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## How to escape the gerrymandering trap

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Republicans' advantage in this cycle's redistricting wars has prompted [new consideration of alternatives](#) to America's traditional single-member House districts. A system employing proportional representation could halt gerrymandering — and the damage it does to representative democracy — in its tracks. But this would need to be implemented with care. The wrong approach could create new problems as bad as the one it seeks to solve.

Gerrymandering is a massive problem in a democratic republic. Since laws are passed by the people's representatives, rather than by the people themselves, simply possessing the right to vote is not enough. Those votes must also translate into legislative majorities for the people's desires to be carried out.

Aggressive gerrymandering breaks that link. A good gerrymander — good not in a moral sense but in the way it works as designed by the gerrymanderers — gives the line-drawing party more seats than it would be entitled to based on its share of the vote. Perform that task well enough, and massive majorities can be forged out of slim vote margins.

That's what the Republicans' recent gerrymanders have done. No one doubts that popular majorities in states such as Texas and Florida would select a majority of Republican representatives under a fair map. Democrats should, however, be able to elect some 40 to 45 percent of those members, since that's their usual share of the statewide vote. But Florida's new map [has 24 districts](#) — 86 percent — that would have been won by Donald Trump in 2024, while four would have been won by Kamala Harris.

Democrats practice these dark arts, too. Trump got [38 percent of Californians' votes](#) in 2024. The state has 52 House seats, so with fair districts, Republicans should elect about 20 members. But Democratic Gov. Gavin Newsom's Newsomander — so dubbed by Republicans — [created just four seats](#) the GOP can reasonably be expected to win, plus a couple more where they have a fair shot.

No single-member-district plan will ever be purely proportional. Even in today's polarized environment, popular incumbents can run ahead of their party. One party often wins most of the close races in a given year. Those distortions are normal, but they have never been so pronounced in one party's favor that they've discredited the traditional system in voters' eyes. That may be changing as the parties engage in a dispiriting gerrymandering race to the bottom.

A proportional representation system limits the potential for distortion by ensuring that the share of seats a party wins is approximately the same as the share of votes it receives. If Democrats win 60 percent of a state's votes, for example, they would be awarded 60 percent of the seats.

That's how it works in theory. In practice, it can be more complicated, depending on how parties run and how many seats are available. If a state only elects three House members, then a 50-50 vote will still give one party two seats and the other one seat. This problem, though, is not tilted unfairly toward one party or the other; it's simply proportional representation's version of the same imprecision present in single-member-district systems.

[Switzerland's election system](#) would be the easiest to implement in the United States. The Alpine nation has a federal, bicameral legislature like America's. Each Swiss canton — the equivalent of a U.S. state — elects members to the country's lower house by proportional representation, with a canton's total number of representatives determined by population. Parties put up lists of candidates, in order of preference, and they secure a number of seats corresponding to the percentage of votes their list wins: In a 10-seat canton, a party with 30 percent support would have its top three listed candidates seated.

Those who don't like the idea of parties choosing lists of people to represent it might prefer [Finland's system](#). Its unicameral legislature's members are also elected

proportionally, but ballots are cast for individuals, not party slates. Votes for all individuals running with a party's support are totaled to determine how many seats a party gets, and the affiliated candidates with the highest number of votes are elected. Still think this gives party elites too much power? There's always the approach used by [Israel's Likud party](#). Israel has a list system, too, but Likud employs a party primary to select which candidates are placed on the list and in what order. Adopting that approach in the U.S. would preserve the importance of party primaries.

Some Americans may be loath to give up single-member districts because they believe a link to a specific geographical electorate enhances voter accountability. [Scotland](#), [Japan](#), [Germany](#) and [New Zealand](#) all have systems that mix single-member seats with a separate party vote providing for some measure of proportional representation. A U.S. version of that would probably require expanding the House of Representatives. But even increasing the number of House seats by 50 percent would establish a legislature about the same size as Britain's House of Commons or Germany's Bundestag.

Any of these approaches could be adopted through an act of Congress. Each would certainly constitute dramatic change that would take some getting used to. But the alternative appears to be either an orgy of partisan gerrymandering or a hopeless attempt to create politically neutral guidelines for redrawing lines. The parties have long sparred over what those guidelines might be, but in the real world any human system can be manipulated by clever map drawers. The resulting maps might not be as grossly unfair as a fully unregulated system, but they could still empower one party at the other's expense for a long time.

Events of the past year have laid bare the inherent incompatibility between "one person, one vote" and a politician-controlled electoral system that translates those votes into seats. Our founders were able to compromise in the pursuit of the common good when they drafted the Constitution. We can hope that the two major parties can do the same now, rather than risk their annihilation — and perhaps the downfall of our republic — at the hands of vengeful gerrymandering opposition.