Fusion as a Pathway to Proportional Representation

Lessons from global experience and American electoral heritage

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Introduction: Charting a Path to Proportional Representation

American democracy faces mounting pressures, many of which are exacerbated by an electoral system that consistently produces a rigid two-party structure. The most common elections in the United States are winner-take-all elections—where only the top candidate in a single-seat district wins. This kind of system has been shown to worsen polarization, empower extremist factions, and undermine trust among those who lose elections.[1] By contrast, proportional representation (PR) systems can help mitigate these problems by giving voters more meaningful choices, fostering multiparty coalitions, and ensuring legislatures more accurately reflect the diversity of public opinion.

Reforming the U.S. system to adopt PR is a challenging but realistic goal.[2] Other democracies have transitioned away from winner-take-all systems despite entrenched interests, and electoral reform is a well-established part of American history, even if past uses of PR in the United States have been limited mainly to local elections. Research on successful transitions abroad points to three recurring conditions that enable adoption of PR:

1. Public discontent with the shortcomings of winner-take-all systems
2. A weakening of dominant parties' control over the political system
3. A disruptive event or shock that creates an opening for reform

While systemic shocks are by nature unpredictable, public frustration with the two-party system is clearly rising. The second condition—weakening dominant-party control—is both more achievable and more often overlooked in American reform debates than many appreciate. Minor or emerging parties are often critical agents in creating pressure for change, but the United States lacks a meaningful multiparty system. Yet this was not always so. Historically, much of the country had robust minor parties, thanks in part to electoral fusion—a practice where more than one party can nominate the same candidate. Today, the United States has lost its multiparty system in large part because its laws and practices, including widespread bans on electoral fusion, make it extremely difficult for minor parties to survive and grow.

[1] Grant Tudor, "Advantaging Authoritarianism: How the U.S. Electoral System Favors Extremism," Protect Democracy, October 2024, https://protectdemocracy.org/work/advantaging-authoritarianism/; Grant Tudor and Beau Tremitiere, "Towards Proportional Representation for the U.S. House: Amending the Uniform Congressional District Act," Protect Democracy and Unite America, March 2023, https://protectdemocracy.org/work/proportional-representation-ucda.

[2] Didi Kuo, "Why Big Reform Is Possible," Democracy Journal (Fall 2023), https://democracyjournal.org/magazine/70/why-big-reform-is-possible.

Fusion represents a practical, historically grounded pathway to open the system to more parties and lay the groundwork for PR. Fusion voting was once common in the U.S., supporting a vibrant ecosystem of minor parties throughout the 19th and early 20th centuries. It enabled parties to compete independently where they were strong and cross-endorse major-party candidates elsewhere, building voter loyalty and issue-based coalitions without the risk of "spoiling" elections. Bans on fusion were deliberately enacted to restrict competition and reinforce the two-party system.

Restoring fusion voting would not automatically deliver proportional representation, but it could help loosen the current system's rigidity by:

- Enabling minor parties to take root in communities around shared issues of concern.
- Encouraging minor parties to build strong organizations that mobilize dissatisfied voters.
- Increasing strategic flexibility for minor parties to influence or challenge major parties.

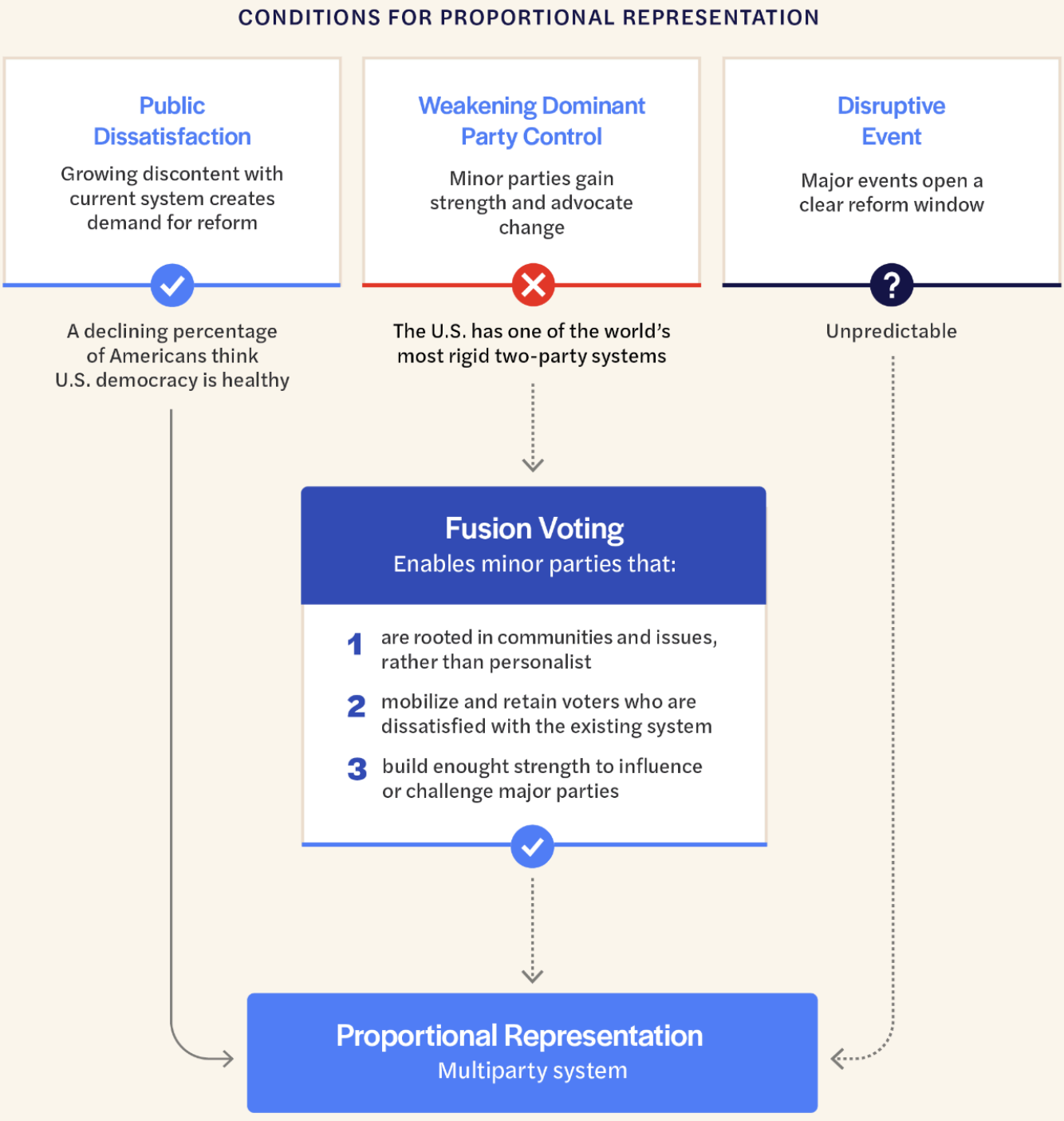
By opening the political system to these kinds of minor parties, fusion could help generate the organizational infrastructure and pressure to make the adoption of PR politically viable.

Fusion could help generate the organizational infrastructure and pressure to make the adoption of proportional representation politically viable.

In short, expanding fusion voting presents a path to the kind of nascent multiparty system that could effectively advocate for change. Fusion voting could serve as a crucial stepping stone—an incremental but meaningful reform that expands voters' choices, strengthens democratic competition, and makes the adoption of proportional representation more plausible. This paper explores the conditions that frequently precede PR adoption, reviews the U.S.'s own experiences with both PR and fusion, and examines how reviving fusion voting today could help create the political environment needed to move toward a healthier, more representative democracy.

How Fusion Voting Could Open a Pathway to Proportional Representation

Many factors influence the conditions for proportional representation reform. While fusion voting isn't a complete solution, it can weaken dominant party control in a winner-take-all system by helping minor parties gain traction.



When Do Countries Adopt Proportional Representation?

Efforts to make American electoral systems more proportionally representative have had localized success, but never national impact. This stands in stark contrast to reform efforts elsewhere in the world. During the 19th and 20th centuries, many democracies transitioned to proportional representation.[3] By the late 20th century, proportional representation had become the preferred electoral system of such diverse democracies as Sweden, New Zealand, South Africa, and Germany. The appeal of PR in these countries paralleled many of the reasons it first gained traction in the United States: primarily, its ability to ensure that political outcomes more accurately reflected the diversity of voter preferences.

With this in mind, the historical failure of proportional representation in the United States should not be seen as evidence of inherent flaws in the system or a fundamental incompatibility with American politics. Instead, it reflects a combination of factors specific to the particular form it took and the historical period in which it was adopted and later repealed.

If the United States were to pursue a more proportional system, what lessons could be gleaned from global experience? Where countries have successfully transitioned from winner-take-all to proportional systems, research on electoral reform highlights three key factors that facilitate transitions:

1. Public discontent with the shortcomings of winner-take-all systems;
2. A weakening of dominant parties' control over the political system; and
3. A disruptive event or shock that creates an opening for reform.[4]

None of these factors is strictly necessary for reform (and even all three might be insufficient, depending on the context). However, most cases of major change have featured at least one. While comparisons of global experiences to domestic politics can necessarily give pause, understanding the dynamics at play within and between these factors in other countries is crucial for assessing the feasibility of and potential pathways for reform in the United States. The following section offers an exploration of how these factors correlate with transitions to proportional representation in a variety of contexts, offering insights that can inform thinking in the United States.

[3] Nils-Christian Bormann and Matt Golder, "Democratic Electoral Systems around the world, 1946–2011," *Electoral Studies* 32, no. 2 (2013): 360–369, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.electstud.2013.01.005.

[4] These are high-level factors that have taken various forms across cases, but nonetheless stand out. For discussions of the complexity of the politics of reform, see Pippa Norris, "Introduction: The Politics of Electoral Reform," *International Political Science Review / Revue Internationale de Science Politique* 16, no. 1 (1995): 7, http://www.jstor.org/stable/1601165; Pippa Norris, "Choosing Electoral Systems: Proportional, Majoritarian and Mixed Systems." *International Political Science Review / Revue Internationale de Science Politique* 18, no. 3 (1997): 298, http://www.jstor.org/stable/1601345.

Historical Examples of Shifts to Proportional Representation

Electoral Inequality & Public Discontent	Decline of Dominant Party Control & Role of Minor Parties	Disruptive Event or Political Upheaval
Belgium (1899)[5]		
Ethnic and linguistic divides created dissatisfaction with winner-take-all systems and persistent electoral inequality	Dominance of French-speaking elite eroded; minor parties pushed for PR to reflect Belgium's cultural, class, and political diversity	Ethnic and class tensions threatened the unity of the nation and necessitated a system to prevent future conflict and ensure stability
Italy (1946)[6]		
Pre-war elections often excluded significant segments of society, creating a demand for a more inclusive system during post-war reconstruction	Collapse of the fascist regime removed dominant party control; Communists, Christian Democrats, and other factions preferred PR to reflect their electoral strength	Post-WWII reconstruction efforts required a new system to build legitimacy after fascist rule
Spain (1977)[7]		
Franco's dictatorship excluded significant portions of the population leading to public discontent with chronic underrepresentation	Transition to democracy saw the decline of dominant Francoist structures; regional and ideological parties advocated for PR to ensure their inclusion in a post-transition Spain	The transition from Franco's regime to democracy was a period of societal and political upheaval

[5] Patrick Emmenegger and André Walter, "When Dominant Parties Adopt Proportional Representation: The Mysterious Case of Belgium." *European Political Science Review* 11, no. 4 (October 21, 2019): 433–50, https://doi.org/10.1017/s1755773919000225; Stein Rokkan, *Citizens, Elections, Parties; Approaches to the Comparative Study of the Processes of Development* (New York: McKay, 1970), 125.

[6] Diego Gambetta and Steven Warner, "Italy: Lofty Ambitions and Unintended Consequences," in *Handbook of Electoral System Choice*, ed. Josep M. Colomer (Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 237-238; Gianfranco Baldini, "The Different Trajectories of Italian Electoral Reforms, in *Understanding Electoral Reform*, ed. Reuven Y. Hazan and Monique Leyenaar (Routledge, 2014), 208-227.

[7] Josep M. Colomer, "Spain: from Civil War to Proportional Representation," in *Handbook of Electoral System Choice,* ed. Josep M. Colomer (Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 260-262.

Electoral Inequality & Public Discontent	Decline of Dominant Party Control & Role of Minor Parties	Disruptive Event or Political Upheaval
New Zealand (1993)[8]		
Chronic disproportionality and spurious majorities under FPTP led to public dissatisfaction with electoral outcomes	Growing dissatisfaction with major party performance in addressing voters' needs; minor parties advocated for PR to reflect broader voter preferences	Economic reforms and dissatisfaction with governance created a demand for systemic change
South Africa (1994)[9]		
The historical exclusion of Black South Africans and ethnic minorities from politics led to public discontent with systems that favored dominance and exclusion	Transition from apartheid era minority rule meant the old ruling party had no legitimacy in the new democracy; minor parties played a key role in shaping the new constitution, ensuring a proportional system to protect smaller constituencies	The end of apartheid and fears of ethnic conflict necessitated a system that could manage a diverse electorate

Public Discontent with the Shortcomings of Winner-Take-All Systems

Any set of electoral rules necessarily impacts the ease or difficulty with which different types of candidates, interests, or parties succeed in gaining election or representation. Most of the time, political actors learn to adapt to a system that might seem to tilt against them and can expect to navigate the landscape of electoral competition and policymaking with a reasonable chance of success.[10] But when the rules of the game consistently disadvantage some groups—where their inability to gain electoral advantage translates into persistent underrepresentation—that chronic disadvantage bleeds into policy as well.[11] Underrepresentation often translates into tangible disparities in economic, social, and political outcomes, which can fuel public discontent and prompt demands for electoral reform.[12]

[8] Jack Vowles, "The Politics of Electoral Reform in New Zealand," *International Political Science Review / Revue Internationale de Science Politique* 16, no. 1 (1995): 95–115, http://www.jstor.org/stable/1601171.

[9] Tom Lodge, "How the South African Electoral System was Negotiated," *Journal of African Elections* 2, no. 1 (2003): 71-76, https://hdl.handle.net/10520/EJC32337.

[10] Patrick Dunleavy and Helen Margetts, "Understanding the Dynamics of Electoral Reform," *International Political Science Review / Revue Internationale de Science Politique* 16, no. 1 (1995): 10. http://www.jstor.org/stable/1601166; Pippa Norris, "Choosing Electoral Systems: Proportional, Majoritarian and Mixed Systems," *International Political Science Review / Revue Internationale de Science Politique* 18, no. 3 (1997): 298, http://www.jstor.org/stable/1601345.

[11] For examples of how electoral rules influence coalitions and policy outcomes, see Torben Iversen and David Soskice, "Electoral Institutions, Parties, and the Politics of Class: Explaining the Formation of Redistributive Coalitions," in *Democracy, Inequality, and Representation in Comparative Perspective*, ed. Pablo Beramendi and Christopher J. Anderson (Russell Sage Foundation, 2008), 94-97.

[12] Pippa Norris, "Choosing Electoral Systems: Proportional, Majoritarian and Mixed Systems," *International Political Science Review / Revue Internationale de Science Politique* 18, no. 3 (1997): 306. http://www.jstor.org/stable/1601345; Reid J. Epstein, "As Faith Flags in U.S. Government, Many Voters Want to Upend the System." *New York Times*. July 13, 2022. https://www.nytimes.com/2022/07/13/us/politics/government-trust-voting-poll.html.

Because of their tendency to produce nonproportional results and persistently underrepresent certain groups, winner-take-all systems are particularly vulnerable to these dynamics. In such cases, it is hardly surprising that frustration is channeled into demands for more proportional systems. More proportional systems are typically better at addressing issues such as income and gender inequality.[13] Proportional systems also produce a more descriptively representative legislature.[14] Legislatures that mirror the dominant characteristics of a society are in turn more likely to be responsive to its diverse needs.[15] Given these benefits, reformers motivated by inequality and underrepresentation of their demands turn to PR.

New Zealand's experience in the late 20th century illustrates how distortions in winner-take-all elections can undermine fair representation and fuel demands for reform. Beginning in the 1940s and 50s, Māori voters and candidates often allied with the Labour Party to advance Māori representation.[16] However, by 1980 it was clear that this strategy had failed to deliver meaningful gains. In response to Labour's lack of sensitivity to Māori issues, activists founded Mana Motuhake, an independent Māori party.[17] Between 1980 and 1990, Mana Motuhake built significant support, winning up to 22.4% of the vote for reserved Māori seats in one election, yet still failed to secure seats proportional to its backing. This problem was not unique to Māori parties.[18] From 1954 to 1990, minor parties consistently earned a substantial share of the vote—13.5% on average, and as high as 20% in some elections[19]—but rarely won a

[13] For electoral systems and income inequality, see Izaskun Zuazu, "Electoral Systems and Income Inequality: A Tale of Political Equality," *Empirical Economics* 63, no. 2 (2021): 793–819, https://doi.org/10.1007/s00181-021-02154-9. For electoral systems and gender inequality, see Øyvind Søraas Skorge, "Mobilizing the Underrepresented: Electoral Systems and Gender Inequality in Political Participation," *American Journal of Political Science* 67, no. 3 (2021): 538–52, https://doi.org/10.1111/ajps.12654.

[14] Pippa Norris, "Choosing Electoral Systems: Proportional, Majoritarian and Mixed Systems," *International Political Science Review / Revue Internationale de Science Politique* 18, no. 3 (1997): 298, 309. http://www.jstor.org/stable/1601345.; Michael Latner, Jack Santucci, and Matthew Shugart, "Multi-seat Districts and Larger Assemblies Produce More Diverse Racial Representation," (2021) http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3911532; Lena Wängnerud, "Women in Parliaments: Descriptive and Substantive Representation," *Annual Review of Political Science* 12 (2009): 51-69, https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.polisci.11.053106.123839.

[15] There is extensive research on the question of how (and how much) descriptive representation impacts substantive policy representation. For a discussion of research on these questions in the United States, see Michele L. Swers and Stella M. Rouse, "Descriptive Representation: Understanding the Impact of Identity on Substantive Representation of Group Interests," in *The Oxford Handbook of the American Congress* (Oxford University Press, 2013). For examples of such studies in the European and Latin American contexts, see Caroline McEvoy, "Does the Descriptive Representation of Women Matter? A Comparison of Gendered Differences in Political Attitudes Between Voters and Representatives in the European Parliament," *Politics & Gender* 12, no. 4 (2016): 754-780, https://doi:10.1017/S1743923X16000118; Maria Sobolewska, Rebecca McKee, and Rosie Campbell, "Explaining Motivation to Represent: How Does Descriptive Representation Lead to Substantive Representation of Racial and Ethnic Minorities?" *West European Politics* 41, no. 6 (2018): 1237-1261, https://doi.org/10.1080/01402382.2018.1455408; Taylor C. Boas and Amy Erica Smith, "Looks Like Me, Thinks Like Me: Descriptive Representation and Opinion Congruence in Brazil," *Latin American Research Review* 54, no. 2 (2019): 310-328, https://doi.org/10.25222/larr.235.

[16] Jack Vowles, Hilde Coffe, and Jennifer Curtin, "Against the Tide?: Māori in the Māori Electorates," in *A Bark But No Bite: Inequality and the 2014 New Zealand General Election* (ANU Press, 2017), 218.

[17] Janine Hayward and Richard Shaw, *Historical Dictionary of New Zealand* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2016), 215; Jack Vowles, Hilde Coffe, and Jennifer Curtin, "Against the Tide?: Māori in the Māori Electorates," in *A Bark But No Bite: Inequality and the 2014 New Zealand General Election* (ANU Press, 2017), 218.

[18] For the New Labour Party, the Green Party, the Values Party, Social Credit, Mana Motuhake for the Maori See: Jack Vowles, "The Politics of Electoral Reform in New Zealand," International Political Science Review / Revue Internationale de Science Politique 16, no. 1 (1995): 99, http://www.jstor.org/stable/1601171; Jennifer Curtin and Raymond Miller, "Political parties - Challenging the two-party system," Te Ara - The Encyclopedia of New Zealand, accessed April 23, 2025, http://www.TeAra.govt.nz/en/political-parties/page-3.

[19] For 13.5% see: Josep M. Colomer and Bernard Grofman, *Handbook of Electoral System Choice* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 531; For 20% see: Didi Kuo, "Why Big Reform Is Possible," *Democracy Journal* (Fall 2023), https://democracyjournal.org/magazine/70/why-big-reform-is-possible/.

corresponding share of seats.[20] In the 1981 general election, for instance, the Social Credit party won 20.65% of the vote but only 2 of the 92 available seats—only 2% of seats.[21]

Major parties were not immune from the distortions either. In the 1978 election, the National Party won a majority of seats with only 39.8% of the vote, while Labour, despite earning 40.4%, ended up with fewer seats—a striking electoral inversion.[22] Such distortions eroded public confidence in the system and intensified calls for electoral reform.[23]

Both major parties attempted to harness these calls without making real concessions. The Labour Party promised during the 1987 campaign season to hold a binding referendum on electoral reform to address these concerns.[24] Yet after the party won, it refused to follow through. The National Party, seeing an opportunity to further discredit the Labour government, then also promised a referendum once in power.

After winning the following election, the National Party attempted to 'divert the reform impulse' among New Zealanders by offering more modest alternatives to wholesale reform.[25] Nevertheless, sustained public frustration forced the reluctant National Party to make good on the promised referendum.[26] The referendum passed in 1993 and in 1996, New Zealand held its first national elections with proportional representation,[27] ensuring a closer alignment between votes cast and legislative representation.[28] Its transition demonstrates how sidelining voter preferences can erode the legitimacy of the electoral system, prompting voters to demand systems that better reflect their preferences and values.

Weakening of Dominant Party Control

The presence of popular minor parties often plays a pivotal role in driving the change from winner-take-all to proportional systems. By allowing minor parties to convert their share of the vote into a commensurate share of legislative seats, proportional systems allow smaller and/or new parties to gain political power and influence over governance where they otherwise would

[20] Jack H. Nagel, "New Zealand: Reform by (Nearly) Immaculate Design," in *Handbook of Electoral System Choice*, ed. Joseph M. Colomer (Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 531.

[21] Inter-Parliamentary Union, "New Zealand House of Representatives," accessed September 29, 2025, https://data.ipu.org/election-summary/PDF/NEW_ZEALAND_1981_E.PDF

[22] Inter-Parliamentary Union, "New Zealand," accessed September 29, 2025, https://data.ipu.org/election-summary/PDF/NEW_ZEALAND_1978_E.PDF.

[23] Jack Vowles, *Towards Consensus?: The 1993 Election and Referendum in New Zealand and the Transition to Proportional Representation* (Auckland University Press, 1995), 2.

[24] Jack H. Nagel, "New Zealand: Reform by (Nearly) Immaculate Design," in *Handbook of Electoral System Choice*, ed. Joseph M. Colomer (Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 531; Jack Vowles, "The Politics of Electoral Reform in New Zealand," *International Political Science Review / Revue Internationale de Science Politique* 16, no. 1 (1995): 105. http://www.jstor.org/stable/1601171.

[25] Jack H. Nagel, "New Zealand: Reform by (Nearly) Immaculate Design," in *Handbook of Electoral System Choice*, ed. Joseph M. Colomer (Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 535; Jack Vowles, "The Politics of Electoral Reform in New Zealand," *International Political Science Review / Revue Internationale de Science Politique* 16, no. 1 (1995): 105. http://www.jstor.org/stable/1601171.

[26] Jack Vowles, "The Politics of Electoral Reform in New Zealand." *International Political Science Review / Revue Internationale de Science Politique* 16, no. 1 (1995): 104, http://www.jstor.org/stable/1601171.

[27] New Zealand adopted a mixed-member proportional system, a system that blends components of winner-take-all and proportional representation, combining single-member districts with some number of additional seats allocated to parties proportionally.

[28] Jack H. Nagel, "New Zealand: Reform by (Nearly) Immaculate Design," in *Handbook of Electoral System Choice*, ed. Joseph M. Colomer (Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 530.

have little to none.[29] As a result, minor parties often become leading advocates for adopting proportional representation in countries with entrenched winner-take-all systems. Examples from around the world show that when these parties gain significant voter support but remain locked out of power under winner-take-all rules, they create pressure for change.[30]

Unsurprisingly, major parties are often resistant to reforms that would weaken their dominant position.[31] One of the core features of winner-take-all systems is that they tend to concentrate legislative power, frequently awarding the largest parties a share of seats that is even higher than their share of the vote. This is a valuable bulwark against rising would-be challengers, and so major parties may oppose replacing the winner-take-all system so long as it works to their advantage.

If a minor party *does* begin to accumulate power and threaten disruption, major parties have a delicate calculation to make. They can (and often do) resist change, meaning that reform will succeed only if a sufficiently strong coalition joins minor parties in advocating for change over their opposition. If major parties remain politically dominant, they may be successful in holding off reform. But if their hold on the system falters or minor parties continue to draw substantial support, that becomes much more difficult.

Alternatively, major parties may recognize the risk of being defeated *within* the winner-take-all system early on and support the reform process, hoping to protect as much of their advantage as possible.[32] Even the threat of minor parties winning in *some* elections can be enough to encourage risk-averse, self-interested major parties to explore options such as proportional representation that mitigate the risk of becoming shut out entirely themselves.[33] To major parties faced with increased competition from minor parties, a partial win (e.g., gaining a significant share but not an absolute majority in a legislature) is preferable to a total loss.

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[29] Less proportional systems create incentives for fewer, larger parties. This prevents smaller parties from having an opportunity to join governing coalitions, as they would in more proportional systems. See Michael Laver and Norman Schofield, *Multiparty Government: The Politics of Coalition in Europe* (University of Michigan Press, 1998), 204. More proportional electoral rules also tend to create space for more ideologically diverse parties, another factor that may contribute to desire for reform. Jay K. Dow, "Party-System Extremism in Majoritarian and Proportional Electoral Systems," *British Journal of Political Science* 41, no. 2 (2011): 341-361, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0007123410000360.

[30] The scholarly literature on this topic is large and political scientists have identified variations of this dynamic. In some historical European cases, for example, ascendant popular or socialist parties applied direct pressure to both expand the franchise and gain electoral access through what is sometimes called a conflictual model of PR adoption. In other cases, more consensus prevailed and major parties agreed to adopt PR (especially the versions that best served their own interests). Regardless of whether minor parties "force" the adoption of PR or major parties advance reform out of strategic self-interest, an existing multiparty system is frequently part of the picture. For examples of this body of scholarship, see discussions in André Walter and Patrick Emmenegger, "Majority Protection: The Origins of Distorted Proportional Representation," *Electoral Studies* 50 (2019): 64-77, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.electstud.2019.02.002. See also André Blais, Agnieska Dobrzynska, and Indridi H. Indridason, "To Adopt or Not to Adopt Proportional Representation: The Politics of Institutional Choice," *British Journal of Political Science* 30, no. 1 (2005): 182-190, doi:10.1017/S0007123405000098. For one example of a nuanced and synthetic approach, see Lucas Leemann and Isabela Mares, "The Adoption of Proportional Representation," *The Journal of Politics* 76, no. 2 (2014): 461-478, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022381613001394.

[31] Carles Boix, "Setting the Rules of the Game: The Choice of Electoral Systems in Advanced Democracies," *The American Political Science Review*, 93, no. 3(1999): 609-624, https://doi.org/10.2307/2585577; Gideon Rahat, "The Study of the Politics of Electoral Reform in the 1990s: Theoretical and Methodological Lessons," *Comparative Politics* 36, no. 4 (2004): 470. https://doi.org/10.2307/4150171.

[32] "As soon as change takes place and the previous structure of partisan competition starts to unravel, the ruling parties consider modifying the electoral system to maintain their political advantage." Carles Boix, "Setting the Rules of the Game: The Choice of Electoral Systems in Advanced Democracies," *The American Political Science Review*, 93, no. 3 (1999): 611, https://doi.org/10.2307/2585577.

[33] Josep M. Colomer, "The Strategy and History of Electoral System Choice," *Handbook of Electoral System Choice*, ed. Josep M. Colomer (Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 7.

Dominant parties may also calculate that PR offers them a means not only of winning seats, but of retaining a leadership role with respect to governance. If a fragmented party system prevents any party from winning an outright majority under PR, major parties can still exercise influence through coalition building with smaller parties. For instance, in Germany's proportional system, no single party has won a majority in recent decades, so coalition governments are the norm.

Major parties such as the center-right Christian Democratic Union (CDU), which led Germany's 2025 election with 22.6% of the vote share, maintain power in the legislature by forming coalitions with less electorally successful parties, such as the center-right Christian Social Union of Bavaria (CSU) which earned 6% of the vote share, and the center-left Social Democrats (SPD) which earned 16.4% of the vote share.[34] For the CSU and the SPD, which are both experiencing dwindling support, this coalition is a means of acquiring power within the legislature.[35]

By integrating smaller parties into their legislative decision-making through coalitions, dominant parties such as the CDU can reduce political fragmentation, ensuring they remain at the center of policymaking even when they do not command electoral majorities. In this example, the dominant CDU won only 164 out of 603 available seats. The tri-party CDU/CSU/SPD coalition, however, has a combined 328 seats—a majority in the legislature. Dominant parties that are at risk of losing their majorities (and thus their legislative authority) under winner-take-all may consider PR in an attempt to preserve and protect their dominance in the event of declining support.

This was the case in Belgium in 1899, when the dominant Catholic Party, facing growing electoral threats from socialist and liberal opponents, led the push for proportional representation as a way to preserve its influence despite anticipating some seat losses under the new system. In previous elections, the Catholics benefited from the vote-seat distortions common under winner-take-all, once winning 73.7% of the available seats with a vote share of 43.9%. But, as minor socialist and liberal parties began to successfully strategize against the Catholics, their margins of victory in specific districts began to decrease by up to nearly 10%.[36]

With this threat to their dominance, the party came to recognize that its comfortable majority provided by distortions related to the winner-take-all electoral system were not a guarantee. It subsequently began to pursue power sharing options in the form of PR to prevent absolute losses in regions with growing socialist or liberal influence.[37] Following the adoption of PR,

[34] "The 21st Bundestag Election," The Federal Returning Officer, https://www.bundeswahlleiterin.de/en/.

[35] In addition to facilitating legislative leadership by coalition, PR can also help party leaders manage their own legislators. In most forms of PR, votes are counted by party, not just individual candidates. Particularly in electoral systems that incentivize voting by party, rather than individual candidate, party discipline is often stronger. Party allegiance is stronger and individual legislators have less autonomy than in winner-take-all systems, where they may seek to cultivate personal, independent power bases through name recognition to advance their careers. That kind of independence makes them less dependent on the party and more likely to break with the party in the legislature. See Sam Depauw and Shane Martin. "Legislative Party Discipline and Cohesion in Comparative Perspective" in *Intra-Party Politics and Coalition Governments*, ed. Daniela Giannetti and Kenneth Benoit (Taylor & Francis, 2008); Christopher J. Kam, *Party Discipline and Parliamentary Politics* (Cambridge University Press, 2009), 113.

[36] Patrick Emmenegger and André Walter, "When Dominant Parties Adopt Proportional Representation: The Mysterious Case of Belgium," *European Political Science Review* 11, no. 4 (2019): 433–50, https://doi.org/10.1017/s1755773919000225.

[37] Patrick Emmenegger and André Walter, "When Dominant Parties Adopt Proportional Representation: The Mysterious Case of Belgium," *European Political Science Review* 11, no. 4 (2019): 433–50, https://doi.org/10.1017/s1755773919000225.

Catholics lost 23% of their seats in the parliament. However, the choice to advocate for and transition to a proportional electoral system was a long-term strategic decision made to protect their dominance over time.[38] Similar dynamics played out in Sweden, which also made the shift to PR when major parties' dominance eroded due to the rise of new political movements.[39]

In short, a key reform dynamic results from the growth of new or minor parties advocating for PR. If they can crack major parties' control over the political system, they can overcome opposition to reform or prompt dominant parties to accept PR as a matter of self-preservation in the face of mounting pressure.

A Shock to the System that Disrupts the Status Quo

Finally, national crises or periods of political upheaval often serve as catalysts for larger-scale electoral reforms, including the adoption of PR. In post-conflict countries, for example, the inadequacies of the winner-take-all system can become apparent.[40] These systems are more likely to marginalize large segments of the population, particularly those who are already politically or socially excluded. This exclusion can intensify grievances, undermine trust in democratic institutions, and fuel renewed conflict.[41] In highly polarized societies, PR can provide an institutional structure that is, by design, more inclusive and equitable.[42] In moments of profound upheaval, this promise can encourage those who are dissatisfied with the outcomes under winner-take-all, and those concerned with the viability and legitimacy of the state, to seek alternative electoral arrangements.

One example is Italy's transition to PR. After World War II, Italy sought to rebuild a political system discredited by fascist rule. In 1946, as Italy transitioned to democracy, it chose PR to reflect the nation's ideological and political diversity, which ranged from communists to Christian democrats.[43] By ensuring representation for various political factions, PR played a role in legitimizing the post-war democratic order and reducing the risk of marginalizing key political groups during a fragile period of reconstruction.

More recently, in South Africa, the end of apartheid in 1994 marked another instance in which political and societal upheaval led to the adoption of PR. There, the transition from an authoritarian regime to a multi-racial democracy required an electoral system that could accommodate the country's profound ethnic and political divisions. Leaders of the negotiated settlement, including leaders of the African National Congress (ANC) and former ruling parties, agreed that PR was the preferred electoral system to ensure broad inclusion and prevent single

[38] Patrick Emmenegger and André Walter, "When Dominant Parties Adopt Proportional Representation: The Mysterious Case of Belgium," *European Political Science Review* 11, no. 4 (October 21, 2019): 433–50, https://doi.org/10.1017/s1755773919000225.

[39] Nils Herlitz, "Proportional Representation in Sweden," *The American Political Science Review* 19, no. 3 (1925): 582, https://doi.org/10.2307/2939136.

[40] Andrew Reynolds, "Elections, Electoral Systems, and Conflict in Africa," *The Brown Journal of World Affairs* 16, no. 1 (2009): 75-83.

[41] Madhav Joshi, "Inclusive Institutions and Stability of Transition Toward Democracy in Post-Civil War States," *Democratization* 20, no. 4 (2013): 743-770, https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2012.666067.

[42] Arend Lijphart, "Constitutional Choices for New Democracies," Journal of Democracy 2, no. 1 (1991): 72-84, https://dx.doi.org/10.1353/jod.1991.0011; Arend Lijphart, "Constitutional Design for Divided Societies," Journal of Democracy 15, no. 2 (2004): 96-109, https://dx.doi.org/10.1353/jod.2004.0029.

[43] Maurizio Cotta and Luca Verzichelli, *Political Institutions in Italy* (Oxford University Press, 2007), 42-43.

group dominance. PR was similarly viewed by negotiators and international onlookers alike as the best mechanism to guarantee that all major groups, including previously disenfranchised Black South Africans and smaller parties, would have a voice in the new government.[44] The result was an inclusive political system that played a pivotal role in fostering legitimacy during a time of immense societal transformation.

The Appeal of a More Representative and Responsive Democracy

While public discontent with electoral system distortions, declining dominant party control, and national crises often contribute to transitions from winner-take-all to PR, they do not need to be simultaneously present for such a change to occur. Each condition provides distinct pressures or opportunities that can make the adoption of PR *more likely*, but they operate independently and vary across contexts.

> The only universally observed condition necessary for a transition to PR is an awareness of the system itself and its potential benefits.

The only universally observed condition necessary for a transition to PR is an awareness of the system itself and its potential benefits.[45] As long as reformers, voters, and policymakers understand their current electoral system and believe that PR could address the specific grievances they may have with it, there are many ways for support to coalesce and for reform to happen.

[44] "The cultural, social and economic diversity of South Africa requires the adoption of an electoral system at all levels which will enable sectoral groups to be adequately represented in decision making." Tom Lodge, "How the South African Electoral System was Negotiated," *Journal of African Elections* 2, no. 1 (2003): 72, https://hdl.handle.net/10520/EJC32337.

[45] André Blais, Agnieska Dobrzynska, and Indridi H. Indridason, "To Adopt or Not to Adopt Proportional Representation: The Politics of Institutional Choice," *British Journal of Political Science* 30, no. 1 (2005): 182-190, doi:10.1017/S0007123405000098. See also Alan Renwick, "Electoral System Change,"in *The Oxford Handbook of Electoral Systems,* ed. Erik S. Herron, Robert J. Pekkanen, and Matthew S. Shugart (Oxford University Press, 2017), 112–32; Jack Lucas, "Reaction or Reform? Subnational Evidence on PR Adoption from Canadian Cities," *Representation* 56, no. 1 (2020): 89-109, https://doi.org/10.1080/00344893.2019.1700154.

A DIFFERENT PATH: PROPORTIONAL REPRESENTATION IN THE UNITED STATES

The first successful push for PR in the U.S. came during the Progressive Era (1890s-1920s)[46] as part of a broader movement for electoral reform influenced by growing concerns about fairness, pluralism, and governance.[47] Seeing the prevalence of urban party machines like Tammany Hall and localized one-party dominance throughout the Gilded Age, proponents of PR sought to address what they perceived as the resulting political corruption, underrepresentation, and partisan gerrymandering.[48] Yet the path to PR during this era differed from the global examples cited above, marked less by a weakening of the dominant party system than by reform coalitions partnering with major party factions jockeying within it.[49]

The first known instance of PR in the United States was in Ashtabula, Ohio in 1915.[50] More than 20 cities subsequently adopted proportional or semi-proportional systems. The system allowed minor parties and underrepresented groups, including labor advocates and those from diverse racial and ethnic communities, to gain a meaningful voice in local government. And while many reformers were skeptical of party bosses, previously excluded groups often found allies in a faction of one of the two major parties who saw PR as a means of preserving or expanding their influence.[51]

New York City's experience provides a striking example of the pressures that led to PR's adoption, as well as its effects in practice. In the 1930s, New York City was home to especially egregious corruption leading to a highly inefficient and unrepresentative city council. Frustrations over Tammany corruption and Democratic dominance led Republican elites, minor parties, and "good government" groups to endorse PR as an electoral reform that could address these issues.[52] In response, New York would come to adopt PR—specifically, the Single Transferable Vote (STV) variant— via referendum in 1936 for its city council elections.[53]

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[46] Elizabeth Israels Perry and Karen Manners Smith, *The Gilded Age & Progressive EraL A Student Companion* (Oxford University Press, 2006), 141. There were substantial reform discussions prior to this point, notably reform efforts following the Civil War. But these focused more on cumulative voting than full proportional representation and saw success principally in Illinois' adoption of the system. For the arguments made on behalf of these efforts, see Charles Rollin Buckalew, *Proportional Representation: Or, The Representation of Successive Majorities in Federal, State, Municipal, Corporate and Primary Elections* (J. Campbell & Son, 1872).

[47] Murray N. Rothbard, *The Progressive Era*. (Mises Institute, 2017). It must be noted that while the Progressive movement did aim to promote equality and curb corruption, it was not immune to the prejudices of its time. Many progressives, like others in this era, held and expressed racist and misogynistic beliefs even as they advocated for a better, more just society.

[48] Joseph D. Reid Jr. and Michael M. Kurth. "The Rise and Fall of Urban Political Patronage Machines" in *Strategic Factors in Nineteenth Century American Economic History: A Volume to Honor Robert W. Fogel*, ed. Claudia Goldin and Hugh Rockoff, (University Chicago Press, 1992), 427-445.

[49] Jack Santucci, "Party Splits, Not Progressives: The Origins of Proportional Representation in American Local Government." *American Politics Research* 45 no. 3 (2017): 494-526, https://doi.org/10.1177/1532673X16674774.

[50] Raymond Moley and Charles A. Bloomfield, "Ashtabula's ten years' trial of P. R.," *National Municipal Review* 15, no. 11 (1926), https://www.scilit.com/publications/3f3601d39aa969222ec13390d21abcf9. See also Kathleen L. Barber, *Proportional Representation and Election Reform in Ohio* (Ohio State University Press, 1995).

[51] Jack Santucci, "Party Splits, Not Progressives: The Origins of Proportional Representation in American Local Government," *American Politics Research* 45 no. 3 (2017): 494-526, https://doi.org/10.1177/1532673X16674774.

[52] Michele Rosa-Clot, "This Stalin Frankenstein System: Adoption and Abrogation of Proportional Representation in New York City, 1936-1947," *RSA Journal* 17 (2007): 203, https://doi.org/10.13135/1592-4467/8797.

[53] "Proportional Representation. Innovation in New York City Charter." *Columbia Law Review* 37, no. 8 (1937): 1424–29. https://doi.org/10.2307/1116611.

New York City represented the only adoption of PR with partisan elections in the United States, and its impact on the party system was immediate and substantial. Under this system, smaller parties, such as the American Labor Party (ALP) and even the Communist Party, were able to secure city council seats, leading to a more diverse political representation for constituents.[54] Prior to the introduction of STV and after its repeal, only two parties won council seats, whereas during each of the five cycles using STV, either four or five parties won seats.[55] New York's city council thus came to include representatives from various backgrounds and political ideologies, fostering a more inclusive political atmosphere that more accurately reflected a diverse electorate.

The change also had meaningful effects in other cities where it was adopted. In Cincinnati, for example, the adoption of PR in 1925 enabled the election of Black representatives to the city council for the first time in the city's history.[56] It also facilitated the election of candidates supporting diverse political ideologies, fostering broader dialogue on policy issues and more innovative and inclusive solutions.[57] By the mid 1940s, anti-discriminatory legislation was passed to desegregate public parks and hospitals, and Black council members pushed for reforms that improved employment prospects for Black Cincinnatians by forbidding discriminatory hiring practices in various industries.[58]

The history of PR in the United States reflects this contingency. (See "A Different Path: Proportional Representation in the United States" on page 15.) In the early and mid-twentieth century, more than twenty American municipalities adopted a form of PR. Yet these successful reform processes often lacked some of the features typical of PR reforms elsewhere. Electoral reform during this time was driven by widespread discontent with the existing system's results. Yet it was *not* typically sparked by any acute crisis. And well-organized minor parties were *not* always at the forefront of reform. Instead, the push for PR came amidst the Progressive Era's generally *anti*-party sentiment. While partisan actors and factions were part of many coalitions pushing for reform, the central goal was typically not just to create a more diverse party system. Instead, many reformers hoped their efforts would weaken the influence of political party bosses and more directly empower voters.

[54] Michele Rosa-Clot, "This Stalin Frankenstein System: Adoption and Abrogation of Proportional Representation in New York City, 1936-1947," *RSA Journal* 17 (2007): 217, https://doi.org/10.13135/1592-4467/8797.

[55] Belle Zeller and Hugh A. Bone, "The Repeal of P.R. in New York City—Ten Years in Retrospect," *American Political Science Review* 42, no. 6 (1948): 1127-1148, https://doi.org/10.2307/1950618.

[56] Robert A. Burnham, "Reform, Politics and Race in Cincinnati," *Journal of Urban History* 23, no. 2 (1997): 131-163, https://doi.org/10.1177/009614429702300201.

[57] Douglas Amy, *Real Choices/New Voices: How Proportional Representation Elections Could Revitalize American Democracy* (Columbia University Press, 2002), 144.

[58] Douglas Amy, *Real Choices/New Voices: How Proportional Representation Elections Could Revitalize American Democracy* (Columbia University Press, 2002), 144.

Yet PR in American municipalities also lacked staying power; by 1962, it had been repealed everywhere except Cambridge, MA. The reasons for the repeal are complex. In part, it was due to the particular form of PR that was adopted. The single-transferrable vote (STV) system allowed voters to rank candidates from multiple parties on their ballots, with ballots being reallocated across candidates in multiple rounds of counting and seat-filling.

This relatively complex system of seat allocation stood in contrast to other forms of PR that also feature multimember districts, but elect candidates using party lists. In party list systems, ballots present voters with a list of candidates organized by party, allowing voters to select the party (and sometimes also the specific candidate within that party) of their choice. The seats in each district are then allocated based on each party's share of the vote in that district. In contrast, STV is focused on candidates; parties have no role in the way votes are tabulated or seats are allocated. The complexity of STV also meant that parties had difficulty predicting whether their voters would support all of their candidates, and it made coordination and governance more difficult once elected officials were seated. In an era when party leadership remained more influential than it is today, the parties quickly soured on the system.[59]

While it lasted, PR did have representation-enhancing effects. More working-class candidates and candidates of color were elected in the municipalities in which it was used following its introduction. In some cases, candidates affiliated with leftist parties were elected. However, this also likely helped major parties galvanize opposition in an era of U.S. history that included widespread anti-Communist sentiment and preceded the Civil Rights movement.[60]

The timing of these events is unfortunate. Just a quarter-century before the push for PR, much of the U.S. did have vibrant minor parties. (And, indeed, some of the first attempts at PR were actively supported by local third parties.[61]) Many of these minor parties secured their place in the party system through the use of electoral fusion—a practice in which multiple parties nominate the same candidate. But the widespread adoption of bans on fusion voting at the turn of the twentieth century helped to snuff out this important aspect of partisan representation in American politics. As we discuss below, revitalizing fusion voting might open up a common pathway to PR by incentivizing the kinds of new parties that could effectively advocate for (and help sustain) reform.

[59] Jack Santucci, "Avoiding the PR Mistakes of the Past," *Democracy Journal* no 70 (Fall 2023), https://democracyjournal.org/magazine/70/avoiding-the-pr-mistakes-of-the-past.

[60] Mike McGrath, "Proportional Representation: The Good Government Municipal Reform that Wouldn't 'Stay Put'," *National Civic Review* 113, no. 1 (2024): 59, https://www.jstor.org/stable/48770637.

[61] For example, a coalition of reformers that included the Socialist Party unsuccessfully attempted to adopt PR in Los Angeles in 1913, while some other cities that adopted PR had existing multiparty politics. See Jack Santucci, *More Parties or No Parties: The Politics of Electoral Reform in America* (Oxford University Press, 2022), 67-77.

Fusion Could Open a Pathway to Proportional Representation

The history of electoral experimentation in the United States rhymes in many ways with the factors that have fueled PR in other countries—popular dissatisfaction with electoral distortions that underrepresent some voters' interests along with disruptive historical events. Yet at least since the early 20th century, the U.S. has lacked the kind of viable minor parties that can help organize voters and advance reform. This is a significant impediment. PR and multiparty systems present something of a chicken and egg problem: PR facilitates more robust multiparty systems, but active minor parties are often key advocates for adopting PR in the first place. So even as winner-take-all systems disadvantage minor parties, some kind of space for minor party influence has been vital in many other instances of PR adoption. Reformers seeking to learn the lessons above and foster a more diverse multiparty landscape as a pathway to PR need some means of doing so.

Put more simply, if reformers want PR to thrive in the United States, they probably need more parties. Other countries have seen new parties emerge and gain momentum in various ways, many of which were linked to social or economic factors.[62] In the United States, reintroducing electoral fusion offers one plausible option.

To shed light on how fusion could help open the door to future PR reform efforts, we first revisit the track record of fusion voting in the United States, and then examine the ways in which fusion voting creates space for the type of minor parties that could help advance reform in the future.

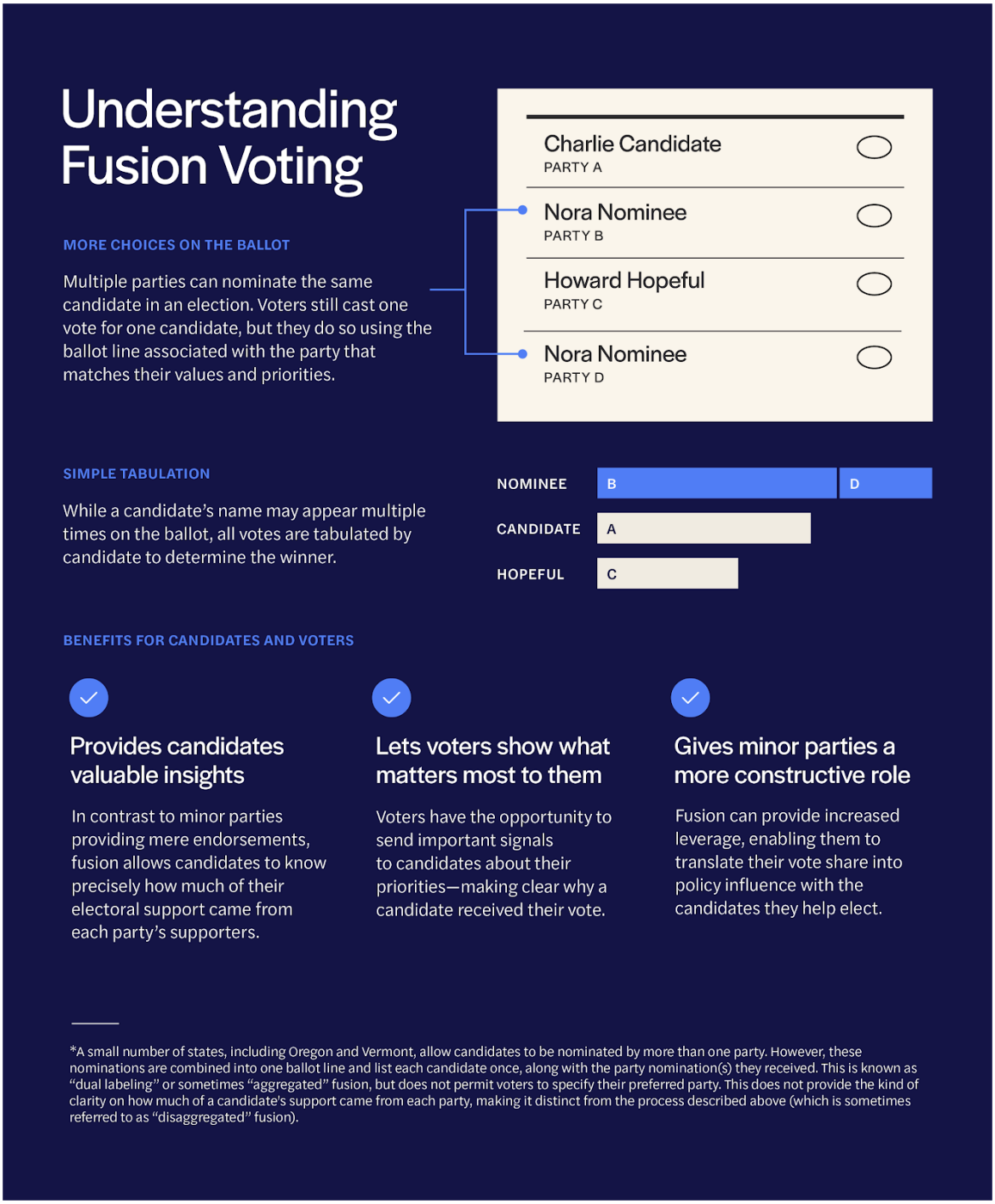
The Rise and Demise of Fusion in the United States

In the early 19th century, fusion voting emerged as a strategy to enable smaller parties to exert significant influence, despite the dominance of two major parties.[63] By nominating candidates who also received major party nominations, minor parties could demonstrate their value in mobilizing voters without wasting votes on candidates with no hope of victory. One aspect of elections at the time that made fusion easier was the absence of standardized ballots until the

[62] Other countries have found themselves with multiparty systems under a number of circumstances. Some are historically unique, such as the connection between industrialization, socialist parties and demands for expansion of the franchise in some European countries. In others, the winner-take-all elections required a majority of votes to win, utilizing two-round elections that enabled a wider range of parties to compete in first-round elections. See André Blais, Agnieska Dobrzynska, and Indridi H. Indridason, "To Adopt or Not to Adopt Proportional Representation: The Politics of Institutional Choice," *British Journal of Political Science* 30, no. 1 (2005): 182-190, doi:10.1017/S0007123405000098.

[63] Lee Drutman, Tabatha Abu El-Haj, and Beau Tremitiere, "Reviving the American Tradition of Fusion Voting." American Bar Association, May 31, 2024, https://www.americanbar.org/groups/public_interest/election_law/american-democracy/our-work/reviving-american-tradition-fusion-voting.

late 19th century. Instead, voters typically used ballots printed by political parties (with their own candidates listed), cut from newspapers, or written out themselves.[64] Each party could simply list the candidates it nominated on its own ballot.



[64] Eldon Cobb Evans, *A History of the Australian Ballot System in the United States* (University of Chicago Press, 1917), 56-61.

Some of these parties, such as the Workingmen's Party of Philadelphia founded in 1828, operated in a particularly localized fashion.[65] Others, such as the the Free Soil Party, the Populist Party,[66] and the Greenback Party[67] had more widespread influence. Prior to the Civil War, anti-slavery activists used fusion as part of a broader political strategy that eventually birthed the Republican Party.[68] Between 1874 and 1892, minor parties in more than half of non-Southern states received at least 20 percent of the vote in at least one election, partly a result of fusing with major parties.[69] By 1910, the total number of fusion candidacies at the gubernatorial, congressional, and senatorial level exceeded 400 in over 30 states.[70]

By endorsing candidates from the major parties, smaller parties were able to push for policies that aligned with their platforms without "spoiling" elections or splitting the vote. (See "Fusion in North Carolina" on page 21.) Thus, fusion voting was a way for minor parties to remain relevant while operating within a larger electoral system still structured as winner-take-all. Particularly in the late 19th century, when political parties were deeply embedded in communities and rancor between the major parties was especially high, minor parties had ample opportunity to mobilize voters who wanted to express dissent with a major party but could not bring themselves to vote for its principal rival.[71]

Many of these parties that would eventually use fusion developed out of grassroots organizing. The Liberty and Free Soil parties grew out of networks built by organizations like the American Anti-Slavery Society. The Populist parties of the 1890s grew out of farmers' alliances that had been established in the preceding years. These roots often enabled them to turn voters out effectively.[72]

At times, a minor party could wield enough influence to ensure that its own candidate became the nominee that drew support from the major party.[73] At others, fusion prompted major parties to adopt portions of minor party platforms, resulting, for example, in the expansion of the antislavery movement and landmark policies such as labor protections, antitrust laws, and

[65] Edward Pessen, "The Working Men's Party Revisited," *Labor History* 4, no. 3 (1963): 203, https://doi.org/10.1080/00236566308583925.

[66] James L. Hunt, "Fusion of Republicans and Populists," Encyclopedia of North Carolina, University of North Carolina Press, Accessed on May 1st, 2025. https://www.ncpedia.org/fusion-republicans-and-populists.

[67] Samuel DeCanio and Corwin D. Smidt, "Prelude to Populism: Mass Electoral Support for the Grange and Greenback Parties," *Party Politics* 19, no. 5 (2013): 298-820, https://doi.org/10.1177/1354068811410361.

[68] Corey Brooks and Beau C. Tremitiere, "Fusing to Combat Slavery: Third Party Politics in the Pre-Civil War North," *St. John's Law Review* 98, no. 2 (2024) https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=4831091.

[69] Peter H. Argersinger, "'A Place on the Ballot': Fusion Politics and Antifusion Laws," *The American Historical Review* 85, no. 2 (1980): 289, https://doi.org/10.2307/1860557.

[70] Howard A. Scarrow, "Duverger's Law, Fusion, and the Decline of American 'Third' Parties," *The Western Political Quarterly* 39, no. 4 (1986): 636, https://doi.org/10.2307/448267.

[71] Lisa Jane Disch, *The Tyranny of the Two-Party System* (Columbia University Press, 2002), 33-58.

[72] Jeffrey Ostler, "Why the Populist Party Was Strong in Kansas and Nebraska but Weak in Iowa." *The Western Historical Quarterly* 23, no. 4 (1992): 451–74 https://doi.org/10.2307/970302. In states like Ohio, where competition between the Republicans and Democrats was robust, farmers' organizations sometimes preferred to leverage their strength within the two-party system, rather than mobilize behind third parties. See Michael Pierce, "Farmers and the Failure of Populism in Ohio, 1890-1891," *Agricultural History* 74, no. 1 (2000): 58–85, http://www.jstor.org/stable/3744121.

[73] Howard A. Scarrow, "Duverger's Law, Fusion, and the Decline of American 'Third' Parties," *The Western Political Quarterly* 39, no. 4 (1986): 634–47, https://doi.org/10.2307/448267. In the 1890s, the Kansas Democratic Party found its political fortunes so poor that it temporarily became the fusion party, accepting all of the nominees of the Populist party. See Lisa Jane Disch, *The Tyranny of the Two-Party System* (Columbia University Press, 2002), 41.

expanded suffrage.[74] Partly through the use of fusion, minor parties grew to the point of being the difference-makers in some races. In 1892, neither major party won more than 50% of the vote in most states, giving minor parties substantial influence.[75]

Unsurprisingly, major parties often resisted the influence of fusion voting, seeing it as weakening their dominance and diluting or altering their political agendas.[76] For much of this period, however, there was relatively little they could do to avoid it. In practice, electoral fusion was straightforward and hard to prevent thanks to the absence of a standardized ballot. This allowed smaller parties to list major party candidates on their own ballot lines (or vice versa), creating opportunities for collaboration and influence. The introduction of the uniform—or "Australian" —ballot towards the end of the 19th century gave major parties an opportunity to change the playing field. When reformers pushed for a uniform ballot, questions of who could be listed on the ballot and how came into play.

FUSION IN NORTH CAROLINA

In the 1890s, the North Carolina Populist Party leveraged fusion voting to form a powerful coalition with the Republican Party, enabling them to significantly influence state politics and implement progressive reforms. This alliance was born out of shared opposition to Democratic Party dominance and policies that marginalized farmers, laborers, and Black voters.[77] Through fusion, Populists and Republicans ran joint candidates for state offices, which allowed them to combine their voter bases without splitting the vote.

Initially, the Populists in North Carolina attempted to go it alone, nominating their own candidates throughout the state in 1892 and taking about 18% of the vote.[78] The election revealed two important things: they would have some success running candidates alone, but they could win many more races if they joined with the Republicans.

The parties eventually adopted a fusion strategy that proved successful in the 1894 election, where the coalition gained control of both houses of North Carolina's legislature. The legislature, representing more diverse ideologies than ever before, enacted several important reforms, including the liberalization of ballot access to extend the franchise to

[74] Lee Drutman, Tabatha Abu El-Haj, and Beau Tremitiere, "Reviving the American Tradition of Fusion Voting." *American Bar Association*, May 31, 2024, https://www.americanbar.org/groups/public_interest/election_law/american-democracy/our-work/reviving-american-tradition-fusion-voting; Peter H. Argersinger, "Populists in Power: Public Policy and Legislative Behavior," *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 18, no. 1 (1987): 97, https://doi.org/10.2307/204729.

[75] Peter H. Argersinger, "'A Place on the Ballot': Fusion Politics and Antifusion Laws," *The American Historical Review* 85, no. 2 (1980): 289, https://doi.org/10.2307/1860557.

[76] Lynn Adleman, "The Misguided Rejection of Fusion Voting by State Legislatures and the Supreme Court," *Idaho Law Review* 56, no. 2 (2021): 110, https://digitalcommons.law.uidaho.edu/idaho-law-review/vol56/iss2/1.

[77] James M. Beeby, "'Equal Rights to All and Special Privileges to None': Grass-Roots Populism in North Carolina," *The North Carolina Historical Review* 78, no. 2 (2001): 1156-186, https://www.jstor.org/stable/23522801.

[78] For a discussion of the 1892 elections in one of the foundational studies of fusion in North Carolina, see Helen G. Edmonds, *The Negro and Fusion Politics in North Carolina, 1894-1901* (University of North Carolina Press, 1951), 26-27.

traditionally oppressed communities and amending a law which had made it nearly impossible for non-elite individuals to hold office.[79] Throughout North Carolina, Black candidates appeared at all levels of government, making their presence common where it was once rare.[80] Other progressive reforms included economic initiatives such as limiting interest rates—an outcome favored by farmers—and investments in public schools, an outcome which benefited the poor and working class throughout the state.[81]

In 1896, the fusion alliance extended its success, electing a Republican governor and fusionist majority who continued the coalition's progressive agenda.[82] These reforms, as well as the increased presence of Black office holders, became a focal point for backlash from Democrats and white supremacists who weaponized racial fears to undermine the fusionist government and stoke violence.[83] By 1899, Democrats regained control of the state and rolled back many of the Populists' and Republicans' reforms.[84]

As states adopted uniform ballots, opponents to fusion identified an opportunity to limit its use by enacting restrictions to cross-nomination practices on the new ballots.[85] By 1910, over twenty states had implemented anti-fusion measures, framing them as a means to streamline the electoral process,[86] though the underlying motive was often to curb the power of emerging parties.[87] By 1920, the number of fusion nominations in the United States had dropped by half from the prior decade.[88] The effects extended beyond fusion nominations: ballot reform measures like fusion bans were associated with substantial declines in the presence of minor parties in state legislatures.[89]

By banning fusion voting, these laws effectively eliminated viable options for expressing support for alternatives to the two major parties, and for those alternatives to influence policy

[79] The bond law had required officials to pay "exorbitant" sums in order to assume office. The reform reduced the amount they needed to pay. Deborah Beckel, *Radical Reform: Interracial Politics in Post-Emancipation North Carolina* (University of Virginia Press, 2011), 179.

[80] Eric Anderson, *Race and Politics in North Carolina 1972-1901: The Black Second* (Louisiana State University Press, 1981), 238.

[81] Deborah Beckel, *Radical Reform: Interracial Politics in Post-Emancipation North Carolina* (University of Virginia Press, 2011), 180.

[82] Ronnie W. Faulkner, "North Carolina Democrats and Silver Fusion Politics, 1892-1896," *The North Carolina Historical Review* 59, no. 3 (1982): 230-251, https://www.jstor.org/stable/23535100.

[83] Matthew Hild, *Greenbackers, Knights of Labor, & Populists* (University of Georgia Press, 2007), 202.

[84] The 1899 legislature amended or repealed over 180 provisions in order to roll back the reforms of the prior years. See Helen G. Edmonds, *The Negro and Fusion Politics in North Carolina, 1894-1901* (University of North Carolina Press, 1951), 193.

[85] Evans Eldon Cobb, *A History of the Australian Ballot System in the United States* (University of Chicago Press, 1917), 59. See also Elissa Berger, "A Party That Won't Spoil: Minor Parties, State Constitutions and Fusion Voting," *Brooklyn Law Review* 70, no. 4 (2005): 1388, https://brooklynworks.brooklaw.edu/blr/vol70/iss4/10.

[86] Howard A. Scarrow, "Duverger's Law, Fusion, and the Decline of American 'Third' Parties," *The Western Political Quarterly* 39, no. 4 (1986): 638, https://doi.org/10.2307/448267

[87] Elissa Berger, "A Party That Won't Spoil: Minor Parties, State Constitutions and Fusion Voting," *Brooklyn Law Review* 70, no. 4 (2005): 1389, https://brooklynworks.brooklaw.edu/blr/vol70/iss4/10.

[88] Howard A. Scarrow, "Duverger's Law, Fusion, and the Decline of American 'Third' Parties," *The Western Political Quarterly* 39, no. 4 (1986): 636, https://doi.org/10.2307/448267

[89] Daniel C. Reed, "Ballot Reform and the Decline of Third Parties in State Legislatures," *Journal of Representative Democracy* 52, no. 2-3 (2017): 163-177, https://doi.org/10.1080/00344893.2017.1300601.

outcomes without spoiling elections.[90] This structural limitation forced voters into a manufactured two-party system and made it extremely difficult for minor parties to gain traction beyond electing the occasional celebrity candidate.[91]

Critics of fusion have sometimes wrapped their opposition in claims about democratic health. Some posited that fusion "reduced the candidate choices available to voters" and minimized the "spectrum of ideas that opposing candidates are able to offer."[92] Others argued that fusion voting complicated ballots by allowing multiple parties to nominate the same candidate, creating the risk of confusion for voters.[93] Some legislators claimed this made it difficult to accurately tally votes and could lead to errors in election administration.[94]

Ultimately, however, banning fusion a century ago was fundamentally partisan. As one Republican legislator in Michigan bluntly put it, "We don't propose to allow the Democrats to make allies of the Populists, Prohibitionists, or any other party, and get up combination tickets against us. We can whip them single-handed, but don't intend to fight all creation."[95] Major party leaders leveraged their control over state election laws to eliminate the threat of competition.

More recent studies and experience also indicate that the concerns typically offered about fusion do not actually bear out. Research has found that voters do not find fusion ballots confusing.[96] And election administrators in New York and Connecticut, where fusion remains legal, have not indicated that fusion complicates vote tallying.[97] Although legal barriers to fusion remain in place, there is little (if any) empirical evidence justifying their continuance.

Fusion Incentivizes Capable Parties

Minor parties are key to both disrupting major party dominance and mobilizing voters who feel disempowered by the existing system. But it is not just any new party that can be expected to seize critical opportunities for reform. A party that is a personal vehicle for a single prominent candidate and her supporters is less likely to push for reform than parties that are rooted in communities or existing networks and that are responsive to their issues. These parties will also have to sustain enough momentum to exert real influence over policymaking and present a real challenge to major parties' power.

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[90] Adam Morse and J.J. Gass, "More Choices, More Voices: A Primer on Fusion," Brennan Center for Justice, 2006, 5 https://centerforballotfreedom.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/199/Report_More-Choices-More-Voices.pdf.

[91] Lynn Adleman, "The Misguided Rejection of Fusion Voting by State Legislatures and the Supreme Court," *Idaho Law Review* 56, no. 2 (2021): 108-118, https://digitalcommons.law.uidaho.edu/idaho-law-review/vol56/iss2/1.

[92] Dennis F. Thompson, *Just Elections: Creating a Fair Electoral Process in the United States* (University of Chicago Press, 2004), 74.

[93] Oscar Pocasangre and Maresa Strano, "What We Know About Fusion Voting," New America, 2024, https://www.newamerica.org/political-reform/reports/what-we-know-about-fusion-voting/.

[94] Dennis F. Thompson, *Just Elections: Creating a Fair Electoral Process in the United States* (University of Chicago Press, 2004), 74.

[95] Cited in Peter H. Argersinger, "'A Place on the Ballot:' Fusion Politics and Antifusion Laws," *The American Historical Review* 85, no. 2 (1980), 296, https://doi.org/10.2307/1860557.

[96] Eric Loepp and Benjamin Melusky, "Why is This Candidate Listed Twice? The Behavioral and Electoral Consequences of Fusion Voting." *Election Law Journal* 21, no. 2 (2022): 105-123. https://doi.org/10.1089/elj.2021.0037.

[97] Oscar Pocasangre and Maresa Strano, "What We Know About Fusion Voting," New America, 2024, https://www.newamerica.org/political-reform/reports/what-we-know-about-fusion-voting/.

While the empirical research base on fusion's effects remains narrower than that of proportional representation, historical examples and the studies that exist do point to its ability to foster sustainable minor party activity. In particular, historical examples suggest that fusion can foster minor parties that:

1. are rooted in communities and issues-oriented, rather than personalist;
2. mobilize and retain voters who are dissatisfied with the existing system; and
3. build sufficient strength to significantly influence or even challenge major parties.

Fusion Incentivizes Rooted, Issues-oriented Parties

Fusion channels the fundamentally candidate-centric nature of our elections through parties, working within the system to create space for minor parties to build support and exercise influence.[98] An important element of this is that the most successful fusion parties have tended to be issues-oriented rather than built around a celebrity leader. Many of the recent examples of independent candidates or efforts to field a national third-party have depended on the appeal of prominent individuals. When their star fades, so does the party's, undermining its viability. Such parties cannot bring about the kind of pressure that incentivizes systemic change. In contrast, parties that have grown through fusion have tended to be built on ideas and policies.

This issues-oriented nature of fusion parties is also key to their ability to mobilize voters. Parties using fusion grow their influence over time via sustained contact with voters and interest groups that can be turned out in various elections. Recent research tentatively bears this out—showing that fusion does have a positive (if modest) impact on voter turnout in some cases.[99] With fusion, minor parties have reasons to bring new voters into the system, and to retain a distinct partisan identity as they do so.[100] Under most states' ballot access laws, minor parties have to retain a certain percentage of the vote in order to remain on future ballots, giving them strong incentives to invest in mobilizing their voters in ways that ensure use of their ballot line, rather than a major party's.[101]

The history and growth of the Populist movement shows how fusion can build on existing mobilization strategies. In the late 19th century, as now, there were states and regions where one party enjoyed substantial partisan dominance. As the post-Civil War economy changed and farmers became dependent on railroads and financial institutions, many shared a sense of exclusion and grievance. Initially, they sought to advocate for their interests through farmers'

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[98] For additional discussion of the connection between party-building, electoral fusion, and the incentives to support proportional representation, see Lee Drutman, "Fusion Voting Roundup: A new report, a new scholars' letter, and so much more," *Undercurrent Events*, July 22, 2024, https://leedrutman.substack.com/p/fusion-voting-roundup-a-new-report.

[99] Oscar Pocasangre and Maresa Strano, "What We Know About Fusion Voting," New America, 2024, https://www.newamerica.org/political-reform/reports/what-we-know-about-fusion-voting.

[100] Melissa R. Michelson and Scott J. Susin, "What's in a Name: The Power of Fusion Politics in a Local Election," *Polity* 36, no. 2 (2004): 301-321, https://doi.org/10.1086/POLv36n2ms3235483.

[101] Fusing with minor parties is thus advantageous for major party candidates under the right conditions and can even prove electorally decisive. Oscar Pocasangre and Maresa Strano, "What We Know About Fusion Voting," New America, 2024, https://www.newamerica.org/political-reform/reports/what-we-know-about-fusion-voting/. See also Benjamin R. Kantack, "Fusion and Electoral Performance in New York Congressional Elections," *Political Research Quarterly* 70, no. 2 (2017), https://doi.org/10.1177/1065912916689823.

organizations such as the Grange or Farmers' Alliance. Farmers first used these organizations to cooperate in agricultural markets and as one California farmer put it, "we were not organized as a political party, but for the purpose of benefitting ourselves by cooperation in business."[102] But these alliances also took on more active political engagement and advocacy, with state conventions producing resolutions and platforms related to issues ranging from the regulation of railroads to the price of schoolbooks.[103]

POPULISTS IN TEXAS: PARTY BUILDING THROUGH EXISTING CHANNELS

The history of the Populists (also known as the People's Party) in Texas provides a clear example of how the party grew by meaningfully engaging with organized social groups and using fusion to expand their success. The Democratic party had taken control of the state's politics following the collapse of Reconstruction in 1873. Republicans were unable to pose a meaningful electoral challenge, despite the economic and social disruptions of the era. As with other regions of the country, many dissatisfied Texan farmers joined alliances that provided robust networks for both connection and advocacy.[104] Initially, the Alliance in Texas eschewed third party politics and tried to work with factions of the dominant Democratic party. Eventually, however, their actual influence proved limited and this strategy dissolved.

The People's Party, which had struggled until then, began to capitalize on existing organizing efforts and forge a farmer-labor alliance. By 1892, the party began to draw support from substantial portions of the Farmers' Alliance, as well as the Knights of Labor. The Party's electoral power grew in the intervening years, becoming the main opposition party in the state by the mid-1890s.[105] Even so, it struggled to secure support from constituents such as Black voters and so found fusion an expedient strategy, as in the 1894 statewide election when the party fused with Republicans. In 1896, Texas Populists again fused with Republicans for statewide office, even as the national party fused with Democratic candidate William Jennings Bryant.[106] These strategies were productive. The People's Party exerted substantial influence in Texas politics, principally by rooting itself in existing social organizations and communities alienated by the two-party politics of the day.

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[102] Quoted in John T. McGreevy, "Farmers, Nationalists, and the Origins of California Populism," *Pacific Historical Review* 58, no. 4 (1989): 482, https://doi.org/10.2307/3640175.

[103] Michael Pierce, "Farmers and the Failure of Populism in Ohio, 1890-1891," *Agricultural History* 74, no. 1 (2000): 58-85, https://www.jstor.org/stable/3744121. See also John D. Hicks, "The Birth of the Populist Party," *Minnesota History* 9, no. 3 (1928): 219-247, https://www.jstor.org/stable/20160737.

[104] Throughout the 1880s, the Southern Farmers' Alliance grew to 200,000 members, drawing support from farmers who saw railroads, the gold standard, and barriers to land speculation as harming their interests. See Robert Worth Miller and Stacy G. Ulbig, "Building a Populist Coalition in Texas, 1892-1896," *The Journal of Southern History* 74, no. 2 (2008): 255–96. http://www.jstor.org/stable/27650143.

[105] See Robert Worth Miller and Stacy G. Ulbig, "Building a Populist Coalition in Texas, 1892-1896," *The Journal of Southern History* 74, no. 2 (2008): 255–96. http://www.jstor.org/stable/27650143.

[106] Bryant's loss in the election and the populists' internal squabbles over fusion strategy ultimately led supporters to splinter across the country. The People's party rapidly faded in the face of internal divisions and rising structural barriers such as bans on fusion candidacies.

Particularly in states whose elections were dominated by one major party, Alliances found their influence on policy to be limited. In such areas, Populist (or People's) Parties courted or even emerged from these organizations. Where successful, Populists brought farmers into coalition with others, such as labor organizations, who felt disempowered by the politics of the day. By building on existing organizations, Populists had both a ready-made base of voters who were already civically engaged on issues of personal importance and the communications channels to reach and turn them out.[107]

The Key to Longevity: Mobilizing and Retaining Voters

Fusion parties have incentives to build loyalty among voters and ensure that they make it to the polls on election day. If voters do not turn out and vote for candidates on the fusion party's ballot line, the party loses its leverage with elected officials. So connecting with existing social groups isn't enough; fusion parties have to build the organizational infrastructure to connect with voters and repeatedly maximize turnout to retain their influence (and ballot line) across multiple elections.[108]

Today, states that continue to permit fusion voting often have more active minor party landscapes than those that do not.[109] Data on the effective number of parties (a measure that weights the number of parties competing by their actual electoral performance) similarly show that New York and Connecticut—the two states in practice that regularly use fusion—frequently have a higher effective number of parties than the national average.[110] The particularities of states and their voters range widely, but fusion and greater minor party presence do seem to go together.

But to maintain this presence across election cycles, fusion parties must demonstrate to their voters that voting on a fusion line has a meaningful impact. And there is some evidence to suggest that minor parties using fusion are able to translate their support into policy influence. The votes delivered by fusion parties are not always decisive—only 2.6% of races for the U.S. House of Representatives were decided by fusion party votes in New York and Connecticut between 1976 and 2022—but they can make a substantial difference in crucial swing races.[111] Even at this level of influence, minor parties in New York, such as the Working Families Party,

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[107] In North Carolina, for example, agrarian leaders kept supporters informed through publications like the *Progressive Farmer*. Helen G. Edmonds, *The Negro and Fusion Politics in North Carolina, 1894-1901* (University of North Carolina Press, 1951), 25.

[108] For a discussion of how this dynamic could contribute to the formation and stabilizing influence of a more moderate party in American politics, see Chapter 5 in Lee Drutman, "More Parties, Better Parties: The Case for Pro-Parties Democracy Reform," New America, July 3, 2023, https://www.newamerica.org/political-reform/reports/more-parties-better-parties/.

[109] Adam Morse and J.J. Gass, "More Choices, More Voices: A Primer on Fusion," Brennan Center for Justice, 2006, 3 https://centerforballotfreedom.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/199/Report_More-Choices-More-Voices.pdf. States that continue to permit fusion largely do so due to the failure of similar efforts to ban it. In New York, for example, the legislature attempted to pass a fusion ban similar to those adopted contemporaneously in other states. In contrast to most other states, however, legal challenges in New York state court were successful and multiple attempts to ban fusion were blocked. See Celia Curtis, "Cross-Endorsement by Political Parties: A 'Very Pretty Jungle'?" *Pace Law Review* 29 (2008): 765-795, https://doi.org/10.58948/2331-3528.1069.

[110] Oscar Pocasangre and Maresa Strano, "What We Know About Fusion Voting," New America, 2024, https://www.newamerica.org/political-reform/reports/what-we-know-about-fusion-voting/.

[111] Pocasangre and Strano note that New York and Connecticut are both states where one party has come to dominate elections for most offices, and posit that fusion parties' influence might be even greater in states with more close elections. Oscar Pocasangre and Maresa Strano, "What We Know About Fusion Voting," New America, 2024, https://www.newamerica.org/political-reform/reports/what-we-know-about-fusion-voting/.

have leveraged their distinct voter base and fusion voting practices to encourage dominant parties to adopt their policy preferences. For example, in the 2010s, the Working Families Party leveraged its fusion vote to press Democratic candidates to effectively support an increase in New York's minimum wage and to adopt paid sick days in Connecticut.[112] These kinds of impacts can demonstrate to voters that a vote on the minor party line is worthwhile.

Building Strength: Influencing and Challenging Major Parties

Skeptics of fusion as a pathway to PR may point out that fusion parties' influence in our political system is dependent on their strategy of not challenging major parties electorally and collaborating with them instead. This would seem to cut against the global pattern of new parties and political movements undermining the dominant party structure. As some scholars have pointed out, parties typically grow in resources and influence by running their *own* candidates, not by funneling votes to the most closely aligned major party candidate.[113]

Because fusion does not help smaller parties elect their own candidates, the argument goes, it limits an important driver of party growth, and should temper expectations for fusion parties to genuinely challenge major party dominance. Some research has indicated that third party candidates who do run on their own in places where fusion is widespread typically fare even worse than those in places where it is not.[114] And to date, it is not clear that New York or Connecticut have seen a more robust push for PR than any other state, despite having active use of fusion voting.[115]

This skepticism is understandable, but misses some broader context. It is true that in recent years, fusion has not led minor parties to frequently run their own candidates or prioritize the adoption of PR as a reform. Yet as highlighted above, global experience with reform does not suggest that the presence of meaningful minor parties *on its own* mechanically translates into a successful push for PR. An existing multiparty system can generate important pressure for PR if minor parties have sufficient leverage and interest in doing so, but the choice to wield their influence in pursuit of PR does not occur in a vacuum. Absent robust popular dissatisfaction or a major disruption to the system, even a robust minor party may decide to focus on policies besides electoral reform.

Even so, the American experience also gives multiple examples of parties that have used fusion to grow *and* leveraged their strength to disrupt the dominant party system, at least at the local level or when major events provided the opportunity. In some cases, these parties have built

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[112] "Patrick McGeehan, "A $15 Minimum Wage Seemed Impossible. Now It's Reality for a Million New Yorkers," *New York Times,* December 31, 2018, https://www.nytimes.com/2018/12/31/nyregion/15-minimum-wage-new-york.html. Mark Pazniokas, "House Passes Paid Sick Days Bill after GOP Talks 11 Hours," *Connecticut Mirror*, June 4, 2011, https://ctmirror.org/2011/06/04/house-passes-paid-sick-days-bill-after-gop-talks-11-hours.

[113] Matthew S. Shugart,"What role for "fusion voting"? Limitations and a potential "open" improvement," *Fruits and Votes*, December 27, 2023. https://fruitsandvotes.wordpress.com/2023/12/27/what-role-for-fusion-voting-limitations-and-a-potential-open-improvement/.

[114] Bernard Tamas, "Does Fusion Undermine American Third Parties? An Analysis of House Elections from 1870 to 2016." *New Political Science* 39, no. 4 (2017): 609-626, https://doi.org/10.1080/07393148.2017.1378294.

[115] Matthew S. Shugart,"What role for "fusion voting"? Limitations and a potential "open" improvement," *Fruits and Votes*, December 27, 2023. https://fruitsandvotes.wordpress.com/2023/12/27/what-role-for-fusion-voting-limitations-and-a-potential-open-improvement/.

sufficient influence to dominate the nominations process in particular locales—compelling the major party to cross-nominate *their* candidates—or running their own candidates independently in areas of strength. The antislavery Free Soil Party did this repeatedly prior to the Civil War, successfully electing members to both the U.S. Senate and House of Representatives while also endorsing major party antislavery candidates for seats they could not win outright—allowing the party to form a robust antislavery coalition in Congress. The 1849 New Hampshire election for the U.S. House of Representatives provides a clear example. In that race, the Free Soil Party endorsed Whig candidate James Wilson II for one seat, while successfully running its own candidate, Amos Tuck, for another.[116]

The Populist Party in the 1890s also used hybrid strategies—frequently running their own candidates or negotiating fusion slates that had the major party nominating Populist candidates for some offices. In Montana, a fusion ticket with Democrats featured Populist picks for governor, lieutenant governor, and secretary of state.[117] In 1890, the Populists in Kansas used a hybrid strategy. Although their candidate in the gubernatorial election two years earlier had carried 36% of the vote for a close second-place finish, in 1890 the Kansas Populists controlled nearly 75% of the state legislature. They accomplished this by running their own candidates in some races and fusing with Democrats in others. By 1892, the Kansas Democratic Party decided to simply adopt (via fusion) the entire Populist ticket.[118] Kansas Republicans, fearing for their majority, began to adopt some of the populists' policy stances, and agreed to new election laws that protected fusion as a legal practice.

There is also evidence that contemporary fusion parties are similarly capable of expanding their electoral strategies beyond fusion, even if they have done so selectively. For example, since the 1960s, the New York Conservative Party *has* occasionally run its own candidates for governor, the U.S. House of Representatives, the U.S. Senate, and various state and local offices.[119] (In at least one case, the Conservative Party candidate even received the Republican Party's cross-nomination via fusion.[120]) Fusion parties can also take advantage of variation in local electoral rules to win office outright. For example, the Working Families Party, which has typically made its mark by fusing with the Democratic party in New York and Connecticut, ran its own candidates for Philadelphia's city council in 2023, under that city's somewhat unique

[116] The local Whig party declined to run a candidate against Tuck, facilitating his election. See Corey Brooks and Beau C. Tremitiere, "Fusing to Combat Slavery: Third Party Politics in the Pre-Civil War North," *St. John's Law Review* 98, no. 2 (2024): 6, https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=4831091.

[117] David R. Berman, *Radicalism in the Mountain West, 1890-1920: Socialists, Populists, Miners, and Wobblies* (University Press of Colorado. 2007), 83.

[118] Joel Rogers, "Kansas and Fusion Voting: Democratic Participation and Responsive Representation in the Sunflower State," New America, August 1 2024, 7-9, https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep62719.

[119] These efforts included a successful campaign for the U.S. Senate by James L. Buckley in 1970, a 1990 gubernatorial run by Herbert London (in which he received nearly as many votes as the Republican candidate,) and Doug Hoffman's 2009 special election campaign for U.S. Congress, a race in which he came in second. See Robert D. McFadden, "James L. Buckley, 100, Conservative Senator in Liberal New York, Dies," *New York Times*, August 18, 2023, https://www.nytimes.com/2023/08/18/nyregion/james-buckley-dead.html; Sam Roberts, "Herberg London, Conservative Savant and Social Critic, Dies at 79," *New York Times*, November 12, 2018, https://www.nytimes.com/2018/11/12/obituaries/herbert-london-dead.html; Stephanie Condon, "Doug Hoffman Concedes Again, Will Not Seek Recount," *CBS News*, November 24, 2009, https://www.cbsnews.com/news/doug-hoffman-concedes-again-will-not-seek-recount.

[120] In 1968, Conservative Rosemary Gunning was elected to the state Assembly and served four terms. She received the Republican party's endorsement. Linda Greenhouse, "Rosemary Gunning, at 71, Ends Legislative Career." *New York Times*, June 8, 1976, 24.

semi-proportional election rules. The Working Families Party's success in securing the two seats reserved for minority party candidates displaced the Republican party from city government altogether.[121] These kinds of examples demonstrate ways that fusion parties *can* at times succeed independently of their usual major party partners. Fusion provides minor parties important leverage and growth opportunities, but it need not be their only tool.

NEW YORK CITY: FUSION AND PROPORTIONAL REPRESENTATION IN PRACTICE

Can fusion and PR work together? The spread of bans on fusion voting largely predated the adoption of PR in American cities, so this historical record is limited. In New York, however, efforts to ban fusion failed and it has remained in practice to this day. As a result, fusion operated in tandem with PR after New York City adopted PR in 1936 for city council elections in response to scandals and pressure from non-dominant parties.[122]

The result was a political environment in which multiple parties representing a range of ideologies, from labor interests to progressives, could co-exist and contribute to policymaking.[123] A party like the American Labor Party (ALP) could emerge as a significant force for labor rights, social welfare, and anti-discrimination reforms. The ALP could use fusion voting to endorse candidates in citywide races while running its own candidates for city council under the proportional system.[124] This dual strategy allowed the ALP to maximize its influence.[125]

This period also saw the inclusion of Black and female City Council members, among others who were typically excluded from office.[126] Representatives from minor parties and previously unrepresented communities used their influence to drive key policy advancements in areas such as tenant protections and housing reforms.[127]

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[121] Joe Brandt, "What is the Working Families Party—and how is it impacting Philadelphia's City Council election?" CBS News, November 8, 2023, https://www.cbsnews.com/philadelphia/news/working-families-party-philadelphia-city-council-elections-republican-democrats-2023.

[122] Jesse Docter and Theodore Landsman, "Proportional Representation in New York City, 1936-1947," FairVote, December 18, 2017, 11-12 https://fairvote.org/report/proportion_representation_in_new_york_city_1936_1947/.

[123] Hugh A. Bone, "Political Parties in New York City," *The American Political Science Review* 40, no. 2 (1946): 275, https://doi.org/10.2307/1950681.

[124] Jesse Docter and Theodore Landsman, "Proportional Representation in New York City, 1936-1947," FairVote, December 18, 2017, 13, https://fairvote.org/report/proportion_representation_in_new_york_city_1936_1947/.

[125] This influence included helping to elect Fiorello La Guardia as mayor of New York City in 1937. "American Labor Party (La Guardia)," Voteview, Accessed May 1, 2025, https://voteview.com/parties/523/american-labor-party-la-guardia; Richard Schifter, "American Labor Party Gave a New York Echo of World Events," *The New York Times,* June 3, 1992, 20; "Labor Party Seen Aiding La Guardia," *New York Times.* January 28, 1937, 2.

[126] Michele Rosa-Clot, "This Stalin Frankenstein System: Adoption and Abrogation of Proportional Representation in New York City, 1936-1947," *RSA Journal* 17 (2007): 216, https://doi.org/10.13135/1592-4467/8797.

[127] Joel Schwartz,"Tenant Power in the Liberal City, 1943-1971," in *The Tenant Movement in New York City, 1904-1984,* ed. Ronald Lawson and Mark Naison (Rutgers University Press, 1986); Jesse Docter and Theodore Landsman, "Proportional Representation in New York City, 1936-1947," FairVote, December 18, 2017, 14, https://fairvote.org/report/proportion_representation_in_new_york_city_1936_1947.

Then vs. Now: How Today Might be Different

Given the prominence of fusion voting and the plethora of minor parties active in the 19th and early 20th centuries, we might have expected more robust efforts to adopt PR at that time. After all, European governments had begun to experiment with PR and reformers in the United States initially aimed for lofty national goals. Why didn't the multiparty system supported by fusion give rise to PR a century ago?

There is no definitive explanation, but one likely factor is that the timing simply did not align—PR didn't meaningfully exist until the latter part of the 19th century and so was not a widely-known option for most of the period that fusion was in use. Perhaps ironically, efforts to ban fusion voting kicked off at the same time as efforts to adopt PR: the Proportional Representation League of the United States—a key organization in advocating for PR—was founded in 1893, the same year that South Dakota passed the country's first anti-fusion law.[128] Minor parties began losing their ability to influence elected officials just as reformers began trying to explore and pursue PR.

It would be twenty more years before PR advocates shifted their focus to the municipal level as a more viable reform strategy, and by 1920 only four cities had adopted the reform. Had the minor parties empowered by fusion been able to sustain their presence longer, perhaps the PR movement would have been more widespread. Indeed, in two of the first three cities where municipal efforts to adopt STV (a variant of PR) were successful, minor parties had an important role. In both, the political coalition that pushed for the reform was anchored in part by an alliance between a faction of the locally-dominant Republican party and the Socialist party.[129] In other words, a minor party helped nudge open the door to reform.

Having a multiparty system already in place is no guarantee that a country will adopt PR. But global experience suggests that robust minor parties often provide critical support. For a system dominated by two major parties to adopt (and sustain) a reform that makes room for others, there must be organized interests and coalitions that demand and hold that space. An important lesson from the United States' prior experiences with STV mirrors this pattern: STV was adopted when one major party saw political advantage in aligning with a faction of its supposed

[128] Kathleen L. Barber, *A Right to Representation: Proportional Election Systems in the Twenty-first Century* (Ohio State University Press, 2000), 31; Elissa Berger, "A Party That Won't Spoil: Minor Parties, State Constitutions and Fusion Voting," *Brooklyn Law Review* 70, no. 4 (2005): 1381-2005, https://brooklynworks.brooklaw.edu/blr/vol70/iss4/10.

[129] In Ashtabula, OH, the first city to adopt PR, Democrats also supported reform alongside Socialists and some Republicans. See Jack Santucci, "Party Splits, Not Progressives: The Origins of Proportional Representation in American Local Government." *American Politics Research* 45, no. 3 (2017): 494-526, https://doi.org/10.1177/1532673X16674774.

opposition, and it was repealed when minor parties could not build and maintain sufficient strength to prevent the door from being slammed shut.

Finally, even if fusion parties themselves are not central to the United States' reform path to PR, such a transition may be more successful (and more sustainable) in an environment that has fusion in place. Party-building is not easy, and it frequently takes time. Regardless of what pathway facilitated PR's adoption, the system would more quickly demonstrate its representative benefits if minor parties were already established. Multiparty systems bring a host of advantages for democratic health. But they also require that party leaders simultaneously manage their own intraparty coalitions and cooperate effectively with interparty allies. Fusion creates opportunities and incentives for parties to do this, potentially providing the "training wheels" and critical experience from which to draw under a new PR system.[130]

The United States has lagged behind most established democracies in adopting PR. Yet the history of electoral systems in the United States includes a diverse set of efforts to make our democracy more representative. Reviving our tradition of fusion voting today would once again reinvigorate those efforts. Global experience shows that having a multiparty system in place provides a wider path for transitions to PR. An increasing number of experts and advocates are expressing support for replacing America's winner-take-all elections with proportional alternatives. Removing restrictions on fusion voting and expanding its use would not only be a benefit itself for democracy, but would also provide reformers with additional building blocks toward adopting PR.

[130] Oscar Pocasangre and Maresa Strano, "What We Know About Fusion Voting," New America, 2024, https://www.newamerica.org/political-reform/reports/what-we-know-about-fusion-voting.