

Why Socialists Should Support Proportional Representation

Via [Jacobin](#)

Alternatives to the winner-takes-all, two-party system in the United States took a beating in June when New York City's experiment with ranked-choice voting seemed to go belly-up. Voters found the new system confusing, and counting the results was delayed by weeks as the NYC Board of Elections struggled to adapt.

It would be a catastrophe for the Left, however, if this hiccup in NYC (which, it's worth noting, is hardly a real PR system, as it is confined to primary elections and still leads to the election of only one representative per district) led socialists to abandon the fight for proportional representation (PR). Like New York's counterparts all over the world, socialists' ability to engage in productive political conflict would be much stronger under the kind of multiparty system that proportional representation enables.

Support for a multiparty system is widespread in the United States. Since the start of the new century, about half the country has said it would support the emergence of at least one more party. Since 2011, Gallup polls suggest that percent of its support has risen and consistently hovers around the high 50s to low 60s. Although support is especially strong among independents, the [latest poll](#) suggests that 46 percent of Democrats also support the creation of a third party.

Fortunately, there is a viable path to realizing that desire in the United States. The [Fair Representation Act](#) introduced in the last Congress is a method for adopting a proportional representation system that is compatible with the Constitution. But understanding what it is and why socialists

ought to support the Fair Representation Act first requires a deeper understanding of how the winner-takes-all system hobbles the Left's success.

A (Not-Well-Known) Right-Wing Bias

The reality is that the winner-takes-all, two-party system plays a major role in distorting representation in Congress, state legislatures, and city councils – at least as much as gerrymandering does. In fact, it's not an exaggeration to say that our current system systematically favors the Right and disadvantages the Left. *Our current system systematically favors the Right and disadvantages the Left.*

That's one of the conclusions drawn by Jonathan Rodden in his fascinating book [*Why Cities Lose: The Deep Roots of the Urban-Rural Political Divide*](#). Urban centers, Rodden notes, are the base of center-left and left-wing voters. But the concentration of like-minded voters in densely packed urban neighborhoods leads to their suboptimal distribution across many districts, regardless of how those district lines are drawn. That creates a bias for right-wing parties who draw their support from rural and exurban districts – districts where their voters are more evenly spread out.

Think of it this way. Cities are so packed with left-leaning voters that many urban districts vote for the center-left or left candidate by very large margins. Right-leaning voters, however, are more evenly distributed across suburban and rural districts, where center-right and right-wing candidates more commonly win by smaller margins. This unbalanced distribution of left and right voters is one of the primary mechanisms that gives our political system a severe majoritarian tilt, biasing elections in favor of right-wing populists who do especially well in rural areas and affluent suburbs.

Due to the distorting effects of the combination of winner-takes-all elections and left voter concentration in cities,

Rodden even finds that laws that would prevent gerrymandering by putting district-drawing in the hands of nonpartisan authorities would not be enough to greatly improve the Left's competitive position. In thousands of simulations of different district configurations, he finds the same bias toward Republicans due to their strength in rural and suburban areas.

But it is not just the technical aspects of how districts are drawn that biases elections in favor of the Right. In the popular consciousness, voters in a two-party system are also taught to believe that they only have two choices. This creates a false sense that the "middle ground" in politics is between the Democratic and Republican Parties.

In what we might call the "middle-ground illusion," voters come to believe that the only way to assert their independence from the two parties and to punish a party is to vote for Democrats in some elections and Republicans in others. Although that choice is really a choice between a center-right party and a far-right party, voters think they're being "fair and balanced" in this game.

Tactical Trouble for Socialists

As if its antidemocratic nature weren't enough of a problem for socialists, four additional aspects of the winner-takes-all, and the two-party system it gives rise to, are especially troubling for socialists' ability to compete effectively.

First, by trapping the Left within the Democratic Party, the two-party system puts socialists in a double bind. On the one hand, we have an obvious need to distinguish ourselves from mainstream Democrats. Winning elections in Democratic primaries depends on drawing clear distinctions, and even going on the attack against mainstream Democrats.

But as we move out of solidly blue districts into more competitive parts of the country, that can rebound to hurt both us and establishment Democrats. A party that seems to be

gripped by a civil war will almost certainly repel voters.

The pressure to muzzle our criticisms, therefore, for the sake of party unity will certainly grow as time goes on, undercutting our ability to establish our own independent position. We got a first taste of this in 2016 and 2020, when Bernie Sanders was under intense pressure not to go on the attack against Hillary Clinton and Joe Biden. Indeed, many blamed Clinton's loss on Sanders's modest criticisms of her in the primary campaign.

Second, establishment Democrats and socialists are already beginning to learn that broad tents make for easier targets. In the 2020 congressional elections, Democrats underperformed compared to expectations. Democratic leaders were likely [not wrong to suggest](#) that part of the reason was due to the success Republicans had in tying Democrats in battleground districts to socialism and other controversial left-wing demands.

At the same time, socialists will likely find in more competitive parts of the country that the Democratic identity is toxic among many working-class voters who might otherwise be open to our message. One reason Bernie Sanders consistently outperforms Democrats in Vermont elections has to do with his ability to appeal to working-class independents and Republicans who approve of his independence from the Democratic Party.

Third, socialists would benefit enormously from being able to make elections about party strategies rather than personalities. In our current system, socialist candidates go up against Democrats in primaries. In those races, and absent party labels, voters often make choices based on personality, identity, and who they think is most likely to win in the general election.

For socialists who want to make elections about strategy and

platforms, this can be especially frustrating. It's hard in a primary to explain to voters why such-and-such establishment Democrat who says they are for progressive reforms is really part of a larger, unlabelled political project that blocks those reforms. General elections, on the other hand, present just such an opportunity to make the choice about contending party strategies rather than personalities.

Moreover, in a multiparty system, socialists can effectively distinguish ourselves from those on the center-left in the eyes of voters in between elections as well. Separate party identities that compete against each other [help organize political conflict](#) for most people. Parties in a multiparty system can, for example, enter and exit governing coalitions, and it's easy for all to see what is happening.

This is not so in a two-party system, where people rarely know the balance of power between the various factions inside a party. Most politically engaged people would likely know that Democrats hold a slim majority in the House, but how many people could tell you the relative sizes of the progressive and neoliberal blocs within the Democratic Party? Among its many sins, a two-party system masks conflicts.

Take the highly popular stimulus bill. In a multiparty system, the party of the Left would have pushed to include greater redistribution in the stimulus, and Joe Biden would have been forced to concede to the pressure in order to secure their support. Voters would have seen clearly where the best parts of the stimulus came from. In our two-party system where these kinds of conflicts are much harder for people to follow, the best parts of the stimulus are perceived (to the extent that people even know they happened) as a gift from Joe Biden, since the push for the stimulus came from "the Democrats."

Finally, and on the longest time horizon, proportional representation is better for socialists because it ensures that if we come to power, we will do so with the support of a

majority of society. In debates in the British Labour Party about the desirability of PR, Ralph Miliband [made the case](#) for the importance of proportional representation in this way:

Labour supporters of the first-past-the-post system argue that it also gives the Labour Party a chance to win an election and form a government of its own. This may be true, but it ignores some important facts, quite apart from the point of principle that the electoral system should not greatly distort representation. One fact the argument ignores is that a government engaged in fundamental reform needs a much greater measure of support in the country than does a conservative government. It is only thus that a radical government could hope to achieve its purposes; and that support ought to be reflected in voting figures. Fifty-one per cent is no magic figure; but achieving that figure, alone or if need be in coalition, is none the less very helpful.

Overcoming the two-party system and transitioning to a system of proportional representation is of paramount strategic importance for the socialist cause. Our ability to win – and to base a future socialist government on the support of the majority of society – would be greatly aided by this transformation.

An American Solution

Is there a viable model for adopting a proportional representation system in the United States?

Germany provides one of the best examples of such an alternative. It's sometimes called "mixed-member proportional representation" (MMP). MMP combines the advantages of direct district-level representation with the advantages of representing parties proportionally.

Every voter on election day casts two votes. They vote for a candidate to be their representative to the German Bundestag;

and they vote for the party that is closest to their politics.

District-level representatives are elected first. Then parties are awarded additional representatives to ensure that their delegation in the Bundestag is proportional to their share of the national vote. A party's representation in the legislature is not exactly equal to their share of the national vote, since some parties do not make the threshold to be represented and are not counted. But it creates a system in which a party's share of seats is fairly close to its share of the national party-preference vote.

It's unclear if such a system would be possible in the United States, given the current constitutional order. But fortunately, alternatives that are definitely compatible with the US Constitution do exist.

FairVote, a nonprofit that specializes in making proposals to fix America's broken democracy, has done the most work on this front. Their [Fair Representation Act](#) is the boldest proposal yet to transition the United States to a multiparty system. Under the Fair Representation Act, congressional elections would be run using ranked-choice voting, which would immediately reduce the bite of the "spoiler effect."

But more importantly, every state with more than one representative would be required to introduce multimember districts. In Louisiana, for example, the state's six districts would be reduced to two, one in the eastern half and the other in the western half. Voters would then rank their preferences in elections. Ballots would be counted, leading to the election or elimination of candidates who meet or fail to meet a certain threshold. Votes assigned initially to elected or eliminated candidates would then be redistributed to the remaining candidates. The process would repeat until a number of candidates equal to the number of seats in a district are elected. *By expanding party choice, transitioning to a multiparty system would likely lead to a burst of turnout*

among working-class voters, greatly strengthening the forces opposed to the far right.

The precise number of representatives assigned to a multimember district would vary based on the number of representatives granted to a state (and in states with only one representative, elections would be held for that single seat). But the multimember nature of most district-level elections would lead to a greater diversity in party representation in Congress. And of critical importance to reducing the unfair advantage of the Right, such a system would combine cities with their surrounding suburbs and rural areas in large, multimember districts. This would greatly reduce the advantage that the Right gains from the winner-takes-all setup.

The Fight for Democracy

Democracy in the United States is under serious strain. The far right takeover of the Republican Party threatens democracy at a foundational level. And the Democratic Party – working [closely with big corporations](#) – does not provide an alternative.

Democratic socialists cannot afford to avoid this crisis any longer. We need a bold vision for building a stronger democracy in the United States. We may even find in the long term that mainstream Democrats, eager to put distance between themselves and the socialist left, might support a multiparty setup. Such a transformation does not have to be a zero-sum game. By expanding party choice, transitioning to a multiparty system would likely lead to a burst of turnout among working-class voters, greatly strengthening the forces opposed to the far right.

Socialists before us have taken up the cause of democracy. The fight for universal suffrage was a key demand for the Left all over the world in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Indeed, every real step forward toward stronger democracies internationally has been championed and fought for by socialists and working-class movements.

The fight for democracy today includes the struggle to defend voting rights, enact a public financing system, abolish the Electoral College, and curtail the power of the Senate and Supreme Court. But it also should look beyond fixing the problems with broken institutions and toward re-founding democracy itself.

A step along the way is ridding this country of the two-party trap and building a real multiparty system. Doing so is possible. And the health of our democracy – and, ultimately, victory for democratic socialism – depend on it.