Electoral System Reform in the United States

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Introduction

The Program on American Democracy in Comparative Perspective hosted a workshop on electoral systems on March 14-15, 2014. The workshop brought together leading scholars of electoral institutions and electoral reforms in the United States and other advanced industrial democracies. The first in a series of meetings to assess the causes and consequences of political polarization and poor institutional performance of American democracy, the electoral systems workshop focused in particular on how the method of election shapes the political incentives of public officeholders, especially members of Congress and other representative bodies. Over the course of the two days of presentations and discussions, participants debated the costs and benefits of different electoral systems, proposed various strategies and goals for reforms, and learned from the experiences of reform initiatives both in American cities and in other countries.

This report summarizes the key debates and findings from the workshop. Although there is no single solution to the many problems in American politics, is it clear that electoral institutions are failing to produce political leaders who negotiate, compromise, and govern effectively. Instead, elected representatives perceive strong incentives to stake out incompatible and uncompromising positions. Changing the rules that determine how candidates are elected can encourage moderation and correct disproportional outcomes produced by the current winner-take-all system in the United States. Thus, they have the potential to make the system fairer and more governable, though there is some tension between these two different goals.

This report proceeds in three sections. The first discusses current problems in American politics, and links them to America's peculiar electoral institutions. The second section examines two electoral system alternatives: mixed-member systems and ranked-choice voting (RCV, otherwise known as the alternative vote, AV, or the instant run-off, IRV), which has been used in elections for the Australian lower house of parliament for nearly a century.[1] We look at countries that have adopted mixed systems to correct for disproportional outcomes. We are particularly attentive to the motivations for (and unintended consequences of) reform in order to derive lessons for the American reform community. The third section looks at ranked-choice voting, which has been implemented in a few major urban areas in the United States. RCV creates institutional incentives for moderate candidates and campaigns, and therefore has the potential to mitigate extremism and polarization. Finally, we conclude by offering suggestions and concerns for electoral reform initiatives in the United States.

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[1] A proportional form of preferential voting is used to elect the Australian Senate.

I. Polarization, Extremism, and American Electoral Institutions

There is widespread scholarly and public concern about dysfunction in American politics and governance. The two political parties have become intensely polarized, resulting in Congressional gridlock, negative and costly election campaigns, and dissatisfaction among voters.

The consequences of polarization are significant: the 112th (2011-2012) Congress was the most polarized since the end of Reconstruction in the late nineteenth century,[2] passing the lowest amount of legislation of any Congress since the 1940s.[3] In October 2013, gridlock over the budget led to a 16-day shutdown of the federal government; by November, public approval of Congress dwindled at 9%, which is the lowest number Gallup has ever recorded.[4] Deepening polarization has paralleled sharp increases in campaign costs and income inequality. Scholars therefore worry about the various effects of polarization, particularly the threat to democracy itself: more voters are identifying as independents and showing less trust in democratic institutions. If elected officials are no longer representing the preferences of a majority of voters, then our institutions are not fulfilling the basic functions required by representative democracy. We need to understand why the United States, the world's oldest and most powerful democracy, has been drifting away from democratic principles.

Some of the problems with American democracy today may be a result of structural problems embedded in our electoral institutions. The United States elects almost all of its public officials at the national and state levels (and most locally) through the "winner-take-all" system of "first past the post." Under this system, technically known as single-member district plurality (SMDP), each voter has one vote to cast for an office, and the winner of that office is simply the candidate who garners the most votes. Because of its tendency to produce disproportional outcomes, and to give majority power to parties that win only a plurality of the vote, this system has become increasingly unpopular around the world, as a growing number of democracies have adopted either some form of proportional representation (PR) or of mixed-member systems (MMS) that combine PR with SMDP. The proportionality, or fairness, issue has become increasingly salient in the United States, where gerrymandering of district boundaries exacerbates the potential for SMDP to yield unfair or distorted outcomes. In the 2012 Congressional elections, for example, Democratic candidates for the House of Representatives received over one million more votes than Republican candidates, but Republicans retained a 33-seat majority in the House. These outcomes were partially a consequence of the U.S.

[2] Keith T. Poole and Howard Rosenthal, 2014. Voteview.com.
[3] Norman J. Ornstein, Thomas E. Mann, Michael J. Malbin, and Andrew Rugg. 2013. Vital Statistics on Congress. American Enterprise Institute and the Brookings Institution. www.brookings.edu/vitalstats.
[4] http://www.gallup.com/poll/1600/congress-public.aspx

electoral system, in which the geographic distribution of votes can have enormous consequences for representational outcomes. Potential reforms to SMDP plurality include ranked-choice voting and mixed-member systems, both of which will be considered in detail in the next section.

As Nate Persily stressed, American elections are also distinctive for their highly decentralized administration. While most advanced democracies have central election commissions in which nonpartisan civil servants administer elections uniformly throughout the country, the United States has over 8,000 jurisdictions overseeing elections at the state and local level. Voters are required to register themselves, and to re-register when they move, all the while accommodating varying registration procedures and deadlines. The frequency and number of elections in the United States is higher than in other advanced democracies, since elections for local- and state-level offices are not always synchronized with national elections. Voting is therefore costly and onerous. Potential reforms to election administration include same-day registration, online registration, interstate trading of voter registers, and compulsory voting.[5] There was also discussion at the workshop of reducing the number of elections in the U.S. by holding more simultaneous elections and even potentially eliminating primary elections and having a single instant run-off election.

Another way in which American elections differ from those in other advanced democracies is through politicization of districting—gerrymandering. Congressional districts are still mainly drawn by state legislatures, so if one party has a majority in both legislative houses, and especially if it also controls the governorship, it can draw district boundaries in such a way as to maximize partisan advantage (and historically, the protection of incumbents as well).[6] Unlike other countries, as Stephanopoulos noted, American courts are often involved in redistricting as a result of litigation—in 2010, there were over 190 lawsuits in 40 states over districting plans, 10 of which were struck down. In other countries, the courts are either uninvolved or deferential to legislative decisions. Further, in states that have adopted redistricting commissions that are either bipartisan or nonpartisan, these commissions are nonetheless perceived as politicized.

Two other features of the American system are notable. The first is primary elections, which were established in the early twentieth century as a Progressive reform

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[5] Compulsory voting is used in countries such as Australia and Belgium. It is highly unlikely to be adopted in the United States. However, higher or universal turnout would likely have a moderating effect on the candidates elected to office, since public opinion data indicates that the median voter holds more centrist opinions than elected representatives.

[6] At the nation's founding, each state was tasked with establishing its own system for electing members to the House of Representatives. States varied enormously: Massachusetts adopted majoritarianism, while other states held at-large elections or drew House districts based on preexisting administrative boundaries. It was not until the Supreme Court's decision in *Reynolds vs. Sims*, in 1964, that districts had to be drawn with roughly equal populations.

to reduce the power of parties over candidate nominations. States determine whether their primaries are open (to all voters) or closed (limited only to registered party members).[7] Because turnout in primary elections is very low, and because primary voters tend to be more ideologically extreme than the general public, the primary election system enables more radical candidates to the general election, contributing to ideological polarization. In 2012 (as a result of a 2010 initiative), California instituted a "Top Two" electoral system, in which candidates from all parties compete in one primary election, and then the two candidates with the most votes face off in the general election.[8] The logic behind this reform is that in districts dominated by one party, a more ideologically defined candidate from the majority party may face off in the general election not against a doomed opponent from the other party but rather against a more moderate opponent of the same party, thus generating some incentives for moderation to win the general election vote.

Finally, the United States is the only country that uses an Electoral College to elect its President.[9] The candidate who wins the greatest number of votes in the Electoral College wins the Presidency. The Electoral College can distort the electoral process in two ways. First, some voters' votes "count" more than others: less-populated states have a disproportionate number of Electoral College votes relative to highly populated states such as California, Texas, and New York. Second, the Electoral College can result in candidates with a plurality of votes—or even a minority of votes—winning the election.[10] A multi-state coordinated movement, the National Popular Vote, seeks to eliminate the distorting effects of the Electoral College by ensuring that the candidate who wins the popular election wins the Presidency. It works through an interstate compact of states with 270 electoral votes (the number needed to win the Electoral College), all of which will cast their votes for the winning candidate regardless of who wins in their state. Currently ten states and the District of Columbia, with a combined total of 165 electoral votes, have adopted the National Popular Vote bill.[11]

Although there are many reforms of American electoral institutions on offer, the workshop at Stanford focused on changes to the electoral system itself -- that is, the

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[7] Primaries may also be partially open, enabling independents but not registered voters of another party to vote in a party's primary election.

[8] Top Two and Top Four are both recommended by organizations such as FairVote as ways to modify the primary system and to provide voters with better choices in general elections.

[9] Most advanced democracies use parliamentarism, which fuses executive elections with legislative elections. In a Parliamentary system, the party with a Parliamentary majority chooses the Prime Minister. Separation of the executive and legislative branches of government through presidentialism has led to instability in many democratizing nations.

[10] In 1992, Bill Clinton was elected with only 43% of the popular vote. In 2000, Al Gore won more popular votes, but George W. Bush won the Presidency.

[11] To follow the progress of the National Popular Vote at the state level, visit http://www.nationalpopularvote.com.

rules by which we elect candidates to office. Changing the rules changes incentives for candidates, and can affect their campaign messages and strategies. The rules can also make it more likely for moderate candidates to win, and therefore increase the prospects for compromise and negotiated agreement on major issues dividing the Congress and the public.

II. Rethinking "First Past the Post": Lessons from Abroad

The United States, along with Britain and Canada, are the only advanced democracies that continue to use SMDP to elect their national assembly members. Most established democracies use either PR or MMS, and several, such as New Zealand, have switched from SMDP to one of these two more proportional systems. SMDP typically produces two nationally competitive political parties and discourages "wasted votes" on third parties. Because only a plurality is needed to win elections, candidates can win elections with the support of a minority of voters. This can mean that a majority of voters lose when considering the total votes cast for the winning and losing parties. SMD can therefore distort democratic outcomes by failing to produce majority rule.

Most advanced democracies democracies use proportional representation, which allocates seats to political parties according to the proportion of votes cast for those parties out of the total number of votes. Proportional representation is unlikely to be adopted in the United States, for several reasons. First, there are legitimate fears about the potential for fragmentation in the number of parties that would be represented in the Congress if PR were adopted. Although there are many mechanisms to attenuate proportionality and make it more difficult for small parties to win (such as a significant electoral threshold for representation, and smaller district size), it is plausible to imagine that there might be a party to the left of the Democrats (such as a Green party) and a party to the right of the Republicans (such as a Tea Party). In addition, federal legislation would be required to permit the creation of multi-seat districts for the election of members of Congress.

However, there are two alternatives that might result in somewhat more proportional outcomes so that the candidates elected to office more closely reflect the preferences of the electorate. The first is a mixed member system in which voters cast two ballots: one for an individual candidate and one for a party. These systems combine elements of single-member district plurality and proportional representation. Depending on how the mixed system is structured, it could still result in two predominant parties. The second alternative is ranked-choice voting, which still elects one winner in a single-member district but allows voters to rank-order all of the candidates, with the winner needing to receive an absolute majority of all votes. The dual attraction of RCV is that it could be enacted by any state without federal legislation, because it utilizes single-member districts, and it is believed to induce moderation, by requiring candidates to

develop strategies to appeal for the lower-preference votes of the less popular candidates. This often requires reaching across partisan and ideological boundaries to develop broader (and less extreme) policy stances.

Mixed-Member Electoral Systems: New Zealand, Japan, and Italy

Once rare, mixed-member systems have become increasingly popular with reformers, as they combine majoritarian and proportional features. In mixed systems, some of the seats in the national legislature are selected through majoritarian or plurality rules, while other seats are distributed proportionally. Voters therefore vote both for an individual candidate and for a political party. Germany has long employed a mixed member system, which ultimately became a model for the reform in New Zealand. Mixed member systems have also been adopted in Scotland and Wales, and were proposed in a failed reform effort in Canada. Mixed systems may be of two types, dependent and independent. In dependent systems, as in Germany and New Zealand, it is the vote for the party list that determines the overall allocation of seats to each party. In independent systems, as in Japan, the two different components of the electoral system each assert their logics independently, and the proportionality rule applies only to the block of seats elected from the party list vote. This section describes how three democracies adopted mixed member electoral systems, and suggests how such a system might work in the United States.

New Zealand

Until 1993, New Zealand used single-member district plurality elections to elect the unicameral Parliament. This produced disproportional outcomes, since small parties failed to win much legislative representation, even if they had some significant electoral support, and because parties could gain majority control of Parliament with a minority of the vote. In fact, there were two elections in which a party that won less than 40% of the popular vote won a majority of parliamentary seats. New Zealand voters became fed up with this "elective dictatorship" in which parties elected with a minority of votes nonetheless won the Prime Ministership and control of the legislative agenda. Voter discontent over failed economic policies, high unemployment, and low growth also spurred reforms, with voters blaming the electoral system for not holding parties accountable for their campaign promises.

In 1986, the Royal Commission on the Electoral System issued a report recommending a mixed-member proportional (MMP) system for New Zealand. Some members of Parliament were to be elected through single-member district plurality elections and the rest from party lists. The Royal Commission had the support of politicians, judges, and academics. In a national referendum in 1993, voters selected mixed member proportional over other alternative proposals.

Jack Nagel, a scholar of New Zealand's electoral reforms, suggests that there are many lessons to be learned from the New Zealand reforms. First, a strong group of advocates can persuade voters of the need for reform. The Royal Commission on the Electoral System was perceived as impartial and was trusted for its expertise. It successfully provided a focal point for debates about political reforms. Further, the Electoral Reform Coalition served as a vigorous and persistent grassroots advocacy movement. These organizations engaged in an impartial public education campaign that included television advertisements explaining how MMP worked. Further, the Electoral Commission itself continued a public education campaign after the reforms were adopted. The clean administration of elections after adoption of mixed-member proportional facilitated the transition to the new electoral system.

Japan

Japan instituted a major electoral reform in 1994. Prior to 1994, members of Japan's House of Representatives were elected in multi-member districts through the single non-transferable vote (SNTV), which allowed voters to choose one candidate in districts with 3 to 5 seats. The Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) dominated Japanese politics from 1955 onward, often through reliance on pork-barrel politics in local districts. Voter discontent with pork (which came at the expense of issue-based politics) and with single-party rule led a coalition of parties to enact legislative reforms in 1994. This new system, called mixed-member majoritarian, required 300 seats to be elected in single-member district plurality elections, and 180 seats to be elected through proportional representation.

Japan's choice of electoral institutions was designed to encourage interparty competition. Under the previous system, there was a high degree of factionalism within the parties, and a fragmented opposition to the LDP. After 1994, party competition did reduce to two major parties -- the LDP and the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ). Japan experienced alternation in power when the DPJ won the 2009 national election.

Ethan Scheiner argues that Japan's mixed-member system is producing results similar to what we would find in a single-member district plurality system. There is contestation between the two major parties, and more of a focus on a party's ability to govern than a party's provision of pork within districts. However, elections have become nationalized to the extent that they serve as referenda on the competence of the ruling party. There is little cooperation between parties in the House of Representatives. Further, the upper House of Councillors is selected from different districts than the lower house, with more rural support. Therefore, interparty and intraparty competition between the houses makes obstructionism far more common than cooperation. Since the 2000's, Scheiner noted during the workshop, less and less legislation has passed, and the policies that have passed have lacked substance.

The Italian government implemented reforms in 1993, in the same wave of reforms as Japan and New Zealand. Before reforms, Italy used a primarily proportional system. However, it was PR with a dominant-party twist. From 1945-1992, the Christian Democratic Party (DC) was a part of every governing coalition (and often held the Prime Ministership) despite winning only a plurality of votes. The fragmented party system also made coalitions highly unstable. After high-profile corruption cases in the 1980s, the Italian Parliament introduced a mixed system in 1993, and amended it in 2005 to include proportional representation with a majority bonus. The 1993 reforms allocated 75% of the seats to single-member plurality elections, and 25% for proportional representation. Each voter cast two ballots -- one for an individual candidate and one for a party. The reforms led to more two-party competition, less party fragmentation, and more accountability. In 2005, Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi, realizing that his party was benefiting from the party-list vote, changed the electoral system again to enhance the majority bonus through party lists. As a result of this reform, the coalition earning a plurality of votes for the party lists is guaranteed 54% of parliamentary seats.

Italy is expected to enact another set of reforms this year, as a result of the Italian Constitutional Court striking down many aspects of the electoral system in December 2012. The court ruled that the majority bonus was unconstitutional, because of the disproportionality it produces, and also ruled that closed party lists were unconstitutional. Roberto d'Alimonte noted that electoral reforms have failed to stabilize Italian politics. For example, the previous three Prime Ministers have been appointed rather than elected, brought in to stabilize coalition governments. Tinkering with the electoral system can therefore be a sign of fragility.

Mixed-member systems have therefore become increasingly popular as countries experiment with electoral systems design. Their appeal is that they attenuate the potential extreme disproportionality of SMDP systems while still enabling a single party to govern, either alone or as the dominant partner in a coalition. Thus, they cut a compromise path through the trade-off between energetic, decisive government, enabled by the majoritarian rule of SMDP, and inclusive governance, enabled by the proportionality rule of PR. As we see above, mixed-member systems can take a variety of forms. In the United States, a mixed-member system would likely preserve many single-member districts, but also create larger multi-member districts with seats allocated through proportional representation. Or most of the House of Representatives could be given over to small (3-5 seat) multi-member districts. A more ambitious and unlikely reform (which would require a constitutional amendment) could preserve the 435 single-member districts but add on a second national party-list ballot to elect some additional number of members (e.g. 100) and correct for disproportionality in the allocation of the

district-based national popular vote for the House.[12] As Jack Nagel noted, any reform towards a mixed system in the United States would likely not only correct for the disproportional outcomes of plurality elections, but also would lead to more diverse candidates selected through party lists.

Ranked-Choice Voting: Australia, Ireland, and American cities

A coalition of experts and reformers has turned to ranked-choice voting (RCV) as a potential way to improve the electoral system in the United States. Ranked-choice voting maintains single-member districts in which each voter has one vote. However, under a ranked-choice system, voters rank each candidate (with "1" going to their most preferred candidate, "2" going to their second preferred candidate, and so on).[13] If a candidate receives an outright majority of first-preference votes, he/she wins the election. If, however, the top candidate receives only 40% of first preference votes, then the votes for the last-place candidate are eliminated, and votes on those ballots are redistributed (as second-preference votes). The process continues until a candidate receives a majority of votes.

Ranked-choice voting is widely used in other countries, and has been implemented in a few cities in the United States. This section reviews the experience of two advanced democracies, Australia and Ireland, with ranked-choice voting, and also discusses the impact of ranked-choice voting at the local level in the United States.

Australia

The Australian political system combines institutions from the United States and Britain, notably federalism and parliamentarism. Australia uses ranked-choice voting for single-member districts to elect members to its House of Representatives, and uses proportional ranked-choice voting to elect Senators from each state. The use of ranked-choice voting makes it more important for parties to court not only their base, but also to court voters who might rank them as their second or third preference. Over 60 percent of all seats are not decided by first-ranked votes, and this proportion has been steadily rising with every decade. Ranked-choice voting in Australia has led to moderate politics, as parties and candidates reach towards the center to capture the lower-preference votes of other candidates. The tendency toward centripetal politics has become so

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[12] This would also address a separate and little-discussed anomaly in the nature of American democracy: the ratio of population to membership in the lower house is much higher in the US (with 435 members representing over 300 million people) than it is in other peer democracies like the UK, Italy, Germany and France, all of which have lower houses larger than 550 members representing populations of less than 100 million. Should the size of the U.S. House be increased by 25% through the addition of about 110 seats elected by a national party-list, by the U.S. lower house would still be smaller in size than any of these four democracies, and slightly smaller than the lower chambers in India and Turkey as well.

[13] RCV systems vary, however, in whether they require a valid ballot to rank every single candidate. Australia does so, and Ben Reilly suggests this may be unnecessary and even undesirable, as it can discourage voters from casting valid votes if the number of candidates proliferates.

pronounced that scholars such as Ben Reilly warn that the advantage of RCV can also be seen as a drawback, since some voters complain that politics can become slightly "boring" when the major parties are so relentlessly sanding down their rough edges to plant themselves in the "moderate middle." Yet one positive consequence, according to Reilly, is that Australian parties and candidates don't wage the kind of demagogic and highly negative campaigns that are common in SMDP systems like the U.S.

Australia is distinctive in having compulsory voting: citizens over the age of 18 must register to vote, and then must show up at the polls and submit a ballot. If they fail to vote, they are subject to a fine. Elections are administered through a national election commission with a permanent staff, and parties distribute "how to vote" cards that suggest ways for voters to rank their votes. These elements of the Australian electoral system show that ranked choice voting may only be one element of bipartisan politics.

Ireland

Ireland has a bicameral legislature that elects representatives through the single-transferable vote (STV), a proportional form of ranked-choice voting. The Irish system is composed of small multi-member districts with 3-5 seats. The ballots for Parliamentary seats show the candidates in alphabetical order, along with their party identification. National representatives in Ireland focus extensively on local constituency service, devoting much more time to helping citizens with personal concerns than they do to passing legislation. In an effort to increase accountability, Ireland established a commission on constitutional reforms in 1996. The political and media elite has rallied around the issue of electoral system reform, particularly since they blame the Irish economic recession of 2009 on a lack of partisan accountability and effective leadership. In Ireland the perceived problem has not been partisan polarization but more nearly a perceived lack of difference between the parties, with a weak parliament whose members focus mainly on constituency services rather than national policy and executive accountability.

Although there have been proposals for the adoption of a mixed-member proportional system, in 2013 the Irish Constitutional Convention convened a Citizens' Assembly to better understand public opinion about electoral reform. Until recently, Irish citizens seemed neutral on the need for a new electoral system. As a result of the Citizens' Assembly, the Irish Constitutional Convention developed a few principal recommendations for electoral reform, including expanding the number of representatives per district (to a minimum of five) and improving registration and voting procedures. David Farrell argues that reform efforts in Ireland show that voter discontent may lead to demands to change elements of the voting process, but may not lead to demands to overhaul the voting system itself.

Ranked-choice voting has been used to elect mayors and local offices in cities such as Cambridge, MA; Minneapolis, MN; St. Paul, MN; San Francisco, CA; Oakland, CA; and Portland, ME. Using data from cities that use RCV, political scientists have begun to investigate the effects of ranked-choice versus single-member plurality elections. As Rob Richie and others noted at the workshop, there are several reasons to focus on RCV as a possible electoral reform in the U.S. It maintains the system of single-member districts and accords with the American ethic of freedom and choice. It allows political parties but does not exclusively depend on them, making it more feasible for independents to run and possibly win. It provides a kind of bottom-up response to gerrymandering, making some districts that looked uncompetitive potentially more interesting politically.

Theoretically, ranked-choice voting should produce electoral outcomes quite different from those under single-member plurality. It should reduce ideologically extreme or hyper-partisan campaign messages, since candidates have an incentive to get as many lower preference votes as possible. It should also reduce negative campaigning, because in multi-candidate races, candidates need to be highly ranked by their opponents' supporters in order to rise to a majority of the vote. RCV puts a premium on building broad coalitions rather than mobilizing a militant base with wedge issues. Because of the greater choice it offers, and the possibility that it may penalize negative campaigning, RCV may also reduce at least somewhat the influence of money in politics. Further, it should decrease the fear of "wasted votes" among voters, potentially increasing turnout and civic engagement. Certainly it would remove the possibility that a minor party candidate (such as Ralph Nader in 2000) could be, or be perceived to be, a "spoiler," swinging the race from one candidate to another, since under RCV, the lower-preference votes for such a minor candidate would be transferred to one of the major candidates. The Australian and Irish cases show us that ranked-choice voting can diminish political polarization between the parties.

Political scientists have begun to conduct systematic research into the effects of ranked-choice voting. Comparing election outcomes before and after the adoption of RCV in various cities, or comparing elections with RCV to elections in very similar cities that do not use RCV, allows inference based on a quasi-experimental design.

Candidates in ranked-choice elections do behave differently than those in single-member plurality elections. Todd Donovan finds that candidates are more likely to spend campaign money on direct mail, staff, and internet ads, and less likely to spend on radio and television advertisements. They also spend more time campaigning door-to-door. Further, in survey responses, candidates in RCV elections were more likely to say that their opponents praised them and less likely to say that their opponents described them in negative terms than candidates in single-member plurality elections. In a study that looked at tweets from candidates, Martha Kropf found that tweets in ranked-choice

elections were more inclusive than exclusive, and used more positive than negative language. By conducting a linguistic inquiry of the tweets, Kropf gauged the affective sentiment of campaign tweets, and found that there was less anxiety and more tentativeness (rather than certainty) in ranked-choice elections.

On the voter side, data from phone surveys of voters shows that ranked-choice voting is associated with more positivity in campaigns; Caroline Tolbert found that voters were less likely to hear the candidates criticize one another. However, ranked choice voting has a limited impact on voting turnout, raising turnout only in years when local elections line up with national elections. Preliminary evidence from David Kimball shows that spoiled ballots and socioeconomic biases in turnout are slightly worse under ranked-choice systems.

The early lessons from ranked-choice voting in urban areas indicate that it might be a promising alternative to single-member plurality. However, it still might be too early to know how ranked-choice voting would affect Congressional elections. First, the cities in which ranked-choice voting have been used tend to be more ideologically homogenous than many Congressional districts. Further, the nationalization of Congressional elections—that is, the increasing strategy of attacking national parties rather than individual candidate characteristics—means ranked-choice voting may have a limited impact on civility in national elections. Finally, civility in campaigns may not necessarily translate to civility in governing. It is unclear if politicians who win ranked-choice elections are more inclined towards cooperation and moderation once in office.

There are several possible ways that RCV might be structured in the U.S. One would be to eliminate the primary election and have only a single election under RCV to determine the winner. However, this could provide a large advantage to incumbents or better-known figures in a crowded field. Richie raised the possibility of a "top four" system, in which a (non-partisan) primary would narrow the field down to four candidates, and RCV would be used to elect the winner in the general election. Theoretically, it would also be possible to retain the party primary, and then enable independents and third party candidates to contest in the general election. But there would then be a strong logic to eliminating the "sore loser" rule that (in most American states) prevents a candidate who loses a party primary from contesting in the general election as an independent. Recently, this has made it impossible for moderate Republican incumbent U.S. senators who were defeated in primaries by Tea Party challengers to come back to contest the general election.

Some of the workshop participants thought that a mixed-member system or a moderate form of PR might be worth looking at for the United States. As one possible reform, FairVote has proposed in essence the Irish system, with PR (or ideally, PR with preferential voting) in 3-5 member districts. This could go a long way toward breaking up the solid partisan character of representation from many parts of the country, such as

the overwhelmingly Democratic Northeast and the overwhelmingly Republican South. Under PR, Massachusetts would probably go from having no Republicans in its 9-member Congressional delegation to having 2-3, and Alabama would probably have not the current 1 Democrat in its 7-member Congressional delegation but 2-3. Thus, party competition within regions would be promoted, and there might also emerge the possibility for a centrist alternative (an independent or third party) to pick up a seat here and there.

There was general agreement that PR is a much less likely prospect for electoral reform in the U.S., but if it were to be adopted it should be in a moderate form in order to discourage party fragmentation, which might only worsen polarization in Congress. Small districts (such as three members, or no larger than five) tend to provide a break on party and ideological fragmentation, since a party or list needs to win a higher percentage in a district (for example, at least 25% plus 1 in a 3-member district) in order to win. Some electoral formulas also favor larger parties.

Jack Nagel recommended consideration of some form of "big party" mixed-member proportional system. In addition to small-sized districts, other features of this system that favor big parties are the following: voters cast only a single-member district vote (not a separate party list vote in addition); there is a high electoral threshold (at least five percent) for a party to win PR seats in parliament; the less proportional D'Hondt formula is used to allocate seats from the vote shares; and there is no provision for "overhang" or adjustment seats to ensure greater overall proportionality. The advantages of such a system for a country like the U.S. are that it would reduce the impact of gerrymandering and ensure a fairer (more proportional) distribution of seats between the major parties, while still tending to preserve the two-party system and to screen out smaller (more ideologically militant) parties that cannot win a single-member district seat. However, such a system would do little to reduce the influence of money in politics, the mobilization of militant activists in party primaries, or even probably the under-representation of women and minorities. (By contrast, national-list or large-district PR systems tend to be much more effective at promoting women's representation).

III. Lessons for Reform

Scholars and pundits have suggested a wide range of reforms to American political institutions, but electoral systems alternatives are particularly promising. First, they have mechanical effects when translating votes to seats. Although single-member district plurality elections often have majoritarian outcomes, in which the distribution of seats reflects the preferences of a majority of voters, ranked-choice systems by definition produce consistent majoritarian outcomes. And mixed-member systems, by integrating proportional seats, correct for disparate outcomes under plurality systems. Although the adoption of different electoral rules does not always produce dramatic or desired effects,

lessons from electoral system reforms in other countries show that institutions can impact the way parties and candidates campaign, develop coalitions, and govern. Similarly, advocates of ranked-choice voting in the United States have seen changes in election outcomes after only one or two election cycles.

And second, changing the rules of elections can change incentives for candidates and party elites. As Bruce Cain stressed at the workshop, partisan polarization appears to be at least as much of an elite as a mass phenomenon in the U.S. And in any case, efforts to address elite incentives driving political polarization are likely to be less costly and to bear fruit more quickly than efforts to address more diffuse societal drivers of polarization. Candidates running under ranked-choice systems cannot rely on mobilizing a limited base of supporters (unless their districts lean overwhelmingly in a strong ideological and partisan direction). Instead, they typically have to appeal to voters across ideological divides. This increases the costs of extreme campaign messages and of vicious attacks against opponents. Ranked-choice voting also changes the incentives of campaign donors, since donating to extremist candidates will be less effective than donating to centrist candidates.

There are a few factors that will greatly increase the chances for successful reform in the United States. Jack Nagel, generalizing from reform efforts in New Zealand and elsewhere, emphasized that voters and political leaders first need to acknowledge that the electoral institutions contribute to disproportionate or unfair political outcomes. Electoral reforms are often preceded by—if not effectuated entirely by—a disenchanted public. Voters do not often see election institutions as the cause of political problems. But as the reforms in New Zealand, Italy, Japan, and Ireland show, voters can be convinced that political incentives need to be restructured in order to bring about favorable outcomes. The American electorate already shows high levels of discontent about political polarization, Congressional gridlock, and poor economic performance. They also express dissatisfaction with the two major parties. If voters link single-member plurality with extremist candidates and fewer third party choices, they may become more vocal about reform.

Voter discontent is particularly critical when political parties are not amenable to reform. Parties are more likely to respond to demands for change when they come from a wide swath of the electorate, rather than from a small community. Therefore, reform efforts must include outreach and education about the relatively easy ways that single-member plurality could be changed.

Another ingredient to success is a vociferous and unified reform community. Grassroots activists, experts, and stakeholders will need to work together to articulate the need for electoral systems reform. Further, it is also critical that reformers coalesce around one or two proposals. The reform community today is highly decentralized, with advocates and academics focusing on a panoply of reforms. If academics, reform

advocates, politicians, and donors combined their expertise and resources, they could be very effective in promoting a limited reform agenda. That said, it is rare that proposals have the backing of the entire academic or reform community. The important point is that, once a proposed reform has enjoyed one or two early successes, it can gain momentum and broaden its support among diverse constituencies.

Finally, successful reforms will require a great degree of patience once they are implemented. The effects of changing the electoral system will not happen overnight. It might take multiple election cycles for voters to become accustomed to new electoral rules, and for candidates to modify campaign and governing strategies. Evidence from FairVote shows that voters and politicians often dislike ranked-choice voting in its first election, but come to prefer it after multiple election cycles. Reform organizations should also engage in ongoing public education campaigns to ensure that voters acclimate to new election rules.

Of course, there are also important disclaimers and caveats about reforms. First, reform proposals must strike a difficult balance between feasibility and desirability. Both the Democratic and Republican parties benefit from preserving the current party duopoly, so it is unlikely that either party will initiate or support reforms that reduce their strength. Further, Americans are much less likely than citizens of other advanced democracies to see institutions as adaptable and flexible. Adopting electoral system reforms will therefore require a concerted effort to show citizens that many adverse political outcomes today are the result of our status quo electoral institutions. Stressing the unfairness of current outcomes—in which a minority of voters can determine a majority outcome—might play well.

Second, while reforming single-member district plurality may encourage moderation and centrism among candidates for office, it is unclear if this would spill over to national policy-making and governance. As Gary Cox and Adam Bonica argue, the United States has seen a trend towards nationalization of Congressional campaigns, such that candidates benefit from opposing the party of their opponent. This incentivizes gridlock and obstructionism in the Congress, and also allows candidates to win office who are out of step, ideologically, with their districts.

Strategic nationalization of campaigns is exacerbated by campaign finance, which has a significant impact in both primary and general elections, and ideological polarization within the parties. The cost of campaigns has risen dramatically, and interest groups and ideologically extreme organizations have become vital sources of campaign resources. These groups often fund extremist candidates rather than moderate or centrist ones. Further, the proportion of centrist candidates has declined as parties have become more ideologically cohesive. There are fewer and fewer conservative Southern Democrats or liberal Northern Republicans in Congress, which makes bipartisan

compromise improbable. Polarization has been on the rise since the 1970s, so it is unclear if institutional reforms can push back against such a deep-seated trend.

As Bruce Cain noted in the workshop's opening presentation, advocates of electoral reform must thus have a realistic sense of what such reform can achieve and a broader strategy for political reform beyond the electoral system. Electoral reform will not fix everything; it must be embedded in a larger structure of reform initiatives that would include serious campaign finance reform, continued efforts to terminate partisan gerrymandering of districts, and efforts to expand voter participation. Increasing voter participation is an intrinsic democratic norm but it will also dilute the influence of highly ideological minorities, which are more driven to vote. Workshop participants debated the merits of following the example of Australia and some European democracies that require citizens to vote. But certainly there is much the U.S. could do to expand voter participation by making voter registration automatic (for example, upon receipt of a driver's license), by creating a linked system across countries and states to automatically transfer registration when someone moves, by expanding opportunities for early voting, and by making more intensive use of the Internet to inform citizens about candidates, issues, and their place of voting. As Nate Persily explained, some of these issues of electoral administration were addressed in the recent report of the bipartisan Presidential Commission on Election Administration, which also warned of a serious looming problem of declining functionality of voting machines in the U.S.

None of these problems should dissuade or deter proponents of reform, however. If anything, they demonstrate how high the stakes are in improving democratic performance in the United States. The government shutdown in October 2013 made clear to voters, and to the rest of the world, how dysfunctional our politics have become. Several workshop participants stressed that other democracies around the world are increasingly questioning why Americans are not doing more to demand better democratic performance. Maintaining institutions that produce unfair results and do not serve the interests of the American public is hardly the answer. Other democracies have found ways to reform their political institutions to make them both more functional and more consistent with democratic principles. The United States has repeatedly risen to this challenge in the past. There is no reason why it cannot do so again.