

Proportional Representation: An Intervention for More Electoral Competition and Better Governance

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May 2, 2025

Introduction

I served in the Alaska Legislature for a decade. It was an amazing life chapter that greatly shaped my perspective on U.S. politics. We passed several major structural reforms in Alaska which I think have played a role in moderating our legislature's and state's politics. One of these — Alaska's "final four" election system — has had an incredible moderating effect, elevating bipartisan collaboration and effective governance. As a legislator, I was privileged to enjoy the benefits of this much-improved governing environment.

Alaska's groundbreaking role in election reform has also made me keenly interested in structural reforms at large, including reforms such as proportional representation.

Here's a key problem with U.S. politics: In an overwhelming majority of legislative districts around the country, the D or R next to a candidate's name on the ballot dictates the election outcome. The election is a totally foregone conclusion. This won't change anytime soon under our current system: each legislative district elects a single representative to the exclusion of all the other candidates. Blue districts elect Democrats; red districts elect Republicans. End of story. Whether it's a 90-10 or 58-42 district, it doesn't matter. It's a binomial and also pretty much a preordained outcome.

Ultimately, this structure is at odds with representing the broader spectrum of voters' views. Proportional representation — a system common in other countries, and starting to gain consideration in the U.S. — would change that. Like many (I think most) Americans, I'm interested in anything that has the potential to moderate politics, promote collaboration, and put extremism on the back heel. I'm a pluralist when it comes to structural reforms. Just as I believe "final four" election reform has been incredibly positive in Alaska, I am excited about the potential of proportional representation to better U.S. politics.

Understanding Proportional Representation

Proportional representation is an electoral system where the number of votes a party receives directly determines its number of seats in the legislature.

Under the current system used for all legislative elections in the United States, a candidate wins a seat by winning the highest vote share in the district. In most states, a candidate can win with a bare plurality vote, sometimes with well under 50 percent, generally when there are weird three-way races or “spoiler” candidates. (We saw this for Alaska gubernatorial elections twice in the 1990s: Alaska Independence Party candidate and former Republican Wally Hickel won with 39% of the vote in 1990, and Democrat Tony Knowles won with 41% in 1994.)

The voters who supported the losing candidate(s) don't have a voice or representation.

Proportional representation breaks out of this mold. Under proportional representation, if a party wins 30 percent of the vote, it wins 30 percent of the legislative seats. The voters who supported the “losing” party in a winner-take-all system have representation in proportion to their vote share.

This isn't some theoretical political science concept. Proportional representation is the dominant elections system among democratic countries around the world.

Boosting Voter Turnout and Engagement

In a winner-take-all election, voters in districts that are considered safe for one party can believe (with good reason) that their vote has little impact on the final outcome. This is a bald-faced reality in electoral politics: Talk with any political strategist, or the DCCC or NRCC. They give zero you-know-whats to 85%+ of all congressional districts in this country. Why? Because whether the district is 58% Republican or Democratic, or 90% Republican or Democratic, the outcome is essentially predetermined.

Under a proportional system, every vote helps determine the overall composition of the legislature. In essence, every vote matters. Relatedly, gerrymandering — politically engineering districts to prevent electoral competition — becomes far more difficult.

Lastly, in countries with proportional representation, voter turnout is significantly higher — typically by at least 10%. Why? Most likely because people feel that their votes matter more.

Expanding Parties Beyond Traditional Boundaries

Once candidates elected through proportional representation get to the legislature, legislative dynamics would change significantly.

Under our current winner-take-all systems, regional divides are common. For example, in Alaska, Republicans win all the seats in the Mat-Su Valley (a Republican bastion north of Anchorage, where Sarah Palin is from), and Democrats are strongest in Juneau and downtown Anchorage. In most states (and, interestingly, in contrast to Alaska), this plays out as an urban-rural divide. Democrats represent all urban areas. Republicans represent all rural areas.

In a proportional representation system, Democrats would win some share of the seats in the Mat-Su, and Republicans would win some share of the seats in Juneau and downtown Anchorage. A “Mat-Su Democrat” or “Juneau Republican” would no longer be an oxymoron.

As a consequence, legislators in a political party would be more regionally diverse (e.g., in the Lower 48, there would be more rural Democrats and urban Republicans). Any given region would likely have representation from both parties. This statewide representation forces parties to focus on policy matters for all areas of the state, not just the areas where they have majority support under the winner-take-all system.

Reducing Two-Party Polarization and Encouraging Cross-Party Collaboration

Legislative gridlock often stems from extreme partisanship. Proportional representation softens adversarial partisan dynamics by creating a system where different party factions can run under different banners and then choose to join (or not join) together in coalitions.

Generally in proportional representation systems, if a third party can meet a particular threshold for support (typically around 5% of the statewide vote), it can earn seats in the legislature. With more minor political parties in the mix, the stark “us”-“them” divide softens considerably.

New opportunities for coalition-building are a powerful antidote to polarization. As parties negotiate and form alliances to pass legislation, legislators are encouraged to reach across traditional party lines and find common ground. This environment not only leads to more representative policy outcomes but also fosters a culture of compromise and mutual respect among colleagues.

Conclusion

Proportional representation in state legislatures would be a transformative change from America's current winner-take-all approach. By aligning legislative seats more closely with the actual distribution of votes, the system would not only enhance democratic fairness but also encourage higher voter turnout and facilitate cross-party coalitions.

No electoral system is perfect. But after years of working in the legislature and on political reform more broadly, I believe proportional representation is an important reform that I hope is adopted in states in the years to come. Goodness knows that this country desperately needs systems-level change given recent political history. I believe proportional representation can be part of the solution.