

# Mixed Member Proportional meets Alternative Vote: Rethinking American Politics

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## Abstract

In this paper I begin with the premise of a two-pronged crisis of representative democracy in the United States. In response to this two-pronged crisis, I suggest merging the alternative vote (AV) and mixed member proportional (MMP) into a single electoral system. I argue that the resulting necessity for legislative and electoral coalition-building, as well as the more favourable conditions for it, address the core problems facing American democracy. In reviewing this argument in more detail, however, it becomes apparent that only some of the assumptions required for it to hold are supported by existing empirical research, while others tread on new ground. These research gaps illustrate promising avenues for future research.

## Keywords

American politics, crisis of representative democracy, electoral system effects, electoral reform, mixed member proportional (MMP), alternative vote (AV)

# Mixed Member Proportional trifft auf Alternative Vote: US-Amerikanische Politik umdenken

## Zusammenfassung

Dieser Beitrag arbeitet mit der Prämisse einer zweigeteilten Krise der repräsentativen Demokratie in den Vereinigten Staaten von Amerika. Als Antwort auf diese zweigeteilte Krise wird für die Verschmelzung der beiden Wahlsysteme Alternative Vote (AV) und Mixed Member Proportional (MMP) plädiert. Es wird argumentiert, dass die daraus resultierende Notwendigkeit legislative und elektorale Koalitionen zu bilden, sowie die günstigeren Bedingungen dafür, die Kernprobleme dieser Krise angehen können. Bei näherer Betrachtung dieses Arguments wird jedoch deutlich, dass nur einige der dafür erforderlichen Annahmen durch bestehende empirische Forschung gestützt werden, während andere Neuland betreten. Diese Forschungslücken zeigen vielversprechende Perspektiven für künftige Forschung auf.

## Schlüsselwörter

US-Amerikanische Politik, Krise der repräsentativen Demokratie, Effekte von Wahlsystemen, Wahlsystemreform, Mixed Member Proportional (MMP), Alternative Vote (AV)

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## 1. Introduction

As political scientists, we are mainly concerned with how things *are*. However, at times, we should go beyond investigating how things *are*, and ask how things *could* be, or even *should* be. Granted, these normative considerations generally fall under the domain of political philosophy, but it is precisely these discussions that can open new avenues for political science research, as this paper illustrates.

In this paper, I take the current state of affairs in American politics as a point of departure for a discussion on how democracy can be reformed and reinvigorated. Drawing from the existing literature, I argue that representative democracy in the United States is confronted with a two-pronged crisis, consisting of endemic government dysfunction (Drutman 2020; Taylor et al. 2014; Barber/McCarthy 2015; Hacker/Pierson 2015; Hetherington/Rudolph 2015) and an increased risk of political violence and democratic breakdown (Levitsky/Way 2022; Levitsky/Ziblatt 2018). Building on research that shows how the United States' electoral system is largely responsible for its strict two-party system (Taylor et al. 2014, 178–181) and how the latter can negatively affect good governance and the quality of democracy (Drutman 2020; Levitsky/Ziblatt 2018), I argue that the current electoral system is responsible for this two-pronged crisis.

Taking this assessment as a point of departure, I tentatively try to rethink American politics by advocating for a reconfiguration of the party system through major electoral reform. In recognising the importance of political parties as intermediaries, as well as the necessity and virtue of coalition-building, compromise, and negotiation, I answer Cain's (2015) call to put pluralist reform proposals back on the agenda. Concretely, I suggest that merging the alternative vote (AV) and mixed member proportional (MMP) into one electoral system provides a promising solution by necessitating legislative and electoral coalition-building in a multi-party system. This, so I argue, addresses endemic government dysfunction, political violence, and the potential breakdown of democracy.

However, when I examine the individual assumptions that are necessary for this argument to hold, I find that only some of them are supported by existing empirical research, while others tread on new ground. As a result, I point out several research gaps that would first need to be filled in order for this line of argument to be fully convincing.

On the whole, this paper has merits on multiple fronts. First, it builds on existing research to address real-world problems through democratic reform. Second, it introduces a new variant of MMP. Third, it provides several avenues for future research.

The remainder of this paper proceeds as follows. In the next section, I briefly outline the two-pronged crisis of representative democracy. In the third section, I lay out the specifics of the proposed electoral reform, to show its likely quantitative effects, and elaborate on the six assumptions underlying the main argument of this paper. In doing so, I point out several research gaps. I conclude with a brief summary.

## 2. Crisis and Reform

Although American democracy is faced with many problems<sup>1</sup>, I argue that two problems in particular are of such severity that together they can be described as a two-pronged crisis of representative democracy. First, endemic government dysfunction, characterised by obstructionism and policy deadlock (Drutman 2020; Hetherington/Rudolph 2015), and second, an increased risk of political violence and democratic breakdown (Levitsky/Way 2022; Levitsky/Ziblatt 2018).

The emergence of this crisis can be traced back to a decades-long process of partisan realignment following the civil rights era, as a result of which a fully sorted two-party system emerged. In this fully sorted two-party system multiple group identities align, cumulate, and reinforce each other so that one binary partisan identity subsumes all other identities. As a consequence of this, racial and cultural cleavages seize to cut across the two parties and now only cut between them (Drutman 2020, 58–103). This means that previous ideological overlap was prereduced by polarisation and mutual threat perceptions (Levitsky/Ziblatt 2018; Drutman 2020).

Polarisation and mutual threat perceptions then led to the erosion of the two most important democratic norms, mutual toleration, and forbearance, which together act as “the soft guardrails of democracy” (Levitsky/Ziblatt 2018, 124). As polarisation intensifies and societies sort themselves into political camps whose worldviews are not just different but mutually exclusive, toleration becomes harder to sustain. When societies grow so deeply divided that parties become wedded to incompatible worldviews, and especially when their members are so socially segregated that they rarely interact, stable partisan rivalries eventually give way to perceptions of mutual threat. As mutual toleration disappears, politicians grow tempted to abandon forbearance and try to win at all costs. (ibid., 142)

<sup>1</sup> Some examples include the disproportionate representation of well-funded interests (e.g. Gilens/Page 2014), the spread of dis- and misinformation (e.g. DiMaggio 2022; Piazza 2022), and voter suppression (e.g. Darrah-Okike et al. 2021; Hajnal et al. 2017).

At first glance, abandoning mutual toleration and forbearance leads to obstructionism and other forms of constitutional hardball. These uncompromising tactics are then likely to cause gridlock and ultimately endemic government dysfunction in political systems characterised by transactional executive-legislative relations – the first prong of the two-pronged crisis. However, upon closer examination, it becomes evident that this norm erosion is much more troublesome as the resulting tactics are ultimately aimed at “permanently defeating one’s partisan rivals – and not caring whether the democratic game continues” (ibid., 134). This erosion of norms can have severe consequences, including the potential for political violence, ‘periods of competitive authoritarian rule’ (Levitsky/Way 2022), or even democratic breakdown (Levitsky/Ziblatt 2018) – the second prong of the two-pronged crisis.

The proximate cause of this two-pronged crisis is thus the erosion of democratic norms through an ongoing process of (asymmetric) polarisation (Barber/McCarty 2015; Hacker/Pierson 2015; Levitsky/Ziblatt 2018, 178–215; Persily 2015). However, I argue that the distal cause is the electoral system, as it facilitates, incentivises, and reproduces the uncompromising two-party conflict in the first place. Because the electoral system of the United States is largely responsible for the strict two two-party system in the United States (Taylor et al. 2014, 178–181), it is by extension also responsible for the intractable nature of partisan conflict. That is why I argue in favour of a major electoral reform, the specifics and effects of which are discussed in the next section.

### 3. Electoral Reform as a Solution

Scholars have put forth a number of reform proposals in response to polarisation, including proposals for open primaries, putting redistricting in the hands of neutral bodies, campaign finance reforms, and making voting compulsory by offering a lottery incentive instead of a fine for non-compliance (Kamarck 2015; Rodden 2015; Jacobson 2015). Despite their undoubtedly positive effects, these proposals fail to address the core problem, the intractable binary partisan conflict, as well as its pernicious effects.

To solve this intractable binary partisan conflict through electoral reform, the electoral system must be designed so that it provides electoral incentives to make participation in cross-party coalitions more attractive and partisan posturing less so, because ...polarized ideological conflict and legislative gridlock will not diminish much until partisan warriors in Congress are punished – or anticipate being punished – rather than rewarded at the polls. (Jacobson 2015, 83)

At least two strategies come to mind that alter electoral incentives in such a way: ranked choice voting systems, and multi-party systems.<sup>2</sup>

Debate The debate over the relative merits of the AV and proportional representation (PR) – the former being an example of ranked ranked-choice voting systems and the latter tending to generate multi-party systems (Duverger 1954; Rae 1967) – is present in literature on societies with inter-group conflict. Some scholars argue that PR is better suited for societies with inter-group conflict, because conflict resolution is facilitated by fair and proportional representation of all societal groups in the legislature (Lijphart 2012, 296; Fraenkel/Grofman 2006a; Fraenkel/Grofman 2006b). However, other scholars argue that the AV is better suited for societies with inter-group conflict, because it incentivises politicians to appeal to larger constituencies, as second and third third-preference votes are also essential to a candidate’s electoral victory, thus encouraging inclusive and moderate rhetoric and policies (Horowitz 2006; Reilly 1997a; Reilly 1997b; Reilly 2018).

Both positions have merit, so why not simply use an electoral system that combines them? There is one obvious answer here, the single transferable vote (STV) which is used in Ireland, Malta, and in Australia for Senate elections (Lijphart 2012, 136). Being a ranked ranked-choice voting system, the STV encourages campaigns and policies to be more moderate, while also achieving low levels of disproportionality, even compared to other list-PR systems (ibid., 150–151). Despite this, I propose a more innovative solution: merging MMP and the AV into a single electoral system.

As this idea has, to the best of my knowledge, not yet been proposed, I need to answer three questions. (1) How would this electoral system look concretely? (2) What are the likely quantitative effects of this electoral system on the party system? (3) What are the likely qualitative effects of this electoral system in regard to concerning the two-pronged crisis of representative democracy, i.e., can it alter electoral incentives and reshape politics in such a way that endemic government dysfunction, as well as the risk of political violence and democratic breakdown, is significantly reduced? Admittedly, answering any one of these questions in a satisfactory manner sufficiently is a tall order. This notwithstanding, I will now attempt to find answers to all of them.

<sup>2</sup> The following reform proposal only applies to House of Representatives elections, as reforming the Electoral College and single-seat districts of Senate elections requires a constitutional amendment, which is currently not feasible (Drutman 2020, 175–205). However, it goes without saying that the positive effects of this electoral reform would be amplified if it were implemented in other elections as well, and at multiple levels of government.

### 3.1. Electoral System Design

Let me begin with what is perhaps the easiest question, regarding the main elements of this electoral system: (a) electoral formulae, (b) total assembly size ( $S$ ), (c) district magnitude ( $M$ ), and (d) the degree of intraparty candidate choice. By and large, this proposal builds on the German archetype of MMP (Zittel 2018), with two major deviations. First, the usage of the AV on the candidate tier instead of single-seat district plurality (SSDP)<sup>3</sup>, and second, the usage of open lists instead of closed lists on the party tier.

First, regarding the electoral formula, I propose to use the Sainte-Laguë divisor rule for seat share allocation on the party tier, and to substitute SSDP for the AV on the candidate tier. As this electoral system largely builds on the German archetype of MMP it goes without saying that “the seats of each party that result from the candidate tier are deducted from the seats won at the party tier” (ibid., 782), thereby compensating for disproportionality.

Second, regarding total assembly size, it would be ideal, in line with the cube root law (Taagepera 2009), to increase the size of the House of Representatives to roughly seven hundred seats ( $S=700$ ). Once again following the German example (Zittel 2018), I propose that half of the now 700 seats are allocated in 350 single-seat districts – by using the AV instead of SSDP – while the other half is allocated using the Sainte-Laguë divisor rule in multi-seat districts with roughly the same population size.

Third, regarding district magnitude, I propose a median district magnitude of six on the party tier, which works out to roughly 50–60 multi-seat districts.<sup>4</sup> Here I follow Carey and Hix (2011) majoritarian and proportional, and implies a straightforward trade-off by which having more of an ideal that a majoritarian system provides means giving up an equal measure of what proportional representation (PR) who argue that a district magnitude between four and eight is the ‘the electoral sweet spot’, as it avoids the trade-off between PR and accountability.

Lastly, regarding the degree of intraparty candidate choice, I argue in favour of open lists, so that voters may express intraparty preferences on the party tier. This is important because it alleviates some of the difficulties of aggregating individual preferences into a social

choice. With more information about voter preferences social choice becomes somewhat easier, though by no means easy as social choice theorists such as Kenneth Arrow and William Riker have shown (Powell 2007). By using the AV on the candidate tier, allowing voters to rank candidates, and using open lists on the party tier, allowing voters to rank candidates within a party list, information about voter preferences is maximised.

### 3.2. Likely Quantitative Effects

To answer the question of the likely quantitative effects on the party system, I employ a logical quantitative model. These models use the seat-product ( $MS$ ), which consists of a given district magnitude ( $M$ ) and assembly size ( $S$ ), to estimate the most likely effective number of legislative parties (ENLP). They operate based on the geometric means of the upper and lower bounds of what is logically possible, and when tested with actual data they are found to have significant explanatory power (Taagepera 2007a; Taagepera 2007b). To estimate the most likely ENLP for MMP systems I use a model first presented by Li and Shugart (2016) and developed further by Shugart and Taagepera (2017), where “ $MS_B$  refers to the basic-tier seat product” and the tier-ratio  $t$  is “calculated as the number of upper-tier seats divided by the total assembly size” (Shugart and Taagepera 2018, 57).

$$N_s = 2.5^t (MS_B)^{\frac{1}{6}}$$

Following the specifications made in section 3.1., we get a basic-tier seat product ( $MS_B$ ) of 350 and a tier ratio ( $t$ ) of 0.5, which gives us an estimated ENLP of 4.197. Having discussed the specifics and likely quantitative effects, I now delve into a more challenging question: Can this electoral system alter electoral incentives and reshape politics in such a way that endemic government dysfunction, as well as the risk of political violence and democratic breakdown, is significantly reduced?

### 3.3. Likely Qualitative Effects

To address this question, it is useful to start by presenting the overarching argument of this paper, i.e., that this electoral system can resolve the two-pronged crisis, in more detail. Then, I break the argument down into six interdependent assumptions, all of which must hold true for the larger argument to stand. Let me begin with the overarching argument.

The emerging multi-party system (ENLP  $\approx$  4) would require the formation of legislative coalitions, as PR makes it less likely for any one party to have a legislative majority. Additionally, a higher number of legislative parties increases the likelihood of cross-

3 Following Herron et al. (2018), I use the more precise term single-seat district plurality (SSDP) to describe the electoral system usually referred to as single-member district plurality (SMDP) or first-past-the-post (FPTP).

4 I am perfectly aware that this would lead to practical coordination difficulties, as several smaller, geographically adjacent states would have to administer a district *together*. However, I lack the space to delve deeper into the issues that arise here with regard to federalism and decentralised election administration.



cutting identities and cleavages, rather than cumulative and mutually reinforcing ones. This, in turn, promotes greater flexibility in forming legislative coalitions, allowing them to come together on an issue-by-issue basis. Moreover, candidates' appeal to larger constituencies during campaigns under the AV would moderate campaign rhetoric and issue positions, as candidates would also be looking for second and third third-preference votes. This legislative and electoral coalition-building would – so my argument goes – help reduce mutual threat perceptions and create favourable conditions for the rebuilding of democratic norms, thereby addressing the two-pronged crisis. I now turn to review the six main assumptions underlying this argument to see if it holds.

*Assumption One: PR and multi-party systems make it less likely for any one party to have a majority of seats, which makes legislative coalitions necessary.* This assumption is supported by empirical evidence. While SSDP systems, and especially Westminster model democracies (Lijphart 2012), tend to produce “manufactured” majorities (Rae 1967, 74–77), PR systems are much less likely to produce manufactured or even earned majorities (Lijphart 2012, 155). The lower likelihood of any party getting a majority of seats, manufactured or earned, logically entails the necessity of legislative coalition-building.

*Assumption Two: PR and multi-party systems increase the likelihood of cleavages and identities to be cross-cutting, rather than cumulative and reinforcing.* To the best of my knowledge, there are no studies providing conclusive evidence to either confirm or refute this assumption. Although Drutman (2020, 213) suggests that this assumption likely holds true, primarily because multi-party systems offer a more nuanced representation of voter preferences, it is important to note that he does not provide concrete evidence to support this assertion. Nonetheless, what appears peculiar is the lack of research in this area, especially considering the substantial body of literature examining the reverse relationship – the effects of cleavage structure on party systems (e.g. Bétoa 2014; Lipset/Rokkan 1967). However, even if this assumption holds true, the positive effects of cross-cutting cleavages and identities could be undermined by the emergence of what Kekkonen and Ylä-Anttila (2021) call ‘affective blocs’. Nevertheless, this remains speculative, and further research is needed to reach a conclusion.

*Assumption Three: Cross-cutting cleavages and identities allow for flexible issue-by-issue coalitions.* This assumption is supported by Rood (2010, 127), who finds that cross-cutting cleavages are precisely what make flexible coalitions in European Union politics possible. Besides, it also seems rather self-explanatory that cross-cutting cleavages and identities allow different groups to come together on different issues.

*Assumption Four: Mutual threat perceptions in inter-group conflicts can be reduced through legislative cooperation in a multi-party system with flexible coalitions.* There appear to be no studies providing conclusive evidence to either confirm or refute this assumption. However, as a first step, we can leverage evidence from a different context. Fishkin et al. (2021) provide evidence from a field experiment that supports the contact hypothesis. In their experiment, they find that moderated deliberation in small groups “with balanced and authoritative information” (ibid., 1466) has a depolarising effect, both ideological and affective. Although these findings cannot be transferred seamlessly to the context of legislative deliberation and cooperation, I contend that an educated guess is nonetheless viable. Building on Fishkin et al. (2021), I argue that the multi-party system and the altered electoral incentives provide favourable conditions for more fruitful deliberation in committee meetings, and even in floor debates. This could decrease polarisation relative to current levels, and as a result, mutual threat perceptions could also decrease. After all, if coalitions are flexible, issue positions somewhat moderated, and negative feelings toward one another reduced, then interpretations of mutual existential threat are less likely to emerge. However, this is highly speculative, and more research is required to reach a conclusion.

*Assumption Five: The AV helps moderate rhetoric and issue positions.* This assumption is substantiated by empirical evidence. Reilly (2018) shows that the electoral incentive of the AV to appeal to a broader constituency has a moderating effect on electoral campaigns in Australia and the United States. Furthermore, according to Donovan et al. (2016), voters in the United States perceive election campaigns to be more civil when the AV is used instead of SSDP. Moreover, as a result of the multi-party system, negative campaigning is already expected to occur less frequently (Elmelund-Præstekær 2008; Elmelund-Præstekær 2010; Walter 2014).

*Assumption Six: If the previous five assumptions hold, then conditions are favorable enough for the norms of mutual toleration and forbearance to be rebuilt.* Due to the somewhat speculative nature of the previous assumptions, no studies exist that address this final assumption. However, in building on the norm life cycle introduced by Finnemore and Sikkink (1998) I can make significant headway in this regard, although their research focuses mainly on international relations (IR). Following Finnemore and Sikkink (ibid.), I argue that politicians with an ideational commitment to democracy can act as norm entrepreneurs and seek to persuade a critical mass of fellow politicians to (re)embrace the norms of mutual toleration and forbearance. The altered electoral incentives, as well as the newly emerging multi-party system, would aid the norm entrepreneurs in this endeavor. An alternative perspective is provided by the

instrumentality-proposition (Opp 2001). According to this perspective, the norms of mutual toleration and forbearance can be expected to re-emerge if they are second-order public goods that aid in the realisation of a first-order public good, in this case, the upholding of democracy. However, this instrumentality-proposition is dependent on the fulfilment of several criteria (ibid., 107–109), which are unlikely to be fulfilled in the present case. Nonetheless, more research is needed to reach a convincing conclusion regarding the re-emergence of these democratic norms.

Ultimately, three of the six assumptions needed to support the argument that this electoral reform can resolve the two-pronged crisis are substantiated by empirical research. The remaining three assumptions, though plausible, have neither evidence to confirm nor refute them, thus pointing to promising avenues for future research.

#### 4. Concluding Remarks

In this paper, I set off with the premise of a two-pronged crisis of representative democracy in the United States. In response to this two-pronged crisis, I suggest merging the alternative vote (AV) and mixed member proportional (MMP) into a single electoral system. I argue that the resulting necessity for legislative and electoral coalition-building, as well as the more favorable conditions for it, address these core problems facing American democracy. In reviewing this argument in more detail, however, it becomes apparent that only some of the assumptions required for it to hold are supported by existing empirical research, while others tread on new ground. These research gaps illustrate promising avenues for future research on (a) the effects of party systems on cleavage structure, (b) the effects of flexible legislative coalitions on mutual threat perceptions, as well as research on (c) the conditions under which the democratic norms of mutual toleration and forbearance are likely to (re)emerge.

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