

Democratize Congress

For American politics to work better, the two parties
should embrace their internal divisions.

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Protect Democracy is a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization dedicated to preventing American democracy from declining into a more authoritarian form of government.

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Introduction

If we want to fix American democracy, we need to recognize that there are more than two kinds of voters, and more than two kinds of representatives.

American politics has become an endless tug-of-war. In our two-party system, every debate tends to be shaped into a two-sided, zero-sum conflict; every success by one party is viewed as a loss by the other.¹ In Congress, the two parties repeatedly fight to a stalemate, only occasionally eking out significant legislative wins. And the longer this gridlock continues, the more mutual animosity grows, and the more each side feels that they must defeat the other at all costs.² This angry, all-or-nothing view of politics has gradually seeped out into the public and now seems at risk of tearing the country — and the Constitution — apart.

Ultimately, however, this two-sidedness is artificial. The American people have a wide range of views;³ they don't even particularly like either of their two major political parties.⁴ We need to stop cramming everyone into a box labeled "Democrat" or "Republican" and start creating more space for various kinds of Democrats, Republicans — and none-of-the-aboves — to organize and differentiate themselves. In doing so, we would create more opportunities for conflict to be resolved through mutually beneficial dealmaking that serves the American people.

There's a long way to go to get to this more functional vision of American politics. Protect Democracy supports a major change to the way that we elect members of Congress — an idea called "proportional representation," in which parties win seats in proportion to the votes they receive. Proportional representation, sometimes simply called "PR," typically gives rise to multi-party systems. In these systems, political conflict is less intractable, more productive, and more representative of diverse electorates.⁵

But the shift to PR is a big change that will take time. We also need a shorter-term strategy to restore some functionality to Congress and to keep our democratic system from falling apart.

One such strategy is to help to empower and distinguish the groups that already exist within our two major political parties — groups that will be referred to throughout this piece as

¹ For a detailed account of how narrow competition for control of government has driven partisan conflict, see Frances E. Lee, *Insecure Majorities: Congress and the Perpetual Campaign* (University of Chicago Press, 2016).

² For one account of this dynamic, see Lee Drutman, *Breaking the Two-Party Doom Loop: The Case for Multiparty Democracy in America* (Oxford University Press, 2020), 107–72.

³ Research shows that the views of the public have consistently been much more diverse than the views expressed through their representatives' roll call votes in Congress. See, for example, Seth J. Hill and Chris Tausanovitch, "A disconnect in representation? Comparison of trends in congressional and public polarization," *The Journal of Politics* 77, no. 4 (2015): 1058–75.

⁴ A recent Gallup poll, for example, found that the favorability of the Democratic and Republican parties to be 34% and 38% respectively. Jeffery M. Jones, "Democrats Regain Advantage in Party Affiliation," Gallup, July 31, 2025, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/692978/democrats-regain-advantage-party-affiliation.aspx>. For more on public dissatisfaction with the two major parties, see Steven L. Taylor, "Trapped in a Two-Party System," Protect Democracy, March 18, 2025, 3–5, <https://protectdemocracy.org/work/trapped-in-a-two-party-system/>.

⁵ Proportional representation would also end gerrymandering, temper extremism, and more. To learn much more about PR, see "Proportional Representation, Explained," Protect Democracy, December 5, 2023, <https://protectdemocracy.org/work/proportional-representation-explained/>.

"sub-parties." In the House of Representatives, for example, there are *already* Progressive Democrats, Blue Dog Democrats, Freedom Caucus Republicans, the Republican Governance Group, and others. They just aren't very visible to the American people, and they are constrained by rules designed to reduce every debate to a two-party conflict. If we stop limiting every issue to only two sides, and allow these sub-parties some latitude to pursue their distinct visions in Congress, we just might be able to encourage dynamic, collaborative policymaking — and start shifting away from our increasingly dangerous tug-of-war politics.

Key Takeaways



Our two major political parties are locked in an escalating, zero-sum conflict that is tearing the country apart and preventing Congress from doing its job.



We can significantly change this dynamic by taking a relatively modest step: empowering "sub-parties" — distinct groups within the existing parties in Congress — principally by amending congressional rules to give these groups additional resources and greater access to the legislative agenda.



Empowering sub-parties would help break up two-party gridlock in Congress, and give members of Congress a new incentive and opportunity to start working with each other and getting things done.



These changes could also help spur additional positive reform, including reforms to our elections that would support a true multi-party system.

The Growing Risks of a Hyper-Partisan Congress and the Potential for Change

In the fall of 2020, political scientists Steven Teles and Robert Saldin wrote an article called “The Future is Faction.”⁶ In that piece, they argued that the current system of two-party conflict is in some respects untenable. With two parties “increasingly captured by their ideological extremes,” Congress fails to reflect the full range of public opinion or address the “demand for more than two outlets for the country’s diversity.”⁷ Teles and Saldin predicted that factions within the two major parties would continue to become more assertive, and that supporting these factions — particularly moderates willing to bridge legislative divides — could lead to “a more deliberative, entrepreneurial, and productive political system.”⁸

Despite dissension within the parties, this factional future has not yet come to pass.

The two parties mostly remain committed to the tug-of-war. Despite a long and continuous trend of narrow victories and narrow majorities, some partisans still seem convinced that if they just keep to the current course they will eventually achieve a decisive victory against the other side and win the tug-of-war. Perhaps they’re just so accustomed to the current system that they have difficulty imagining something different.

Nonetheless, there are also signs of a growing realization that the current system is bad for everyone. More and more members of Congress across the political spectrum are chafing at the depth of congressional dysfunction and the inability to get things done (including a record number of members who are leaving Congress altogether⁹). Consider a recent example described by George Washington University professor Casey Burgat:

⁶ Steven M. Teles and Robert P. Saldin, “The Future Is Faction,” *National Affairs*, no. 45 (Fall 2020), <https://nationalaffairs.com/publications/detail/the-future-is-faction>.

⁷ Teles and Saldin, “The Future is Faction.”

⁸ Teles and Saldin, “The Future is Faction.”

⁹ Stephen Fowler, “With midterms more than a year away, a record number of lawmakers are eyeing the exits,” *NPR*, September 2, 2025, <https://www.npr.org/2025/08/13/nx-s1-5495665/lawmakers-leaving-washington-run-for-governor-congress-2026-midterms>.

"In mid-July [2025], a rare thing happened in Congress: two lawmakers from opposite political planets — Republican Thomas Massie of Kentucky and Democrat Ro Khanna of California — came together on a bill. And it wasn't just any bill: their proposal would force the public release of sealed records related to [notorious sex offender] Jeffrey Epstein's network and criminal activities. It has broad bipartisan support (30 Democrat and 11 Republican cosponsors), would almost certainly pass in a floor vote, and represents the kind of transparency most Americans across the political spectrum say they want from their government.

So, naturally, the House Speaker responded by... calling summer recess early."¹⁰

One of the arrangements that keeps us stuck in two-party conflict is that leaders of the two parties have substantial power to control the legislative agenda. They primarily use that power in service of party unity, blocking votes — even on widely-supported measures, like the release of the Epstein files — simply because they incur some risk of dividing members of their party or putting them at odds with a co-partisan president.¹¹ The result is an intense centralization of the legislative process that mostly produces gridlock.

As Burgat notes, this is terrible for the country, but also not great for most members of Congress: "Lawmakers elected to write laws are mostly left waiting to be told what's in them and then ordered by their party's leadership to vote for them."¹² Individual members who are not in party leadership have little incentive to try to craft bipartisan legislation when so few bills pass and the process is so tightly controlled. Instead of putting their time and resources toward developing productive relationships and crafting legislation, they are mostly left to do the types of things that deepen partisan conflict: online and national media appearances, grandstanding, and picking fights with their colleagues.

Even party leaders themselves are not always advantaged by centralized, two-party control. To keep their party in line on every vote, they have to craft an agenda that appeals to both their most moderate members and their farthest extremes. This is at times a near-impossible (and mostly thankless) task, as each party tries to hold together increasingly diverse coalitions. For nearly a month in 2023, the Republican Party in the House of Representatives was without a leader at all, having ousted their speaker and repeatedly disagreed on a replacement.

This situation is far from inevitable.

It was not always the case that party leaders in Congress were charged with determining every detail of the legislative agenda. In fact, for most of American history, rank-and-file members had the opportunity to play a much larger role. In the Senate, parties didn't even have floor leaders until the 1890s, and not until the 1930s did the rules enable the majority party's leader to set the

¹⁰ Casey Burgat, "When Lawmakers Aren't Allowed to Make Laws," The Liberal Patriot, August 8, 2025, <https://www.liberalpatriot.com/p/when-lawmakers-arent-allowed-to-make> (internal links omitted).

¹¹ This phenomenon has been extensively studied by political scientists, many following on the influential book *Setting the Agenda* by Gary W. Cox and Mathew D. McCubbins. *Setting the Agenda: Responsible Party Government in the U.S. House of Representatives* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

¹² Burgat, "When Lawmakers Aren't Allowed to Make Laws."

agenda.¹³ For much of the period since, the major parties have been deeply fractured, and yet Congress experienced periods of remarkable productivity in spite of — or perhaps even because of — the participation of competing groups within the parties.¹⁴

Congress has on many prior occasions changed internal rules to broaden access to the agenda and make legislation easier to consider, debate, and pass. These changes have often been spurred by coalitions of groups within, and even across, the two major parties.¹⁵ Other legislatures have also arranged power in a variety of different ways, often unlocking more legislative productivity. For example, many U.S. state legislatures have used processes that allow greater access to the legislative agenda and are linked to more diverse groups passing legislation.¹⁶

All of which is to say that today's centralized Congress is in many ways an outlier. We should not simply try to return to some idealized Congress of the past, but neither should we be overly pessimistic about the prospects for change.

¹³ The majority party leader gained the right of first recognition, which enabled them to set the agenda. Gerald Gamm and Steven S. Smith, *Steering the Senate: The Emergence of Party Organization and Leadership, 1789-2024* (Cambridge University Press, 2025), 45.

¹⁴ A recent book by political scientist Ruth Bloch Rubin argues that parties have often functioned particularly well when the factions within them are equally matched. *Divided Parties, Strong Leaders* (University of Chicago Press, 2025).

¹⁵ For examples, see Soren Dayton and Josiah Watney, "Making the Rules of the House," Niskanen Center, January 28, 2025, <https://www.niskanencenter.org/making-the-rules-of-the-house/>.

¹⁶ Sarah F. Anzia and Molly C. Jackman, "Legislative Organization and the Second Face of Power: Evidence from U.S. State Legislatures," *The Journal of Politics* 75, no. 1 (2013): 210–24.

How to Empower Sub-Parties

Throughout American history, the rules of Congress and the structure of partisan conflict have been in constant flux. And for much of that history, power in both chambers was relatively decentralized, vesting individual members with significant power to advance their proposals. At times this created bottlenecks — without appropriate rules to determine which proposals should advance, and in what order, Congress has occasionally become preoccupied with squabbles about its own schedule.¹⁷

However, we now have the opposite problem: a long period of continuous centralization has produced the worst levels of gridlock and disorder in modern history. What is needed is not extreme centralization, but structure — rules that create fair, orderly, shared opportunities for members to access the agenda, and to pass proposals that have majority support.

In today's Congress, when any group outside party leadership wants to be productive — to forge compromises and pass legislation — they typically have to get most of their co-partisans, as well as their party leadership, on board. A lot of that work takes place behind closed doors, and even if it is successful, the party will often be nearly in lockstep for the resulting vote, teeing up a knee-jerk response from the other party and once again making it appear that there are only two different points of view.

That doesn't leave much room for different types of Democrats or Republicans to distinguish themselves. Members from particularly conservative or liberal districts may want to highlight their vision for the future, debate their colleagues, and get on the record in support of their distinct beliefs. Members representing areas with particular local or regional concerns may want to forge creative compromises that address the particular needs of their constituents. And members closer to the middle of the political spectrum may want to forge cross-partisan compromises that bridge ideological divides.

Having votes, even failed votes, allows members of Congress to show the public who they are and what they stand for. But if most votes are largely along party lines — or near-unanimous votes on matters of small importance — then it makes sense for voters to think that there are only two kinds of members. And even when individual members buck the party line, it's hard for that signal to break through the noise.¹⁸

Enabling sub-party groups to pursue a consistent and distinct agenda would send a much stronger message—and it would make Congress more functional, fluid and small-d democratic.

¹⁷ For example, Senator George Edmunds remarked in 1882 that “we are in a continuous struggle... a continual struggle that takes up time, to see what it is we will do rather than in spending our time doing it.” Gamm and Smith, *Steering the Senate*, 44.

¹⁸ A growing body of evidence shows that, though voters are generally good at distinguishing the political positions of the two parties, they often cannot distinguish between the views of different members within each party. See, for example, research pending publication by political scientists Jacqueline Colao, David E. Broockman, Gregory A. Huber, and Joshua L. Kalla. “Tracing Polarization's Roots: A Panel Study of Voter Choice in Congressional Primary and General Elections,” May 27, 2025, https://doi.org/10.31219/osf.io/7xbza_v1.

But to do so, the rules would need to provide sub-parties with: (1) resources that allow them to collectively develop their legislative agendas; and (2) even more importantly, genuine opportunities to get those policy ideas up for a vote.

Resources for sub-party policymaking

Being a member of Congress is a resource-intensive job. Members have to travel, campaign, meet with constituents, do media appearances, and so on — and though they are allocated resources for hiring a staff, their capacity to really dig into public issues, consult with experts, and craft legislative solutions is quite limited.¹⁹

The members that do get additional policy staff are party leaders and those with leadership roles on committees (though the latter have become increasingly sidelined in the policymaking process, as policymaking activity becomes more and more party-leader-driven). Even party leadership will often rely on and defer to presidents of the same party, in part because the Executive Branch of government has drastically more resources and available expertise.

Of course, like-minded members of Congress may come together, form groups, and develop their own policy agendas. As of 2022, the Congressional Research Service counted over 800 groups formed by members of Congress, including over 400 formally registered with the House of Representatives as Congressional Member Organizations (CMOs).²⁰ But not only is there no budget to staff these organizations, CMOs are prohibited from having their own staff or office space,²¹ and prohibited from accepting funds or other resources from private sources.²²

In other words, congressional rules explicitly discourage policy work outside of the confines of partisan leadership, formal committees, or individual member offices.²³ Many Congressional Member Organizations serve as little more than a resume line for members of the House of Representatives. There are informal, outside resources that members may be able to draw on –

¹⁹ “[W]hile the world has become far more complex, while policy has become far more complex, while constituent and media demands have expanded, while the executive branch has grown considerably, and while lobbying has grown dramatically, Congress has allocated fewer staff to keep up.” Letter to the U.S. House of Representatives on Congressional Capacity from the New America Foundation, R Street Institute, Brookings Institution, American Enterprise Institute, and Campaign Legal Center, March 9, 2016, <https://static.newamerica.org/attachments/12772-congress-should-improve-oversight-capacity-and-reduce-its-reliance-on-lobbyists/staff%20capacity%20letter%20final%20030916.09b91c1a26c844978f21e322d78fdb6a6.pdf>.

²⁰ Sarah J. Eckman, *Congressional Member Organizations (CMOs) and Informal Member Groups: Their Purpose and Activities, History, and Formation*, CRS Report R40683 (Congressional Research Service, March 21, 2023), <https://www.congress.gov/crs-product/R40683>.

²¹ “A Member of a CMO, in support of the objectives of that CMO, may utilize employees (including shared employees) and official resources under the control of the Member to assist the CMO in carrying out its legislative objectives, but no employees may be appointed in the name of a CMO.” “Members’ Congressional Handbook,” Committee on House Administration, accessed September 24, 2025, <https://cha.house.gov/members-congressional-handbook#E93AD3ED-B79D-4E6A-A016-262C5C606593>. Certain “Eligible Congressional Member Organizations” (ECMOs) may accept funding from individual member offices, but the process for establishing an ECMO is cumbersome. See “Eligible Congressional Member Organizations Handbook,” Committee on House Administration, February 1, 2021, <https://cha.house.gov/cache/files/6/0/605177f9-0f18-4c46-bb55-ec7d9af4f533/4606F64A78A1B23B8DBBC482780D8581C591BADF3CC647B7D6D6BA61AEB742F8.eligible-congressional-member-organization-handbook-02-10-2021.pdf>.

²² “Members’ Congressional Handbook,” Committee on House Administration, accessed September 24, 2025, <https://cha.house.gov/members-congressional-handbook#E93AD3ED-B79D-4E6A-A016-262C5C606593>.

²³ The House of Representatives used to have what were called “legislative service organizations,” which allowed members to pool their resources, and “facilitated the public policymaking efforts of legislative blocs.” Andrew J. Clarke, “Congressional Capacity and the Abolition of Legislative Service Organizations,” *Journal of Public Policy* 40, no. 2 (June 2020): 214–35, 216. However, LSOs were abolished in 1994 as part of an effort to concentrate more power in the hands of party leadership. Clarke, “Congressional Capacity,” 218–19.

namely think tanks and other nonprofit organizations that are loosely affiliated with certain caucuses or other factions. But again, congressional rules limit those external relationships.

Members of Congress should have more resources dedicated to their core job: making laws that serve the American people. And in particular, members should be encouraged — not discouraged — to organize into a discrete set of sub-parties and develop distinctive policies and brands. More informal, outside resources would be helpful in that effort. But congressional rules should also be revised to help facilitate the formation of sub-parties and provide them with resources for collective policymaking.

Opportunities for sub-parties to access the legislative agenda

In Congress, party leaders are very strong legislative gatekeepers. Few significant bills get passed, and those that do often pass on a highly partisan basis. In this environment, members lack both the incentive and the ability to differentiate themselves and to contribute productively to the legislative process.

However, there are any number of ways that that could change. For example:

- As of 2013, 35 state legislative chambers used a process called “automatic calendaring.”²⁴ In these state chambers, every bill that passes through a committee is automatically added to the calendar for consideration by the full legislature. These legislatures have tended to pass more bills without lockstep support from the majority party than other legislatures with tighter partisan control over the agenda.²⁵
- Historically, the House of Representatives has created several alternate avenues for accessing the legislative agenda that were ultimately rendered ineffective — but that could be reformed and renewed. One such effort resulted in the creation of the discharge petition process, which allowed a majority of members to sign a petition as a route to by-passing leadership and getting a vote (in practice, the process has been bogged down by cumbersome procedures and is used mostly as a source of leverage).²⁶ Another was the addition of “Calendar Wednesdays,” a now-defunct practice that designated time for committee chairs to bring legislation directly to the House floor.²⁷ With some relatively minor changes, each of these avenues could be re-opened.

²⁴ Anzia and Jackman, “Legislative Organization and the Second Face of Power,” 215.

²⁵ Anzia and Jackman, “Legislative Organization and the Second Face of Power.”

²⁶ See Philip Wallach and Priscilla Goh, “The Discharge Petition: Its History and Role in the 118th Congress,” American Enterprise Institute, April 29, 2024, <https://www.aei.org/articles/the-discharge-petition-its-history-and-role-in-the-118th-congress/>.

²⁷ See Jason A. Smith, *House Practice: A Guide to the Rules, Precedents, and Procedures of the House*, U.S. Government Publishing Office, 2024, Chapter 8: Calendar Wednesday, 219, <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/GPO-HPRACTICE-118/pdf/GPO-HPRACTICE-118.pdf>.

- Congress could also take inspiration from other legislatures. For example, during each session of the Canadian Parliament, individual members are provided, by lottery, with an opportunity to introduce a single “private members’ bill,” and an hour of each day is set aside for the consideration of such bills.²⁸

Any of these processes could help lessen congressional gridlock. However, reforms to de-centralize control over the agenda should ideally empower not just individual members or committee chairs, but also sub-parties — the groups with the greatest potential to clarify more perspectives and disrupt two-party conflict. Defining those groups and giving them some direct ability to access the legislative agenda will require some policy innovation. However, it would not be entirely without precedent. For example, beginning in 1980,²⁹ and continuing into the 2010s, the House of Representatives generally allowed certain important factions within each party to offer their own wholesale alternatives to the budget bill, and to get a vote on those alternatives. Though this practice was never formalized in a standing rule, it encouraged these sub-party groups to cohere around actual, detailed alternative visions for federal spending.

Creating opportunities for sub-parties to access the legislative agenda would help them to cohere and to become policy relevant, creating more opportunities for legislative leadership, and making them more distinct to the broader public.³⁰ It would also incentivize members of Congress to shift more of their energy to the things that make Congress function: developing policy, building legislative coalitions, and doing the work of the American people.

²⁸ House of Commons of Canada, “Private Members’ Business,” accessed September 23, 2025, https://www.ourcommons.ca/procedure/our-procedure/PrivateMembersBusiness/c_g_privatemembersbusiness-e.html.

²⁹ 126 Cong. Rec. 8789–90 (1980), <https://www.congress.gov/96/crecb/1980/04/23/GPO-CRECB-1980-pt7-5-2.pdf#page=20>.

³⁰ In the event that the United States shifted to a true multiparty system, the realities of multiparty governance would make it even more essential to decentralize some control over the legislative agenda. See Lee Drutman and Rob Oldham, “Governing the House With Multiple Parties,” *New America*, August 6, 2024, 35–37, <https://www.newamerica.org/political-reform/reports/governing-the-house-with-multiple-parties/>.

The Persistent Problem of Electoral Incentives

In addition to shifting us toward a more functional Congress, empowering sub-parties could also serve as a stepping stone to fixing the primary systemic problem that originates *outside* of Congress — the structure of our elections.

Most members of Congress run for office in winner-take-all contests — elections in which the single candidate that gets the most votes wins, even if the vote is split among multiple candidates and the winner does not get a majority. Under a winner-take-all system, it is very difficult for a third-party or independent candidate to compete, because they risk splitting votes with their most similar major-party competitor and inadvertently helping their least-favored opponent. Such candidates usually (often wisely) decide not to run, leaving voters with only two choices — even if neither major-party candidate truly represents the people of the district.

Partisan primaries exacerbate the downsides of winner-take-all elections and create an additional incentive for gridlock. Most candidates who wish to run under a major-party banner must first win that party's primary. This can put them in a kind of catch-22 situation:

- To win their next primary election, candidates need to avoid doing anything that would disappoint too many of the voters in their own party.
- But to win their next general election, they also don't want to alienate too many voters in the general public.

Moreover, candidates don't want to offend party leaders, who give them committee assignments, help with fundraising, and decide whether any of their bills will get a vote. It can be exceedingly difficult for a member to simultaneously satisfy each of these various constituencies. For some members, an appealing strategy in many policy areas is to do nothing — to not even take a position, so that they can avoid offending any of the different groups they depend on to remain employed.

This creates an obstacle to the policy changes proposed above, though not an insurmountable one. Districts vary, and not all members are equally stuck in this trap. Congress has become so dysfunctional that voters of different stripes may increasingly be open to change. And even legislators that feel pulled in different directions may welcome opportunities to address regional concerns, or to tackle other issues that are not at the center of two-party conflict.

A gradual empowering of sub-parties may also lead to a virtuous cycle. As voters start to recognize that their representative is not just another Democrat or Republican, but part of a distinct group with its own identity, belonging to that sub-party may help some members bridge the gap between their primary and general electorates. Which would, in turn, further empower

sub-parties — and potentially make it easier for members to imagine and accept even bigger changes (like a transition to PR) that would open the door to full-fledged multipartyism

With this in mind, members of Congress should consider the possibility that empowering sub-parties could contribute to the longer-term project of reforming federal elections and enabling multi-party politics. When legislative opportunities arise, they should try to use those opportunities to smooth that path. For example, they should consider:

- **Initiatives within Congress to discuss and propose electoral change.**

Two members of the House (co-chairs of the Blue Dog Coalition) recently proposed the creation of a bipartisan Select Committee on Electoral Reform, with wide support from leading scholars (and from Protect Democracy).³¹ Creation of such a committee would be a modest step that could help call attention to the need for electoral change, and help build consensus around necessary policy solutions.

- **Policies that reinforce third-party and sub-group identities.**

One way to further the creation of alternatives within Congress would be to allow more distinct groups to organize around and associate with like-minded major-party candidates. For example, policies like fusion voting, which allows candidates to be listed under multiple party labels on the ballot,³² could permit candidates to run not only as Democrats and Republicans, but to accept a third-party's nomination as well. Candidates could perhaps also be permitted to use a sub-party label *instead* of a generic major-party label, identifying themselves, for example, as a "Progressive Democrat" or a "Freedom Caucus Republican."

- **Policies that remove barriers to independent and third-party candidacies.**

Despite the obstacles to non-major-party candidates, there is a growing interest in such candidates in both the political class and the general public. It is possible that some incremental changes to electoral rules could help enable more of those candidates to compete, and, in turn, open up more potential for new sub-parties in Congress and new legislative coalitions. Such changes could include lowering ballot access requirements, finding ways to reduce the likelihood of spoiler effects, and re-examining fundraising barriers that disproportionately affect candidates outside of the two parties.

Making broad policy changes is often harder than changing congressional rules — most notably, federal legislation can be vetoed by the president, while congressional rules changes cannot. But these changes should have some chance if they can find a sufficiently diverse and motivated base of congressional support; they should appeal to any member or group that feels stifled by the current system and is willing to back incremental change.

³¹ "175 American Scholars Write Letter Supporting Select Committee on Electoral Reform," November 21, 2024, <https://protectdemocracy.org/work/175-american-scholars-write-letter-supporting-select-committee-on-electoral-reform/>.

³² For more on fusion voting, see "Fusion Voting, Explained," Protect Democracy, December 19, 2023, <https://protectdemocracy.org/work/fusion-voting-explained/>.

Conclusion

If there's one thing that most Americans can agree on, it's that American politics is broken. Members of Congress seem to be part of that consensus; they generally express deep dissatisfaction with their roles, and they recognize that they are working within a failing, unpopular institution.

But what they lack is a politically-feasible vision for how to fix this mess. And that's the beauty of empowering sub-parties: it's not a revolution, it's a set of relatively small changes that could have an outsized impact, in part by making further change more likely. It could shift us out of our political downward spiral and into an upward one. And it doesn't require consensus between Congress and the Executive Branch, or even between the two chambers of Congress.

All it requires is the leadership, the will, and the political imagination to affect change. Members of Congress may be reluctant to reform the system that they've become accustomed to, particularly now that a long period of gridlock has narrowed our collective horizons. But they should consider what it might be like to finally have the opportunity to do the jobs they were elected to do. To lead, to solve problems, and to take a break from the dead end of deepening two-party conflict.



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