

EXTENDING THE SPHERE OF REPRESENTATION: THE IMPACT OF FAIR REPRESENTATION VOTING ON THE IDEOLOGICAL SPECTRUM OF CONGRESS

“Extend the sphere, and you take in a greater variety of parties and interests; you make it less probable that a majority of the whole will have a common motive to invade the rights of other citizens.”

- James Madison, Federalist #10

“Some of the best legislators were Democrats from the suburban area who would never have been elected in single-member districts and some of the best legislators on the Republican side were legislators from Chicago districts who would never have been elected under single-member districts.”

- Former Illinois state senator and state comptroller Dawn Clark Netsch, describing the impact of fair representation voting in the Illinois House of Representatives

“...[It was a] symphony, with not just two instruments playing, but a number of different instruments going at all times.”

- Former Illinois state representative Howard Katz, describing the Illinois House of Representatives when elected by fair voting from 1870 to 1980

Because instituting fair representation voting for Congress would be a transformative moment in American politics, it is difficult to predict exactly what the impact of the reform would be on the partisan makeup of Congress. The only certainty is that Congress would become more representative of the political viewpoints of the American people. Most significantly, the House of Representatives would shift from representing just two partisan poles on a left-right linear spectrum with an empty void between, to more fully representing the electorate’s three-dimensional character on economic, social, and national security issues.

Even if the two major parties continued to dominate the great majority of seats, as would be likely, the “big tents” these parties purport to represent would be better reflected in Congress. Because fair voting would be used in primaries as well as the general election, parties would nominate candidates reflecting their internal diversity. Geographic diversity within parties would also rise, as candidates from the major parties would regularly win seats in the other party’s strongholds. As a result, there would be a much more fluid spectrum that would likely lead to far more cross-party coalitions – socially conservative union backers, socially liberal fiscal conservatives, Republicans focused on urban policy, Democrats focused on rural policy, and so on.

Such big tent parties are essential to making American democracy work. While some advocates of proportional representation voting systems assume that it comes with disciplined parties, that model of representation works best with parliamentary government. But the American system of checks-and-

balances is designed for representation based on individual differences that allow for compromise among different parties and interest groups. Congress in 2013 is as dysfunctional as it is precisely because there is not enough diversity within the parties to allow for compromise. By using fair representation voting to “extend the sphere,” we can make the Madisonian vision of representative democracy work again.

Modelling the Impact of Fair Representation Voting

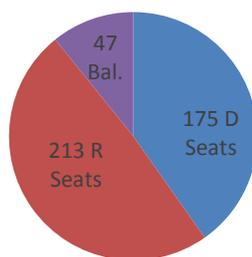
Remaining within the context of the two-dimensional ideological spectrum based on current partisan voting patterns, however, we can still show how Congress would provide a more accurate reflection of the voting population under the fair representation voting plan that we have created for all 50 states. Assuming that Americans’ voting patterns would remain roughly the same under a fair voting system, we can illustrate what Congress would likely look like in terms of the two major parties and even in terms of a spectrum of political ideology.

This analysis will project the composition of a fair representation Congress using the plan outlined in this report from three perspectives: a simple Republican/Democrat party split, a left-right political spectrum, and a three-dimensional sphere of cross-cutting political philosophies and policy positions.

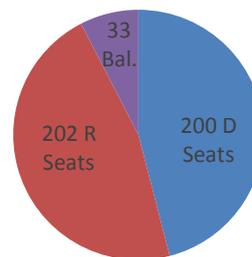
Projection #1: Party Breakdown Under Fair Voting

The two graphs below show the partisan breakdown of congressional seats currently and what that breakdown would be under fair voting, using the simple categorization of “Republican” and “Democrat” that does not capture the new diversity that would exist within the major parties:

Current Partisan Split



Fair Voting Partisan Split



In a year in which the two major parties perform roughly evenly nationwide under the current system, Republicans would be heavily favored to win 38 more seats than Democrats. Under our fair voting plan, a 50-50 year would instead give the two parties roughly the same number of seats in Congress: 202 Republican-favored seats, 200 Democratic-favored seats, and 33 balanced seats (defined as those within 3% partisanship of a super district threshold).

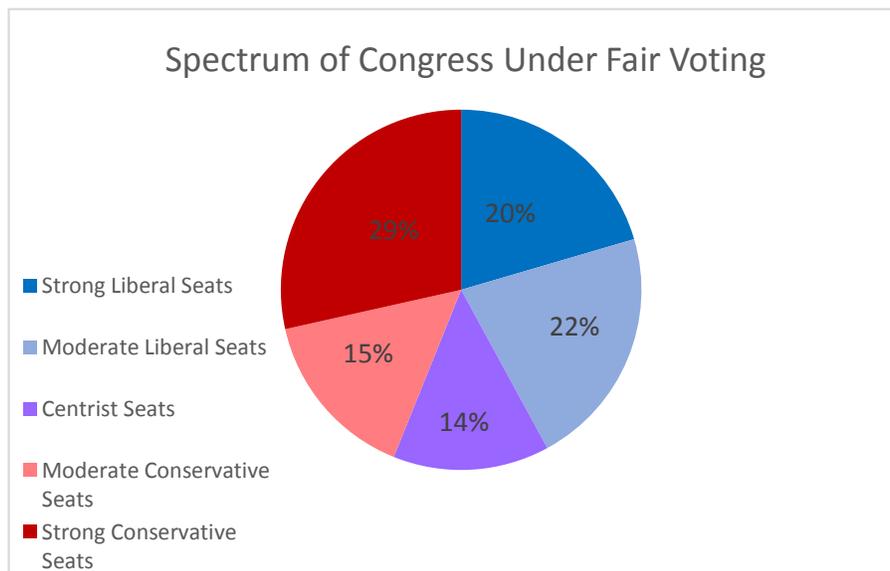
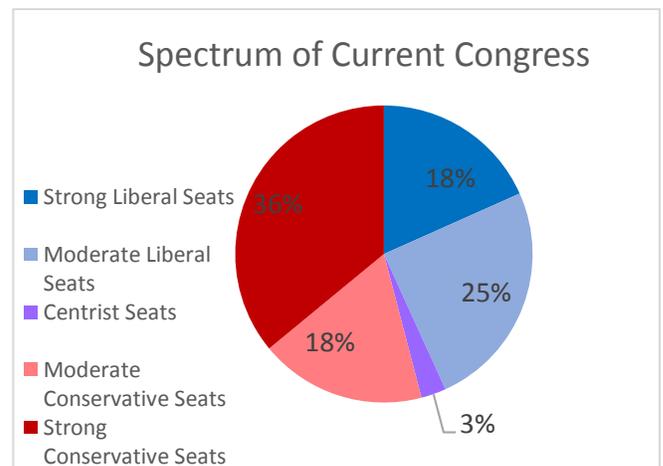
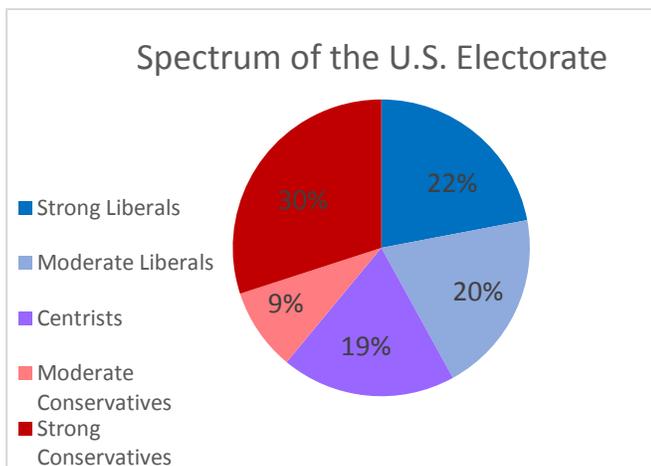
In a year in which most Americans support Democratic candidates, Democrats would almost always win the most seats. Similarly, Republicans would almost always win more seats when they received the most

votes. In this sense, fair voting would produce governments that are accountable to the will of the electorate. That is not true of the current system, as was demonstrated in 2012, when Democrats won the most votes in House races nationwide but Republicans won a substantial majority of seats.

Projection #2: Political Spectrum Under Fair Voting

Projecting the partisan outcomes of fair voting purely in terms of two parties, however, ignores one of the greatest virtues of fair voting systems: the fact that fair voting would create a Congress that represents many political viewpoints, not just two. It is still more difficult to project exactly which viewpoints would be represented in Congress under fair voting, but we can again make an educated guess.

The three charts below show our estimates for the ideological distribution of the American electorate, the current Congress, and Congress under fair voting. They are followed by a brief description of the methodology behind each estimate.



The top two charts illustrate the striking fashion in which the actual political preferences of the American electorate have been distorted in the House of Representatives by winner-take-all elections. While strong and moderate liberals are represented roughly in proportion to their population share, the large block of centrist Americans is receiving essentially no representation in Congress. Strong conservatives are heavily overrepresented in the current Congress, largely because their share of the electorate is large enough in most Republican-leaning districts to overwhelm less conservative candidates in Republican party primaries. That is less true of their strongly liberal counterparts, who are concentrated in fewer congressional districts and are in a more equal balance overall with moderate liberal Democrats.

The spectrum of Congress under fair voting is much more reflective of the U.S. electorate. Centrist Members of Congress – those most likely to forge bipartisan compromises – would earn a substantial share of seats. Conservatives, particularly strong conservatives, are no longer significantly overrepresented. Furthermore, fair voting is likely to lead to many more gradations on the left-right spectrum than the five categories listed here, more accurately representing the diversity of American political opinion and creating more opportunities for reaching deals on legislation. As will be discussed in the next section, however, this framework assumes a two-dimensional nature of our electorate that in fact is not truly representative of who we are and what we believe.

U.S. Electorate Spectrum: These numbers were taken from a [Pew Research Center poll](#) in 2012 of American party identification and ideology. We combined “liberal Democrats” and “liberal independents” into the “Strong Liberal” category, combined “moderate Democrats” and “conservative Democrats” into the “Moderate Liberal” category, used “moderate independents” for the “Centrist” category, combined “liberal Republicans” and “moderate Republicans” into the “Moderate Conservative” category, and combined “conservative independents” and “conservative Republicans” into the “Strong Conservative” category, ignoring those who reported no party or ideological preference.¹

Current Congress Spectrum: These seat numbers are based on liberal-conservative dimension DW-NOMINATE scores, a commonly-used statistical tool for measuring the voting patterns of Members of Congress on a left-right spectrum. Because DW-NOMINATE scores for the current Congress skew far to the right, we adjusted the ideological center, using the average midpoint between the average DW-NOMINATE scores for the two major parties over the last 10 years (.094) as the center, instead of 0. Members of Congress with DW-NOMINATE scores between 1.0 and .595 are considered “Strong

¹ “Moderates” are not defined as necessarily being centrist on all issues, but could also have a mix of conservative and liberal views. “Moderate” Members of Congress are more likely to be “bridgebuilder” representatives, able to forge compromises between more traditional partisans on certain policies.

Conservatives,” scores between .595 and .345 are “Moderate Conservatives,” scores between .345 and -.155 are “Centrists,” scores between -.155 and -.405 are “Moderate Liberals,” and scores between -.405 and -1 are “Strong Liberals.”

Fair Representation Voting Congress Spectrum: These seat numbers are calculated by projecting what kinds of candidates would be elected in each multi-seat congressional “super district.” In a five-seat balanced district elected under a fair voting system, for instance, one seat would likely be won by a strong progressive, one by a moderate progressive, one by a centrist, one by a moderate conservative, and one by a strong conservative. This is a reasonable assumption because fair voting systems ensure that any likeminded group of voters whose share of the electorate is above a certain threshold (16.6% in a five seat district) will have the voting power to elect their preferred candidate.

In districts that aren’t balanced, extra seats for the favored party in this projection were assigned alternately to moderate and strongly partisan candidates. Due to the large voting bloc of strong conservatives, strong conservatives were assigned seats before moderates. Moderate liberals were assigned seats before strong liberals except in the case of majority-minority districts, which tend to elect unusually liberal representatives. For example, in a four seat district that heavily favors conservatives but in which a racial minority makes up 20% of the population, two seats would be won by strong conservatives, one seat by a moderate conservative, and one by a strong liberal.

Seats that are considered balanced in terms of partisanship are projected to be won by “crosscutting” or “bridgebuilding” candidates, who could come from either of the two major parties or run as independents. Furthermore, every five seat district is projected to elect at least one such crosscutting centrist, because centrists make up more than 16.6% of the American electorate. Furthermore, there is space for independents and third parties to win election under fair voting, meaning that not all of the liberal and conservative seats are guaranteed to be won by Democrats and Republicans. Even when they don’t win, these challengers from outside the major parties can more effectively hold the major parties accountable.

Projection #3: Three-Dimensional Representation under Fair Voting

A graduated but linear spectrum still cannot fully capture the complex and cross-cutting nature of many Americans’ political viewpoints and the viewpoints of the Members of Congress who would be elected under fair voting. There is not just one spectrum of political thought in the U.S., but many different axes that are largely independent – economic, social, and foreign policy, to name a few.

The Democratic and Republican parties have each aligned on various sides of these axes, with Democrats typically supporting government economic intervention, liberal social policies, and dovish foreign policies, and Republicans supporting more laissez-faire economic policies, religious/conservative social policies, and hawkish foreign policies. But this alignment has happened more through accidents of political history than due to any particular philosophical coherence of these positions.

While some Americans have followed the parties in this alignment, many others have not. There are many pro-life Democrats, isolationist Republicans, and countless other cross-party combinations in the

American electorate. Yet under our current polarized, winner-take-all-elected Congress, these Americans are essentially unrepresented in Congress. Elected representatives who deviate from the party line on major issues, like Senator Bob Casey and former Rep. Ron Paul, are rare exceptions.

Under fair representation voting, these candidates would be elected with much greater frequency. In many countries using national party list electoral systems, these types of complex positions are represented by a multitude of minor parties. Because of the relatively high thresholds for election in FairVote's fair voting plan, however, such party fragmentation is highly unlikely (though it would certainly be easier for third party and independent candidates to win election). Instead, the two "big tent" parties would simply be forced to run candidates that actually represent all of their supporters.

In a five-seat district electing four Democrats, for instance, one of the Democrats might be pro-life, another anti-gun control, another anti-foreign military intervention, and another adhering to the standard party line, along with a moderate Republican. Contrast that with what would likely occur with five winner-take-all districts: five party line Democrats winning election, representing only one point out of the multi-dimensional array of possible political viewpoints.

Fair representation voting would extend the sphere of representation in the U.S. House of Representatives such that it would reflect the true diversity of the American electorate, instead of distilling it into two partisan poles. Representatives would have new electoral incentives to seek out votes from the full spectrum of voters in their districts, facilitating bipartisan dealmaking and breaking through the perpetual gridlock in Congress.