

Representing the Golden State

The Road to Multiparty Democracy in California
January 2024





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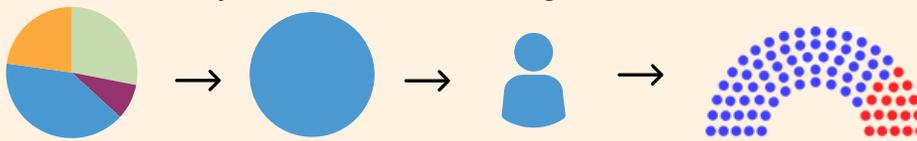
The Problem: California's Two-Party System

Political division is rampant. The two parties refuse to cooperate. Californians are struggling.

California's electoral system ensures that only two parties can represent voters in our State Legislature, which has led to a single party dominating our government for nearly 50 years. While single-party domination avoids the typical pitfalls of America's two-party system (partisan gridlock and dysfunction), it also severely restricts political representation in our state, limits electoral accountability, and, as of January 2024, has resulted in 71% of Californians calling for more political parties.

California's Current Electoral System

Majoritarian Elections with Single-Member Districts



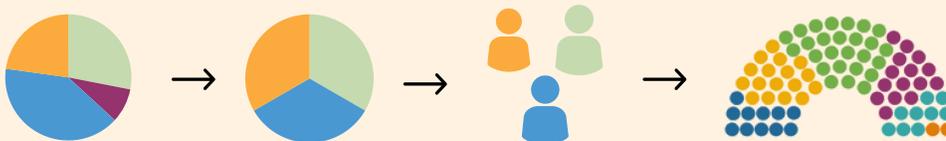
The Solution: Proportional Representation

More parties. Less division. Better representation. Responsive legislation.

Proportional Representation refers to a type of electoral system that distributes legislative seats to political parties in proportion to the amount of votes they receive in elections. For example: if Party A earns 10% of the vote in an election, Party A then receives 10% of the seats in the Legislature. The vast majority of advanced democracies use proportional representation in their legislative elections, which is why the vast majority of advanced democracies also have multiple parties representing their voters.

Proportional Representation = Multiparty Democracy

Proportional Representation with Multi-Member Districts



Introduction

California contains multitudes. The Golden State is the most populous state, the wealthiest state, and the most diverse state. We have the fifth largest economy in the world, and many of America's most notable technological and cultural innovations came from our soil, from Silicon Valley to Napa Valley to Hollywood.

Our innovative spirit can't be attributed to any one factor. The diversity of our land matches the diversity of our people. Scattered throughout our 1,000 miles of coastline, snow-capped mountains, evergreen forests, sprawling grasslands, and scenic deserts are 40 million people with more cultural, racial, and linguistic diversity than any other state.

And yet, when it comes to politics in the Golden State, the richness of our diversity is flattened. Like the rest of America, California only has two viable political parties. As partisan polarization has increased on the national stage, it's increased in California's State Legislature as well. And in the process, California's legislature has become totally dominated by one party.

One party domination might not seem like a bad thing, especially if you're a Democrat. After all, it reduces gridlock and makes legislating easier. But when it comes to effectively representing the preferences and needs of everyone in our state, single-party domination presents a range of problems. At the core of these problems is the reality that California's representative democracy isn't all that representative, even for members of the party in power. This isn't a secret among voters; there are countless communities that are unsatisfied with the status quo and want more options:



71% of Californians believe more political parties are needed.

Increasing the number of parties representing voters is critical to both preserving and advancing democracy in the United States. California is well-positioned to lead this charge. We have the popular demand, resources, and political climate necessary to enact major reforms and become the first multiparty US state. Crucially, California's ballot initiative process allows citizens to propose changes to the law without the support of our legislature or governor.

In support of that argument, this report will discuss why democracies need political parties, what the problems with only having two parties are, and how we can transition to a robust, multiparty democracy that would better represent the many diverse communities that make California so great.

About ProRep Coalition

Launched in 2023, ProRep Coalition is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit with a mission to enable multiparty democracy in California through education and coalition-building for Proportional Representation.

Learn more about our team here:

<https://www.prorepcoalition.org/about>





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I. Why do we need political parties?

In many ways, the most democratic system of government would be one in which every citizen directly votes on every policy and governing decision. But in the world as we know it today, that isn't practical or possible. Electing representatives to make decisions on behalf of the people is the only way our democracy can function in the interests of everyone equally. Yet, there are so many different elections at the state, local, and federal level, and most voters don't have the time to study the policy positions of each candidate.

That's where political parties come in.

Political parties are groups of individuals with similar ideologies who organize themselves to win elections, operate government, and make public policy.

They are foundations of representation in modern democracies, and they structure our relationship with the government in a number of crucial ways, as seen in the boxes on the next page.

It can be tempting to want elected representatives to be nonpartisan, independent actors free of any influence beyond the voters who choose them. But [history shows](#) that this is unworkable; attempts to reform politics in this way have consistently failed. Political scientists almost universally agree on the necessary centrality of political parties, echoing the axiom first declared by the political scientist E. E. Schattschneider in 1942: "Modern democracy is unthinkable save in terms of the parties."

Even so, when it comes to political parties in the US, most Americans' views of them are skeptical at best. Since its founding, the United States has had a strong [anti-party political culture](#). **But we need parties, and the frustration Americans feel towards them isn't due to what parties are by nature, but due to the political divisiveness, conflict, and resentment that comes from only having two.**

Political Parties: Key Functions

Parties give order and clarity to voters' choices.

A party label (for example, Democrat or Republican) tells a voter about the general ideology and affiliation of someone running for office. If a voter is a Republican, they know that they will agree with a Republican candidate much of the time – or at least probably more often than they would agree with a candidate from the other party. While it may seem attractive for politicians to be more “independent,” candidates who run without a party label are much harder for voters to assess.

Parties make policies understandable to the public.

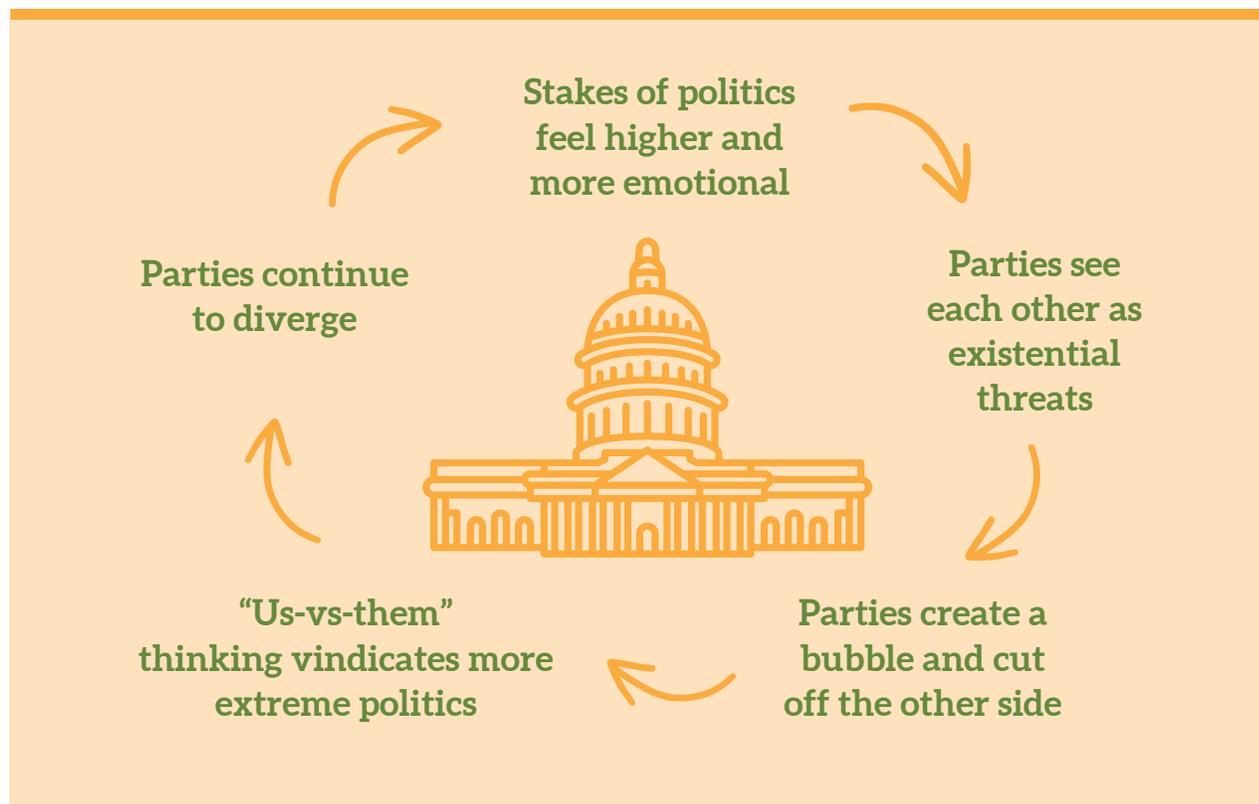
Without the help of parties, individual voters would have the tremendous and time-consuming responsibility of studying every individual candidate's policy positions to determine whether they align with their politics. This would be impossible for most voters, who don't have the time or resources to do all that work on their own. Plus, without any parties, voters would be left at the mercy of individual candidates, who may be less transparent about what they do and don't actually support. Parties simply make electoral politics more coherent.

Parties enable elected officials to organize themselves and translate the will of voters into policy.

In order for elected representatives to deliver on their promises to voters, they can't simply act alone. Passing legislation requires teams of legislators to make policy promises together. A policy promise made by a lone legislator is a lot less trustworthy than the same promise made by a party that has the institutional structure necessary to secure a majority of lawmakers' support.

II. America's Two Party Problem

In Washington, D.C., the two-party system creates a **“doom loop;”** a vicious cycle where polarization breeds dysfunction, breeding more polarization and more dysfunction. As the stakes of each election feel higher, tribal us-vs.-them thinking feels increasingly justified, people wall themselves off from each other in information silos and echo chambers, and more and more extreme actions towards the other side feel justified.



We see this phenomenon play out all the time in Congress, and it has worsened in the past few decades. Judicial nominees used to get nearly unanimous bipartisan approval; now the nomination process is a zero-sum partisan fight. Actions like raising the debt ceiling to allow for spending that Congress has already approved were once routine;

now they are occasions for brinkmanship and point-scoring against the other party. Tools like censure and even impeachment which were once used sparingly in extreme cases are now standard procedure for a party out of power to attack and attempt to delegitimize the party in power.

This process of constant escalation is well-known to any observer of American politics today. But it's not natural or unavoidable – it is unique to America's two-party system.

When only two viable parties dominate politics, the party out of power is motivated to make governing as hard as possible for the party in power. Each party is seduced by the idea that they are just one election away from domination and achieving their policy goals, leading to "I alone can fix it" rhetoric from candidates every election cycle. Likewise, the fear of the other side winning and dominating for the next few years leads to more and more motivation to demonize the other major party.

Unfortunately, the doom loop isn't reserved for Congress. It significantly impacts our state legislatures as well. However, its effects are quite different at the state level.

Rather than a constant shifting of power between the two major parties, many state legislatures are experiencing the opposite effect: prolonged one-party domination.

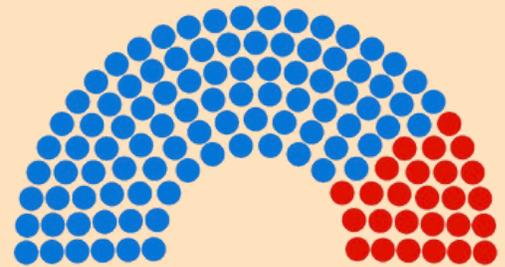
III. California's One Party Problem

Compared to the U.S. Congress, California's State Legislature doesn't have nearly as much gridlock or dysfunction. The two parties don't cooperate much, but in California, they don't have to in order for legislation to pass. The Democratic Party has maintained nearly complete control of the legislature since 1970.

One party in total control of the government may seem like a good thing, especially if it solves the typical issues stemming from our national two-party dysfunction (and if the party in control is the one you prefer as a voter!) But single-party control presents a range of problems for our legislature.

Legislatures are the places our elected representatives go to introduce and debate bills, negotiate compromises, and enact laws. We elect leaders to represent our interests and deliberate on our behalf when creating and passing legislation. But when the process of legislating is dominated by one party, the deliberation of policies that impact all Californians is less transparent, often occurring solely among representatives of the dominant party. Without visibility into legislative decision making, voters are left with few tools to evaluate the quality of their representation, which limits their understanding of how their vote impacts policymaking. This stifles electoral accountability and pushes lawmakers towards extremism and corruption.

It's not just California, either; America's statehouses are as polarized as ever. After the 2022 elections, a single party now controls the governor's office and both legislative chambers in 39 states – the greatest number of one-party states in three decades. In California, after half a century of one party dominating our legislature, we've learned a few things about why this isn't working:



Combined Partisan Distribution
of California's State Assembly
and State Senate.

1 Poverty in California is getting worse, and our marginalized communities are turning away from politics.

- **According to a recent study**, about a third of California’s 40 million residents live in poverty or near-poverty. Despite having the fourth largest economy in the world, 34% of California’s families lack enough income to meet basic living needs, largely due to exorbitant housing costs.
 - This isn’t a new problem. Even though California has been the U.S. state with the largest unhoused population for more than a decade, state legislators have consistently failed to address its root causes.
 - Californians are well-aware of the issue: 76% of all adults favor government policies that would make housing more accessible and affordable; 71% say the gap between the rich and the poor is getting larger; and 67% believe children growing up in California today will be worse off than their parents. Yet, our government fails to act.

- **California’s voter turnout rates vary significantly by race and socioeconomic status.** Who votes – and who doesn’t vote – tells us a lot about how different races and ethnic groups perceive our political system. According to researchers, “large majorities of nonvoters say that traditional politicians and parties do not care about people like them, and that elections have little to do with how decisions are made in the United States.”
 - California’s adult population is 39% Latino and 35% percent White. However, nearly 60% of California likely voters are White, and only 19% are Latino.
 - Likely voters and nonvoters differ significantly in their socioeconomic status: Of California’s frequent voters, 67% are homeowners and 59% have annual household incomes of \$60,000 or more; Of nonvoters, 69% are renters and only 24% earn \$60,000 or more. Moreover, while White and Asian homeowner rates hover around 60% in California, Black and Latino homeowner rates hover around 30%.
 - In a two-party system where one of the two parties is hostile towards racial equity, many voters of color feel they don’t have a real choice. Meanwhile, the other party can effectively take them for granted, resulting in a system that doesn’t take the concerns of people of color seriously.

2 Most Californians are politically left of center, which results in an overly dominant Democratic Party that conceals liberal voters' differing preferences.

- **“Vote blue no matter who!” ...only works when there’s two.**
 - With only two parties to choose from, everyone on the left side of the political spectrum only has one viable option. For those on the left who are unsatisfied with the Democratic Party, that often means being forced to settle for what they consider the lesser of two evils. If the only option in town that satisfies the identification of the vast majority of the state’s voters is the Democratic Party, it means everyone, besides those willing to be ignored as Republicans, is incentivized to vote for the Democratic Party.
- **The dominance of the Democratic party in California hides liberal voters’ ideological diversity.**
 - The complete control of government by Democrats in California reflects a political reality; most voters in the state are left of center. But that general preference conceals a lot of ideological diversity. Not all Democrats are the same; there’s a dramatic difference between the progressive and moderate wings of the party, and they don’t always get along. But the differences between these parts of the party are not clear to voters. Whether a Democrat is progressive, moderate, or somewhere in between, the only identifying label voters have when voting is “Democrat.”

3 Nearly all voters who don’t identify with the Democratic Party are left without power.

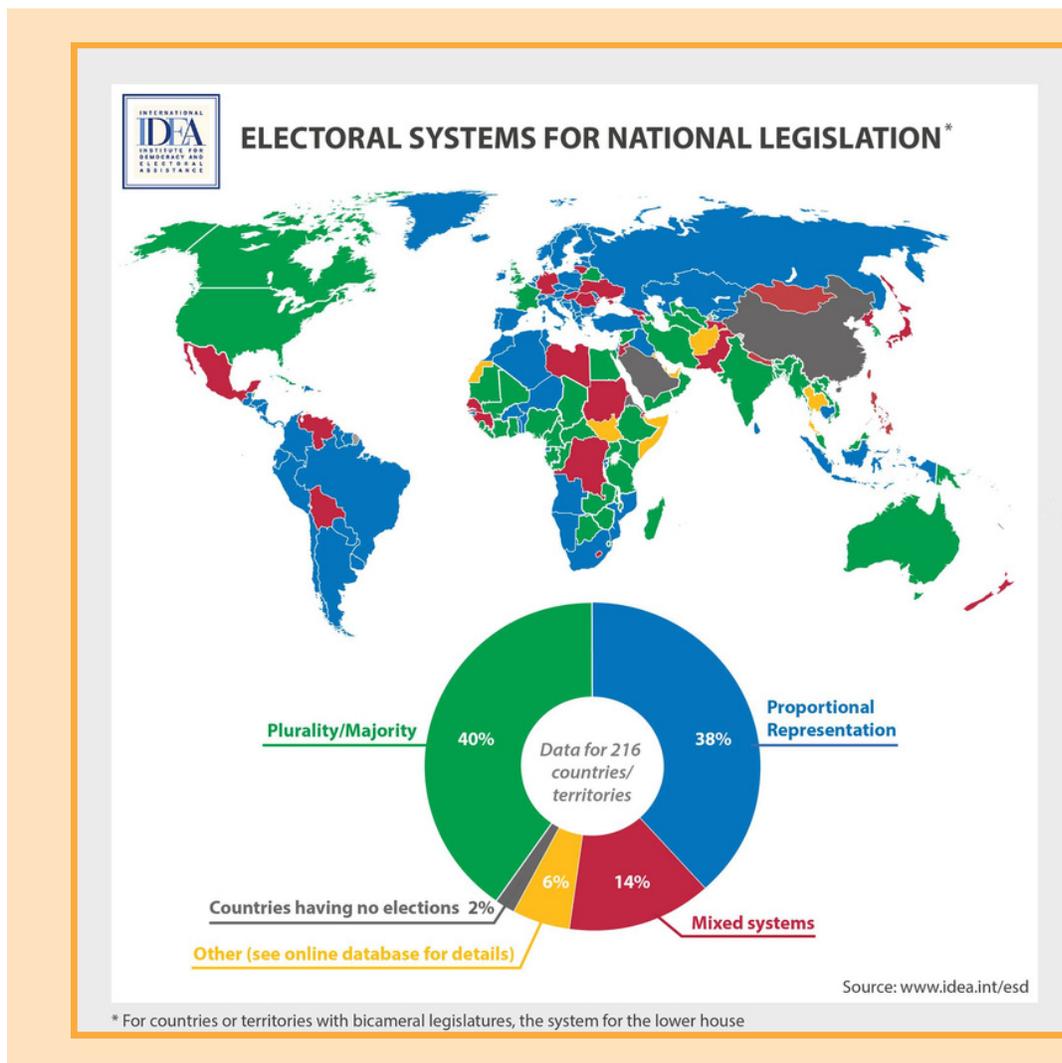
- **Even though 25% of Californians are Republicans, the party has been largely sidelined from policymaking for five decades.**
 - The Republican Party and its voters have little influence on legislation in California. With a supermajority in both Houses, Democratic lawmakers don’t need to compromise with Republicans or consider their interests in order to enact laws.

- 75% of bills proposed to the legislature last year were strictly partisan: supported exclusively by either Democratic or Republican lawmakers. Only 8% of bills had more than one sponsor from each party.
 - Without an outlet to realistically have their views expressed in the legislature, conservative voters are often left feeling voiceless and angry – making them more likely to demonize the other side, and fixate on the ideological purity of candidates in the districts where Republicans can win. That in turn leads to more polarization between elected representatives of the two parties. The doom loop continues.
- **The lack of meaningful political representation in our state legislature isn't lost on Californians.**
- Nearly 1/3 of registered voters identify as independent or with a minor party. While the Democratic Party has the highest share of registered voters in California (46%), independent voters and minor parties have the second (29%), and the Republican Party has the third (23%). Fewer voters are registered with major parties now than at any other point in recent history.
 - 71% of Californians believe more parties are needed. Over the last decade, the amount of Californians who believe the two major parties do such a poor job that we need more increased by 17%.

Recognizing California's one-party problem isn't a criticism of the Democratic Party, its policies, or its voters. It's an acknowledgement of the inherent lack of representation that stems from our two-party system and the harmful zero-sum politics it produces. Fortunately, there's a solution to this problem. But in order to work towards that solution, we first need to understand why we only have two parties to begin with.

IV. Why do we only have two political parties?

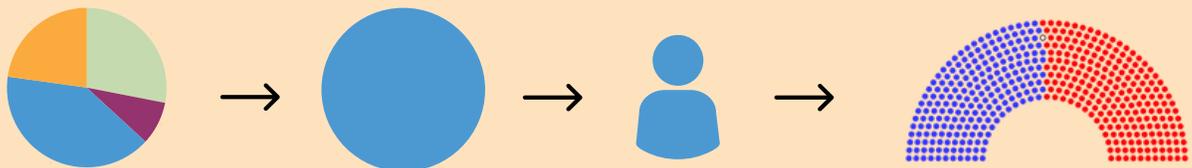
If our democracy is a government by the people and for the people, elections determine how the government is made up of *the people*. The rules that govern our elections and determine how votes are translated into seats are referred to as **electoral systems**. **The type of electoral system a country or state uses plays a profoundly important role in shaping the political life of its democracy.** Among many impacts, electoral systems are largely responsible for determining how many parties represent voters.



There's an entire branch of political science dedicated to researching how electoral systems influence party systems. Supported by decades of evidence, many political scientists have come to accept a truism in political science known as Duverger's law. The law explains why some countries have two-party systems while other countries have multiparty systems. It's fairly straightforward: **when a country uses majoritarian voting rules combined with single-winner districts for its legislative elections, that country will likely be dominated by two major political parties as a result.** For more detailed research on how institutional features impact party systems, see the [Seat Product Model](#).

When there is only one seat up for grabs in an election (a single winner), and the only way to win is to simply get the most votes (majoritarian-style), then any third party trying to compete for votes will take votes away from the side closest to it (the spoiler effect).

Majoritarian Elections with Single-Member Districts



This type of electoral system creates a political climate that discourages voters from selecting candidates they genuinely prefer. Instead, voters are forced to settle for candidates from the major parties they feel are most likely to win. In turn, political diversity is forced into a “left” and “right” partisan binary.

Party A

Occupies liberal, "left" side of political spectrum

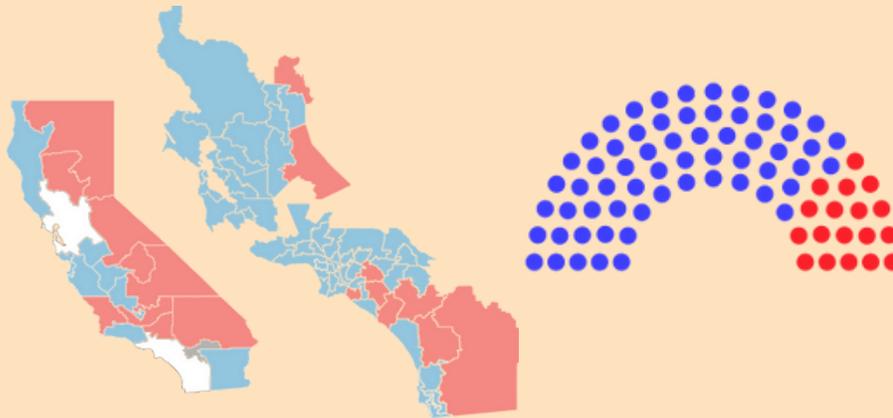
Party B

Occupies conservative, "right" side of political spectrum



We don't need to look too far to see that majoritarian elections produce two-party legislatures. Below is a map of the California State Assembly's 80 majoritarian, single-member districts.

2022 California State Assembly Election: Single-Member Districts with Majoritarian Voting



With the exception of a single representative identifying as Independent, all of the seats in California's State Assembly belong to either Democrats or Republicans due to our electoral system. The same two-party pattern is found in our state senate, all state legislatures across the U.S., as well as in the U.S. Congress

The reason why majoritarian voting in single-member districts is used throughout the U.S. isn't a mystery: we inherited the system from Britain. However, there is no federal law mandating how state legislative elections are conducted, and [Article IV, Section IV of the Constitution](#) allows state governments to experiment with alternative election systems. Similarly, [Article I, Section IV](#) allows the U.S. Congress to change how its elections are conducted. There is no constitutional requirement for any of America's elections to continue on with our broken election system.

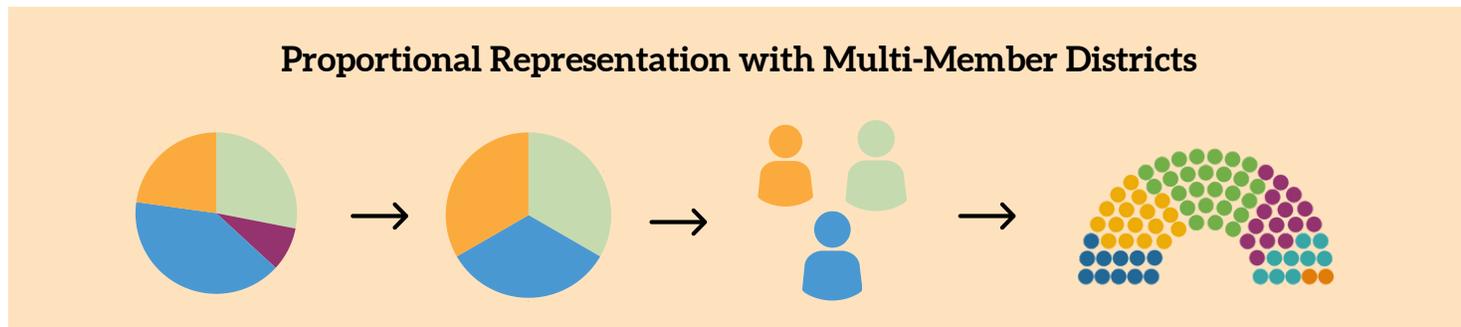
So if we know that our two-party system is fundamentally unrepresentative, that it results from our antiquated, inherited majoritarian electoral system, and that the Constitution allows us to change the system, what are the alternatives?

V. The Solution: Proportional Representation & Multiparty Democracy

Most large, modern democracies left the antiquated single-winner district system behind over the past couple of centuries. In its place, about 80% of the world's advanced democratic countries use a type of electoral system that is more representative, more conducive to a functioning legislature, and allows more than just two political parties: **proportional representation**.

Proportional representation is an electoral system where a political party's share of votes in an election determines how many seats it holds in the legislature. If a party wins 30% of the vote, it wins about 30% of the seats. If it wins 60% of the vote, it wins about 60% of the seats, and so on.

Proportionality stems from the use of multi-member districts, where voters are represented by multiple representatives instead of only one. Obviously, one representative cannot possibly be divided to reflect the proportion of voters who chose them. But multiple representatives can:

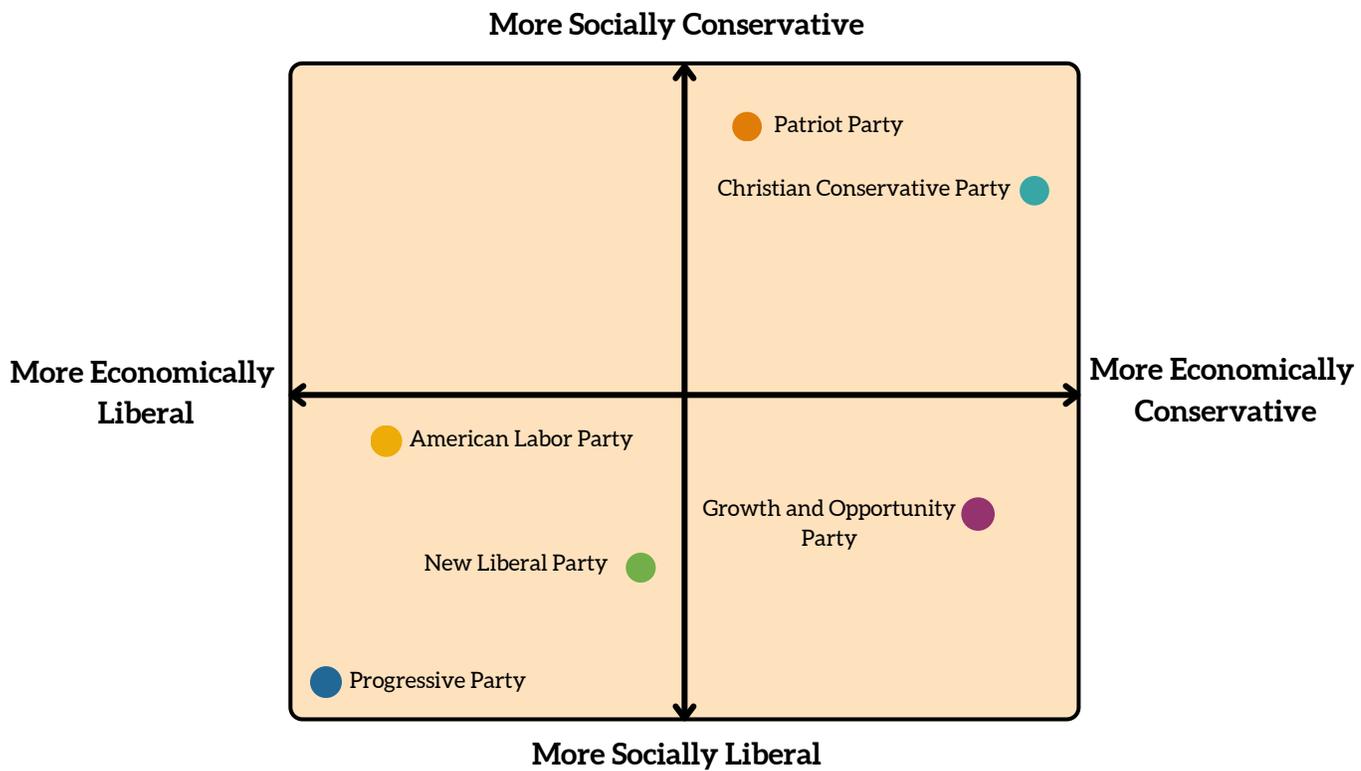


There are many different methods to organize multi-member elections that result in proportionality. The most common system in the world is a party list system, where voters select their preferred party and candidate simultaneously. Another popular system called the single transferable vote

(STV) utilizes ranked choice voting – it is used or will soon be used in local elections in [eight American cities and localities](#), including most recently [Portland, OR](#). There are other forms of proportional representation as well – the biggest benefits do not come from the particular form of voting, but from the proportional outcome.

It’s easy to see why proportional systems are the overwhelming preference of those who study elections. They better reflect the diversity of the electorate, they are more responsive to voters’ preferences, and they break up the two-party stranglehold on politics. That’s why in 2022, [more than 200](#) political scientists, historians, and law professors signed an open letter to Congress calling for the adoption of proportional representation in the U.S.

Outside of academic circles, although electoral system design and proportional representation remains far-removed from voters’ consciousness, [support for more parties](#) is at a 20 year high. After all, having more parties would significantly diversify our political spectrum and allow Americans to select representatives that more closely align with their values. Below is what a multiparty political spectrum in the US might look like.



Party Descriptions

- **Patriot Party:** The party of Donald Trump’s 2016 primary campaign: the coalition of the small town, white working-class Americans who feel left behind by globalism and condescended to by cosmopolitanism. It is economically populist and strongly anti-immigration. Its strongest support among lower-income conservatives comes from exurban America.
- **Christian Conservative Party:** Focused centrally on issues of religious liberty and morality, with very limited government. Finds strongest support among the most politically engaged and affluent, especially men.
- **American Labor Party:** Focused on economic populism, with an appeal to working-class Democrats who don’t have college degrees and don’t follow politics closely. It is more moderate on social and cultural issues compared with the Progressive Party, but also more diverse, appealing to many working-class Hispanics.
- **New Liberal Party:** The professional-class establishment wing of the Democratic Party. Members are cosmopolitan in their social and racial views but more pro-business and more likely to see the wealthy as innovators.
- **Growth and Opportunity Party:** The socially moderate, pro-business wing of the Republican Party. It is the heir to the old moderate “Rockefeller Republican,” the East Coast wing of the G.O.P.
- **Progressive Party:** Focused on equity and racial justice, with a strong vision of inclusive social democracy. Its strongest support comes from politically engaged, highly educated younger people, especially women.

Source: [Quiz: If America Had Six Parties, Which Would You Belong To?](#)

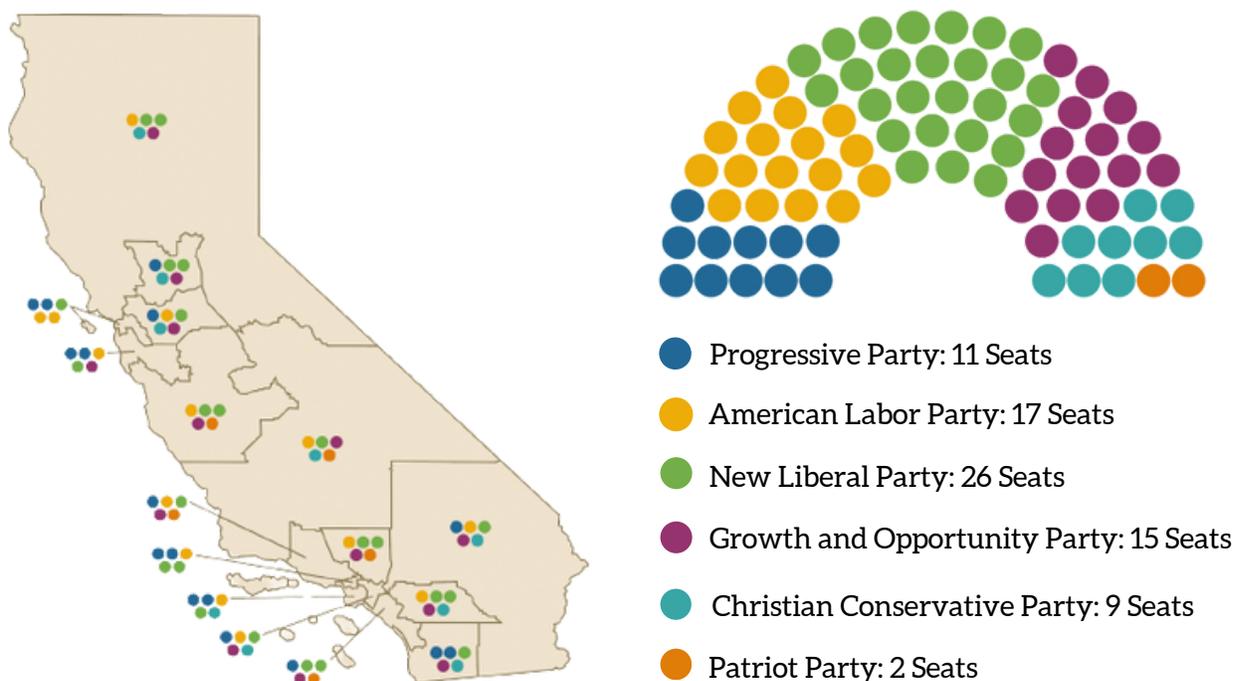
By Lee Drutman, NY Times

Adopting proportional representation at any level of government will be a long and challenging process – thanks to the very dysfunction that it aims to address! But California has a unique pathway for voters to demand this kind of change. Our state’s robust system of direct democracy allows citizens to champion ballot initiatives themselves. **With enough support, we can get proportional representation on the ballot in California and lead the charge towards multiparty democracy in America.**

VI. Imagining Multiparty Democracy & Proportional Representation in California

Adopting proportional representation in California wouldn't dramatically change our legislature overnight. But over time, our state's political landscape would diversify considerably. The two-party system we have today would likely transform into a four or five party system. Below is a map of how California's State Assembly and its partisan makeup might look with the adoption of multi-member districts and proportional representation.

For Illustrative Purposes Only



Note: There are multiple types of proportional electoral systems. This map is intended to demonstrate how the system functions at a basic level for educational purposes. ProRep Coalition does not currently advocate for any particular form of proportional representation.

By adopting proportional representation in the Golden State:



California would become the first U.S. state with a multiparty legislature.

Adopting proportional representation would lead to multiparty democracy in California, giving voters more meaningful electoral options and allowing them to better express where they stand on the political spectrum. With proportional representation, the third of Californians that identify as independent or with the minor parties will finally be represented by a party they prefer. Progressive Democrats, moderate Republicans, and everyone in between will have more options that more closely reflect their actual beliefs and convictions. In addition, with multiple parties representing voters, multiparty coalitions would emerge and lead to a legislature that more adequately represents the needs and interests of the citizenry.



Liberal voters would have a simpler way of selecting the progressive and moderate candidates they more closely align with.

California leans heavily liberal. However, since our choice of parties is limited to two, many voters are forced to vote for the “mega-party” that represents the entire left side of the political spectrum. Yet, that “mega-party” contains a wide range of political preferences within it. Forced to function as a whole, the party often oversimplifies and misrepresents its own members’ diverse ideologies. With proportional representation, all those on the left side of the political spectrum would have multiple parties to choose from, allowing them to more easily identify the candidates they most closely align with, whether radically left, progressive, or moderate.



California's diverse, multiracial society would be better represented in the Legislature.

With proportional representation, parties would have a greater incentive to compete for the support of historically marginalized communities. Due to increased competition, parties are encouraged to form closer ties with their constituents and champion policy proposals that better address their needs. Having multiple parties also means greater diversity in party and candidate choice for disadvantaged groups, increasing the chances that voters will see their needs directly addressed by their elected representatives. By generating political competition and responsive policymaking, proportional representation would help reduce California's racial divide in voter participation and economic mobility.



Communities would no longer need to live in segregated groups in order to get representation.

Currently, voters have to make up the largest share of their district in order to have their voice represented in the State Legislature. If you live in a district where your party is in a small minority, you're normally out of luck. Proportional representation avoids this problem. Because the threshold for a party to win seats is lower in a proportional district, everyone has a chance to elect a candidate of choice that represents them, no matter where they live.



Low-income voters would have a stronger voice in addressing economic inequality.

Since proportional representation reduces the percentage of votes needed to win seats, it also reduces the amount of money needed to win seats. With lower campaign finance barriers, parties that refuse to benefit from corporate donations have a better chance of being elected and representing the interests of low-income voters.



Political discourse in California would be tailored to California, not just echo national debates.

In recent years, California's elected leaders have funded ad campaigns in conservative states criticizing their leaders and their policies. These campaigns don't help Californians, they just reinforce the unhealthy "us vs. them" political division occurring across the country. By increasing the amount of parties representing voters, proportional representation would increase the amount of perspectives that shape California's political debates. Rather than reducing complex political discourse to zero-sum, binary arguments, incorporating multiple preferences would facilitate collaborative dialogue and allow California to break free from the country's toxic two-party divisiveness. In addition, demonization would no longer be a viable campaign strategy. In a multiparty system, there is no single "other" side. Parties have to compete with each other and have far stronger incentives to stand for something and articulate who they would work with on different issues—not simply who they oppose.



In Conclusion

Political parties are the foundations of representation in our representative democracy. They structure the relationship between voters and their government, allow voters to organize themselves according to their beliefs, and enable representatives to work together to enact policy. There isn't a single advanced democracy in the world today that doesn't rely on political parties... and the vast majority have more than two.

In the United States, however, we have a rigid two-party system that has produced and reinforced a crisis of representation for our democracy. Over the last few decades there has been a dramatic rise in polarization between the two parties, which has created a political culture of division, gridlock, and zero-sum politics. From national, to state, to local government, the increasingly toxic discourse between Democrats and Republicans has fueled dysfunction and stalled progress at the expense of hard-working citizens. That's why [85% of Americans](#) believe we need major political reform.

In California, the two-party dysfunction occurring on the national stage has manifested in one party dominating our state legislature for nearly fifty years. The inherent lack of representation that comes from one-party rule has crippled our state government's ability to respond to Californians' critical needs and diverse preferences. This is perhaps most apparent in the staggering fact that in California, a state considered to have the fifth largest economy in the world, nearly one-third of our population lives in or near poverty. Such high levels of inequality are not only political shortcomings, but structural flaws that stem from the lack of representation in our two-party system.

There's no shortage of obstacles our state faces; from climate change and housing affordability, to improving healthcare and preventing government overreach, we need a government that can address complex problems through inclusive and dynamic policy-making.

Our two-party system is uniquely antiquated and results in an us-vs.-them political climate that's wholly unreflective of the diversity and cooperative potential of Californians. **We need more parties. We need a system that rewards compromise and collaboration. We need proportional representation.**

Fortunately, Californians don't need to wait for the federal government to adopt proportional representation and transition to a multiparty democracy. California's ballot initiative gives voters a power equal to the power of the state legislature. If we want to become a multiparty democracy, we can enact the necessary reforms ourselves. With enough support, we can champion a ballot initiative for proportional representation that would begin to foster the conditions necessary for multiparty democracy. Doing so would allow voters to take back control of our politics and create a state government that is by the people, for the people, and truly representative of the people.

Join the Coalition Working towards a Multiparty California!

