was a contentious time in U.S. politics, but we had a party system in which both parties contained multitudes, and both parties contained broad geographies. So you could fight out some of these issues both within the parties and between the parties in a way that did not collapse everything into Democrats versus Republicans.

Really, over the last three decades, we have lost that. You used to have conservative Democrats, you used to have liberal Republicans, you had Republicans from New England, you had Democrats from the West and some of the Plains states.

And they were really different, right?

They were really different.

What Barry Goldwater was in American politics was really different than George Romney, was different than John Lindsay, the liberal Republican mayor of New York.

Or Jacob Javits.

Or Jacob Javits. In the Democratic Party, Lyndon Johnson and Hubert Humphrey were just extremely different politicians before they served on a ticket together.

Kennedy and Johnson were very different politicians. This is the whole story I tell in my book “Why We’re Polarized.” But I don’t think today we have any intuition for how wide the parties were.

Yes. It was just a completely different party system, and you see that in the way that a lot of bills pass with these broad Republican-Democratic coalitions.

Now, the only legislation you see that looks like that is the stuff that nobody cares about.

When you talk about the way in which these differences in the parties collapse down, one place you really see it is in how closely the way people vote for House and Senate candidates now tracks the way they vote for president.

You put up a [series of charts](#) on the way people voted for the Senate candidate and the president in 2000 — which is a while ago now but not that long ago — and the way they did in 2024. Can you just walk me through what has happened in that voting, and what it means for the system?

Yes, I would love to. One way to think about it is to think of a data point, which is Jim Jeffords running in 2000 as a Republican in Vermont and winning overwhelmingly. He gets, like, 70 percent of the vote. Or Lincoln Chafee as a Republican in Rhode Island. But those states go very heavily to Gore.

You cannot imagine a Republican winning statewide in Rhode Island or Vermont for the Senate now. What you see between 2000 and 2024 is the disappearance of the Jim Jeffordses and the Lincoln Chafees.

They both switched parties.

And they both switched parties, as a good example. The last dot that is off is Joe Manchin, and he's a Democrat who wins in a very Republican state. Although not that long ago, West Virginia had been a pretty Democratic state.

So even a candidate with the generational talent of Jon Tester in Montana cannot outperform the Democratic Party. And that is just a tremendous collapse in the effect of individual candidates.

You have this chart, and I just want to describe it. You see all the bubbles of the different Senate elections, and then the line that is showing the correlation between how people are voting for a Senate candidate and how they're voting for the president.

In 2000, according to your data, the correlation is 0.2. It's 20 percent.

It's a pretty weak correlation.

So knowing how a state is voting for president does not really tell you how they're going to vote for the Senate.

Yes.

And by 2024, it's over 90 percent. In politics right now, and particularly among Democrats, we're having this debate about how much moderation is worth.

And a point you make, which I find compelling, is that moderation might be worth a couple of points, but what has really happened is that the whole ability to diverge from your party has weakened tremendously.

How much a Sherrod Brown, a Jon Tester, a liberal Republican can diverge — in high cases, a 6-8-point overperformance against the party. But compared to what you could do in 2000 or 2004 or 2006, which is fairly late into polarized American politics, we just vote with the presidential level.

And it's even more extreme at the House level.

The correlation there is now 0.98, which is basically 100 percent.

The reason I'm bringing this up is that one of the arguments you make is that we just need to have more parties. In the two-party system, when it becomes this rigid

and people hate the other party so much, there's no other way to have real political competition except to make it possible to form new parties.

Make that case for me.

A lot of people are dissatisfied with the Democratic Party, a lot of people are dissatisfied with the Republican Party, but they have no other options because our system of single-member districts limits those options.

What happens every election is we just keep swinging back a little bit toward Democrats, a little bit toward Republicans, because there's some portion of the electorate that's just disaffected, just wants change — and there's a lot of people who are just not voting altogether.

The Democratic Party is a big coalition. There are a lot of fights within the Democratic Party, and the way that the Democratic Party holds that coalition together is they say: Well, do you want Republicans to win? No, they are fascists.

You cannot deviate. You have to get on with the party line.

Republicans are a big, heterogeneous coalition, and Donald Trump's political genius is that he brought that coalition together by just owning the libs, just hating the Democrats: The Democrats are the enemy. Whatever you think of me, I may have done something weird on Jan. 6, but if you don't defend me, you're helping Democrats.

And everybody gets locked into that binary psychology, and that is the thing that keeps holding these coalitions together. It just traps our political system into this spiral of demonization, or what I have called the two-party doom loop.

But is proportional representation enough to do anything about that? Because that would really just affect House elections.

Proportional representation would impact House elections. Now, for Senate elections, you could use fusion voting, which is a system that was once widely legal in the U.S. It exists in New York.

What that allows for is you can have multiple parties basically forming a proportional coalition on a single candidate. So minor parties could play in those elections. You could also do that for presidential elections and gubernatorial elections.

So this would be something like, imagine in Michigan, where Abdul El-Sayed is running, and if he wins the primary, you could have a Michigan progressive party, where people voted for him through that party.

So the Michigan progressive party is running in House elections. It's able to be on the ballot in Senate elections, so it's just building strength.

That's basically the argument?

It's building strength, and it's also signaling the coalition.

If he wins, but he only gets 12 percent of the general election vote from the progressives, then says, for example: Oh, maybe my progressive support is less than I thought it was. So actually, I need to represent my coalition in a way that's maybe a little bit more moderate.

Or the converse is that maybe the progressive party says: If you don't do X, you don't vote this way with us, we're not going to endorse you in the next election. And then he has to serve them.

Yes.

OK.

So he has to navigate that. But, I mean, all politics is coalitional politics.

The problem is that we just have these two coalitions that are locked in a permanent death struggle with each other when there's actually a lot of other possible coalitions that could happen in any given election, or any given Congress, that would perhaps offer some different approaches to solving some of our current problems.

We just get locked into this: I need an issue, not a solution.

Here's where I am skeptical that multiparty democracy would solve the range of problems we're talking about here.

I believe it would solve the gerrymandering problem. I believe it would actually lead to healthier competition for voters who are currently functionally disenfranchised.

But I look around the world and I see, in the U.K., a multiparty democracy that is not looking much healthier than ours. The center-left party there is in shambles.

Nigel Farage's party, Reform U.K., is probably going to win. The Tories are somewhat in shambles.

I look at Israel, and Netanyahu has a coalitional majority that is built on highly extreme members and so is very unstable. It's actually particularly unstable at this exact moment that we're talking. It has not led to a healthy politics in Israel.

In Germany, the AfD is surging. In Italy, a more far-right party won.

So if what you're saying is that there is a toxic competition that is allowing a more extreme right — or, for that matter, I guess people could worry about an extreme left — to emerge, and having a multiparty system would be stabilizing, what about the international scene right now gives you confidence that is true?

We put four countries on the table, so let's work through each of them.

The U.K. has first-past-the-post. It does not have proportional representation. It does have a multiparty system, but a multiparty system in a first-past-the-post system.

Can you describe what that means?

First-past-the-post is the same system that we have: single-winner elections, single-member districts. In some ways, that's actually the worst system — a multiparty system within single-member districts — because it means that the Reform party could get 27 percent of the votes and a majority in the House of Commons. In the same way that Labour won the last election with around 33 percent of the vote, and they got two-thirds of the seats.

Israel has an extreme form of proportional representation where the entire Knesset is one electoral district, 120 members, and the threshold for representation is just 3.25 percent. So if you get more than 3.25 percent, you get a seat in parliament.

There were a couple of weird things that happened in the last elections, where a couple of parties that probably should have run together ran separately, and they were just under that threshold.

But it's too many parties. At the extreme end of too many parties, that leads to too much fragmentation, and then it makes it harder to pull together a coalition.

It's too proportional. There is such a thing as too proportional.

What you're saying, in the Israel case, is that you're getting a bad outcome because there are specific design questions that they have messed up? That if the margin for representation was 5 percent or 7 percent or something, that would be much better?

It might be. It would also be better if they had a constitution. I think that would probably help.

But it's also a country that has a lot of challenges being beset by enemies on all sides. There are a lot of complicated things going on in Israel that are somewhat unique to Israel as a country.

I guess the point I'm trying to make here is that every country is unique. Every country has its own factors. No country is going to perfectly tune its electoral system. Every country is unhappy in its own way.

That's true.

But imagine an alternative world in this country where, in 2016, Donald Trump did not quite win the Republican nomination, or he didn't win the election. In our system, if that had happened, if Hillary Clinton had beat him, maybe that's the end of the Donald Trump insurgency.

But in the system you're talking about, maybe MAGA becomes a party that is winning half or a little bit less than half of the seats the Republicans are. And rather than the gatekeepers in the Republican Party being able to hold it at the door, which obviously they did not do anyway —

That didn't happen.

But it could have. I have my thoughts on this, but it seems to me that the system we had was relying on gatekeepers for a long time. And the system you're talking about here allows for much more entry of new parties — the D.S.A. party, a far-right party, all kinds of different things.

And maybe that is more representative of the public. I think that's a fairly good argument for it. But it is not obvious to me that it is stable in some way that we are not or we have not been.

Yes. If we want to talk about Germany, we want to talk about Italy, these are good examples that there is a far-right party.

Giorgia Meloni was of the far-right party, and she became the head of government there. She had to form a coalition, and she had to move to a more moderate position to build a coalition.

AfD has been basically kept out of the German government. If they reach a point where it's impossible to form a government without them, they will have to make a compromise with another party.

The problem is what has happened in the U.S. — and maybe you could tell an alternative history in which things went differently in 2016 and we were in a different place, but that's not the place that we're in — is that we have half of the electorate that thinks if the other party wins, it's illegitimate.

Or, at least, very, very, very dangerous.

Very dangerous. That leads to an escalation of the mind-set that we're just going to do everything that we can do, whether or not it's democratic, whether or not it's legitimate. Look at the way that the Trump administration is really eroding norm after norm because they've convinced themselves that Democrats are evil, and they want to maintain power. A lot of the Republican voters are like: Meh, Democrats are evil. So whatever is justified.

That is the situation that is incredibly dangerous to democracy.

Why would this make it different? If you imagine this situation we're talking about, but now there's not just a Democratic Party, there's the D.S.A. Party, there's the Anti-Zionism Party, there's the Blue Dog Party, whatever it is — probably not that many.

But in the world you imagine, you think we would split into something like five or six parties. So there are two to three parties on the left.

Maybe, in that world, the Republican figure we're talking about, or the right-wing figure, is actually saying: Look, you can't let this D.S.A. party in, they're really dangerous.

How is that different?

I would posit that there is a portion of the Republican electorate that thinks Donald Trump is not great but that thinks Democrats are worse. And they have no alternative party to vote for in which they can say: You know, I don't like Democrats, I don't like Donald Trump, but I want something that's more of a traditional Adam Kinzinger, Liz Cheney party that would push against some of Trump's extremism, but maybe give me some of the just straight-up conservative policy.

Do a comparison to Brazil, for example. There's this [great piece by Zack Beauchamp in Vox](#), which is a publication I think you're familiar with. He did some deep reporting in Brazil, looking at why Brazil was able to put Bolsonaro in jail after his attempted coup.

Part of the story is that Bolsonaro built a coalition of parties. Brazil is a multiparty system, and those parties, after they saw what Bolsonaro tried to do, they said: We can move on. We're not tied to Bolsonaro.

The Republican Party in the U.S. could have pushed back against Trump, but they didn't because they were so tied to him. And Trump said: Well, whatever you think of me, Democrats are worse.

And in that binary condition, you cannot hold your side accountable because it means the other side is going to win. When things become so zero-sum, so binary, so all-or-nothing that you will tolerate even an attempted coup, that's when things get really dangerous. That is the danger of the two-party system.

Here's another way of looking at what is going wrong, from my political perspective, in a bunch of these countries around the world: The left-of-center parties suck.

You're a big parties guy, and you argue, I think correctly, that parties are the fundamental organizers of political conflict, and that part of the problem in our political system is we don't have an official place for them. So they're poorly balanced against each other.

We haven't thought very hard about how we want to relate to parties. One thing that you sometimes argue is that a good dimension of this and related reforms would be that it would empower parties more.

Yes.

I just look at the way the Democratic Party is acting, and it is making, in my view, just terrible strategic decision after terrible strategic decision.

Not all of them. I actually think, for instance, Hakeem Jeffries has done a quite good job as leader of the House Democrats. But you look at the D.N.C. under Ken Martin, and it has been a mess.

You look at the uniting around Joe Biden in the 2024 election before it became completely untenable, the unwillingness also to have any kind of open process to decide who would replace him.

You look at the tendency to just organize around candidates who have institutional weight. We're watching that fail in place after place — Andrew Cuomo in New York City, Janet Mills in Maine.

It seems somewhat similar in other countries to me. Keir Starmer has this problem of a candidate who's really fluent at navigating institutions more than at connecting with the public.

I'm seeing that failure in a lot of left-of-center parties, a preference for people who can navigate the institutions, and the institutions are just quite different than the public. They have different internal voices. They have more intense policy demands, and there's a consistent diminishment or discounting of the importance of what I would call political or communicative talent.

There's just actually something wrong in these left-of-center parties. These are institutional structures at an anti-institutional moment, and that's why they're failing. I'm curious how you think about that.

I think that's right, that a lot of center-left parties are really struggling in this moment. It is a moment of collective distemper. People are very frustrated with the way institutions are working. I think a lot of that is the hangover from Covid and inflation. Yes, I share all your frustrations and critiques of the Democratic Party, and I probably take that up another 50 percent. But the problem is that there's no alternative to the Democratic Party in the U.S.

In the U.K., although they do have first-past-the-post, the Greens are rising. In Germany, there is an alternative — the Greens have also been doing better in elections.

So if there were a progressive party in the U.S., they would have an opportunity to say: Hey, you want left politics and you don't like the mainstream Democrats? You can vote for us.

If there were a Blue Dog Party that was more of a populist, center-left party, they could say: Hey, you don't like the mainstream Democrats? You can vote for us. We're an alternative.

So there is a sense of dynamic competition. But I agree we are in a moment in which there is just tremendous anti-institutional frustration in a lot of places, a lot of Western democracies, and that's a real challenge for democracy.

The question is: How do we manage that? And I think the best way to manage that is to create a space where multiple parties can compete to capture that energy and to harness that in a way that is more progressive and hopeful about the future. As opposed to the right-wing parties, which just say: Hey, we just have to kick out all the immigrants and go back to how things were in some halcyon lost era.

But the other question that set of institutional failures presents is: How would you get something like this done?

Because there's first the question of: Can you just do proportional voting with a bill?

But the other issue you're facing here is that to vote for proportional representation as a member of Congress or as a party in Congress is to ask a lot of current incumbents to knowingly give up their seats.

In this fair world we're talking about, where California seats are apportioned — you know, whatever it is, like Democrats get 65 percent of them and Republicans get 35 percent of them, and something like the reverse in Texas — to vote for this, for California Democrats, would mean some set of them are knowingly voting away their seats. And that makes it a very hard push.

I mean, there's a bill from Representative Don Beyer to do a version of proportional representation. It doesn't have a mass of co-sponsors.

It does not.

So talk me through this. Can you do this just through a bill? Can you do it in one shot? And how would you get a bill like that passed?

Yes, you can do it in a bill. The current controlling statute is the Uniform Congressional District Act of 1967, which mandates single-member districts. Congress could amend that bill and mandate proportional multimember districts, and that would be just a law of Congress.

Article 1, Section 4 of the Elections Clause of the Constitution gives Congress pretty broad power to decide how its members get elected. So Congress could pass a bill.

Now, the politics question of it is the complicated one. You say: Well, OK, members would be giving up their seats. There is a way to pass proportional representation and for members not to risk losing their seats, which is to just increase the size of the House alongside doing proportional representation.

If you just make California have more representatives or Massachusetts have more representatives, then the incumbents can keep their seats —

And there's an argument for that.

There is a very strong argument.

Do you want to just make that argument briefly? Because I think that's an interesting way of thinking about how you might blunt some of the initial opposition to this.

The argument is basically that for most, or all, of our history up until 1911, as the country got bigger, the House got bigger. Every decade, we'd do a census, and then there would be an apportionment, and as the population grew, so did the House.

The original House of Representatives was only 65 members. It kept growing, and at 435 members in 1911, Congress couldn't agree on how to reapportion things, and eventually they said: Oh, we'll just keep it at 435.

The country is a lot bigger now than it was in 1911. It's more than three times as large, and yet we've kept the size of the House the same.

So given that the country is a lot bigger, given that members now represent 765,000 constituents — that's very high.

There's a strong argument for increasing the House. In fact, I co-wrote a piece with the American Academy of Arts and Sciences arguing that we should increase the size of the House by 150 members. You could push for even more, although I think it might be a little disruptive to do more than that.

But when you increase the House by 150 members, it's increasing by about a third, and that would be good, I think, to better represent the diversity of this country, to bring in a bunch of new members, a bunch of fresh members.

And also it would ease the path to proportional representation and make more states benefit from proportional representation. Because there are some states that have smaller delegations.

In Iowa, Rob Sand is a Democrat running for governor, who looks like he's got a very good chance of winning that election — which was not anticipated in Iowa, which has become quite a lot redder in recent years. He's running very explicitly on destroying the two-party system.

He's a Democrat, but he's like: We should not have this duopoly in our politics. That's been a resonant message in Iowa, and I think it could be elsewhere.

You could imagine a Democratic Party under new leadership, a presidential candidate running on some mix of aggressive campaign finance reform to get the money out of politics, elections reform like proportional representation. Supreme Court term limits would be another one I would put on that.

But you could have a party that is fundamentally saying: Look, the stakes on this have gotten too high. People are unhappy. You're all cynical about politics. This is not serving you.

The problem is that while you could imagine that as serving the interests of an individual presidential candidate or an individual candidate for governor, we are talking about something that has to pass the House.

So I'm curious, as we come to an end here: We have seen a lot of systems switch over to proportional representation in other countries. What are the politics that usually allow that to happen, given that oftentimes politicians are pretty jealous about preserving a system that they've figured out how to benefit from?

That is true. When you look at the switchovers, there are a few things that tend to come together. One is intense dissatisfaction with the status quo and just a public that is feeling like the system is fundamentally broken and putting pressure on politicians to do something different to change the rules.

Second is that there is a clear sense of: What is the alternative? Because there are a lot of ways you could change things. To the extent that people say proportional representation is a fair way to do things and we agree on that, that's important, as well. So those two things have to come together: There's a sense of what the problem is and a sense of what the solution is.

But then the third thing, and this is the thing that you raise, is that politicians ultimately have to vote for this, and they have to change the way they get elected. And they may not love the way they get elected now, but they know it. They've mastered that system. From the perspective of Democrats, who will potentially be in the majority in 2029 and have a trifecta, 2030 looks terrible. They will then pay the midterm penalty, there will be reapportionment, and we're just going to keep doing this gerrymandering.

The post-2030 redistricting would be terrible.

Yes. But even the 2030 midterms will be terrible for Democrats because basically every midterm is a wipeout. That's just how things are in our politics.

There's a political sense that we're going to lose, so we better use this opportunity to end the gerrymandering wars because, ultimately, if we keep doing the gerrymandering wars throughout the 2030s, that's going to be very bad for us.

There's another political argument that I would make to Democrats in Congress, which is to say: Do you think of yourself as part of the Democratic Party or part of the Democratic coalition?

If you talk to progressive Democrats, they will say: We're not the corporate Democrats, and we think that the corporate Democrats are just terrible for the party. We want to make our case directly to the voters that we're going to offer bold progressivism.

Moderate Democrats would say: The progressives are killing us with all these crazy issues, all this big government, all this woke stuff. We want to speak to the moderate Democrats, and we want to run independently.

And then Blue Dog Democrats might say: The Democratic brand is terrible. We would just like to run as Blue Dogs because we think we can connect with voters who have written off Democrats but might consider us and might support us.

You can imagine that there are three factions roughly within the Democratic Party, and many members of Congress see themselves inside of one of these factions. They can be different things in different parts of the country and to different voters rather than having to be one thing. Which winds up just being this muddle that nobody can quite figure out what they're for, and they can't agree on what they're for, and then they wind up fighting all these fights in primaries.

So I think there is a political case in that respect. Then there's just some sense of: Do we care about these basics of voters having representation and feeling like their vote matters? If we care about democracy, because we are Democrats, maybe this is just the right thing to do for the country.

And besides, it's pretty miserable being here in Congress under this maximum gerrymandering, where we don't know whether we're going to have our district next year, and it's just a miserable place to be.

What do you say to a Republican listening to this, saying: Oh, you guys are just liberals. You're losing now, and your Virginia gerrymander didn't work out, so now you just want to change the rules?

Well, I've been saying we should move to proportional representation for a very long time. [*Chuckles.*]

But there is a problem for the Republican Party, which is, like the Democrats, Republicans are a heterogeneous coalition. There are a lot of folks who vote Republican who don't feel well represented by the Republican Party.

I think if Republicans had a faction or a new party that was competing in urban areas, the party could actually grow. There are a lot of urban areas where Democrats have not governed well, a lot of blue states where Democrats have not governed particularly well.

An alternative party that maybe is not the Trump Republicans but maybe is the growth and opportunity party that doesn't have the baggage of that, could actually make some valuable inroads in those places.

Fundamentally, this is a very Madisonian argument about American democracy. We shouldn't have two permanent factions. What we need is a multiplicity of factions that allow us to constantly argue and constantly reconstitute from election to election. The situation that we're in is not good for anybody, Democrats or Republicans.

What about the simple argument — this is one I find convincing — that Republicans in blue states should be represented, too? That it's just not good for voters anywhere for the way the system is done to be a protection and maximization for the incentives of the politicians as opposed to the representation of the constituents?

Competition is good. Having two parties or five parties or six parties that are competing everywhere, it's good for America, it's good for voters, and nobody should be shut out of power anywhere.

I think that's a good place to end. Always our final question: What are three books you'd recommend to the audience?

One book that I think people should read is Lani Guinier's "The Tyranny of the Majority." This was a book that really influenced me in thinking about the value of proportional representation, particularly for minority communities.

Lani Guinier was writing these law review essays in the '80s and early '90s about how proportional representation would actually be better for minority communities, and that sort of cost her a job in the Clinton administration as the head of civil rights because she had some weird ideas on proportional representation.

But these ideas are newly relevant. I think a lot of folks in the civil rights community are giving these ideas a second look, and she just writes really eloquently about them.

Another book I'd recommend is Sam Huntington's "American Politics: The Promise of Disharmony," which is a historical look at these eras of reform in American politics. It says that we have this roughly 60-year cycle in which, every 60 years or so, Americans get really dissatisfied with their political institutions, and they reform them. The last time we did that was the 1960s. So if you take his rough 60-year cycle as somewhat correct, then we are due for that.

Is there a reason he thinks it is 60-year cycles?

Well, it's just sort of a generational thing, where there's this endogenous process where people sort of fix the institutions, but not really, and then people grow complacent and then dissatisfied. And then the gap between what we expect of our institutions and what our ideals are grows to a point where there is a sense that we need to change things.

Sixty years is rough, but if you think about the American Revolution, Jacksonian democracy, the progressive era, the 1960s — maybe it's time.

And a final book — I'll recommend a book of fiction — “The Recognitions” by William Gaddis, which is a book about forgery and authenticity and originality.

In this era of A.I. and not knowing what's authentic and what's not, it really resonates. It's a long book. It's one of these 1,000-page postmodern books, but it really feels fresh, even though it was published in 1955. He's just an amazing writer.

Lee Drutman, thank you very much.

Thank you, Ezra.