

## Multiparty America?

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*A Different Democracy: American Government in Thirty-One-Country Perspective.* By Steven L. Taylor, Matthew S. Shugart, Arend Lijphart, and Bernard Grofman. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014.

*Why Cities Lose: The Deep Roots of the Urban-Rural Political Divide.* By Jonathan A. Rodden. New York: Basic Books, 2019.

*Breaking the Two-Party Doom Loop: The Case for Multiparty Democracy in America.* By Lee Drutman. New York: Oxford University Press, 2020.

Liberal democracies sometimes end up in “pluralitarian” states. The defining feature of such a period is majority-opposed policy, but without clear agreement on what should replace it. Other markers include wrong-winner elections (e.g., when the party with most votes does not win public office), elevated rates of third-party voting, and high levels of party discipline.<sup>1</sup> Such periods are likely under winner-take-all elections, such that they generate demand for reform.

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<sup>1</sup> “Party discipline” is in contrast to “party cohesion.” Discipline is externally induced, whereas cohesion flows from rank-and-file agreement. See Aldrich (1995), for example, on structure- versus preference-induced voting equilibria.

They culminate either in realignment (i.e., who votes for which party and what those parties stand for), or a long-run increase in the number of parties, which also implies some new coalition (Nagel 1998). The United States may be in such a period now.<sup>2</sup>

Demand for reform is appearing in books, and I review three of them here. Each makes some case for proportional representation (PR). Each also gives lots of useful information. Taylor and coauthors survey a range of institutional combinations in 31 democracies, 1990-2010, bringing overlooked nuance to the usual debates; e.g., not all senates are created alike, nor are presidential systems. Rodden shows the logic of an urban/rural party system and how it rests on single-seat-districts (SSD) — including in countries with nonpartisan districting, as well one with “ranked-choice voting.” Drutman argues that the status quo is not sustainable, making his case with an extensive survey of institutional and behavioral literature in comparative and American politics. Each book is worth reading for these reasons alone.

But my goals in this essay are to highlight key issues, especially for those close to reform debates. First, I summarize each book’s core framework, then turn to its case for PR. A third section deals with conversation stoppers: “extremist” parties and the PR-presidentialism combination. Two of the books speak directly to these issues — yet another good reason to read them. Then, having dealt with the Nazis (pun intended), I turn to the theory of reform in each book. The punchline is uncomfortable: third-party entry, possibly with spoiler voting. Beyond that, however, any reform project aims to remake coalitions. That reshuffling starts at the very beginning, when reformers start choosing their allies.

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<sup>2</sup> Geographic concentration and third-party voting have produced two of five wrong-winner presidential elections: 2000 and 2016. The others were in 1824, 1876, and 1888. All but 1824, when there was no party system, came with polarized two-party politics. In 2012, the Democratic Party won more votes nationwide than the Republican Party, but Republicans won a majority of seats in the House of Representatives. On party discipline and polarization, one common indicator is the NOMINATE score. For potential mechanisms driving those scores, see, e.g., Hassell (2017) and Noel (2013).

The essay concludes with notes on the last reform movement and what it meant for voting rights. This movement emerged in the early 1890s and continued into the New Deal. When it was built around new-party entry, the system responded with voting restriction. At a time when other countries were switching to PR, we instead fixed the size of the House of Representatives and built up a Jim Crow regime. Reformers seeking demonstration cases then turned to local government, where their partners took further steps to limit inclusion (e.g., small assemblies, nonpartisan ballots). Was that history an accident, due to contingent choice? Or was it due to enduring features of the U.S. political system? Left to the reader, the answer may color how we think of reform in the present.

### **Models of party competition**

All three books take a multi-dimensional view of party competition. Rather than locate politics on a left-right spectrum (e.g., from “very liberal” to “very conservative”), each holds that issues can combine in other ways. Americanists will recognize the distinction between “economic” and “social” dimensions, which have alternated in salience over the course of American history (Miller and Schofield 2003). The comparative story is similar (Dalton 2008), sometimes involving anti-elite “populism” on the left and/or right (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017).

The two-dimensional model is most clearly on display in Drutman. One axis is market regulation (“who gets what”), and the other is national identity (“who are we”). This yields four types of political actor: progressive (socially and fiscally liberal), classically liberal (socially liberal, fiscally conservative), populist (socially conservative, fiscally liberal), and conservative (socially and fiscally conservative).

Whereas Drutman invokes a policy space, Rodden builds his argument on geographic space. Tolerance and personal freedom reign in the cities, yet economics divide the underclass from market liberals. The hinterland is socially conservative, such that Drutman might point to a preponderance of populists, with a sprinkling of classical liberals. Finally, for Rodden, the suburbs are “swing” regions, whose voting for the “left” party falls off with population density (p. 95).<sup>3</sup>

Taylor et al set their book least clearly in a spatial framework, but even here, a single dimension does not suffice. Two of the coauthors have long maintained that the number of dimensions varies with the number of parties (Lijphart 1999, Taagepera and Grofman 1985). Much of the book is based on James Madison's writings, wherein "faction" suggests progress toward modern theories of multiparty competition (pp. 33-4).

### **The case for reform**

The basic problem in each book is minority rule, which leads to some form of material inequality. For Drutman, however, the effects go deeper, threatening constitutional order itself. He posits two big “doom loops” (positive feedbacks): one among elites, then another among voters. These loops are rooted in a party system defined by social issues. When politics is about “who we are” as a nation, he writes, compromise is more difficult than when we fight about economics. Who-we-are fights also lend themselves to 50-50 competition. This is because “tribal” politics have more moving parts than class-based politics, and more parts make it easier for the sides to approach parity. (Were we to fight about economics, have-nots would outnumber the haves.) Add this who-we-are fight to a separation-of-powers system, and the result is a battle

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<sup>3</sup> Suburban voting, for Rodden, largely depends on who wins periodic “battles for the soul of the left” — the social-democratic urban precariat, or economic leaders in the tech-based economy.

for control of the presidency (cf. Lee 2016a, 2016b). At an elite level, the incentive in Congress is never to compromise, lest the other side claim a policy win. And to sustain that competition, the parties must suppress cross-cutting issues (cf. Lipset and Rokkan 1967). The results are three-fold: inattention to inequality, ratcheting-up of presidential power, and increasing willingness to violate procedural democracy (a loss of “forbearance,” per Levitsky and Ziblatt [2019]). The solution, then, is to break up the parties by switching to PR elections.

For Rodden, “cities lose” on policy because their voters are packed, and their core constituencies should have their own parties. Single-seat elections force classical liberals into the same party as progressives: Democrats in America, “left” parties in Commonwealth cases. Their policy bundle does not appeal to rural areas, nor reliably to suburban voters. Rodden documents this hostility with aggregate vote shares, showing how the left vote declines as one moves from center city into more distant precincts. And this is a problem of geographic concentration, not gerrymandering (Chen and Rodden 2013, also see McGann et al 2016). Therefore, since World War II, “left” parties have been out of power more often in Commonwealth countries, due to SSD elections. On the continent, however, PR has two big effects: “unpacking” the urban vote, then letting classical liberals have their own party. These lead to more investment in cities writ large, as urban parties (of left, right, or both) find their way into government more often.

Finally, Taylor et al argue that America’s Framers chose the worse of two ways to “protect liberty.” Either would have made “ambition counteract ambition” — but with different implications for majority rule. “Factional balancing” is the preferred approach. Reflected in the Virginia Plan for the U.S. Constitution, there would have been just one election, to a lower chamber, and that chamber would have populated other constitutional offices. Given mass parties, the authors argue, this could have evolved into a multiparty parliamentary system —

majority rule based on negotiation, without veto players to block those bargains (cf. McGann and Latner 2013).<sup>4</sup> But history gave us the second approach: separation of powers. The book's latter chapters posit policy effects: weak labor unions, high obesity rates, mass incarceration, poor environmental protection, and so on. How, then, can *A Different Democracy* be a call for reform? Its authors leave open the possibility of constitutional "reengineering," particularly with respect to electoral systems. What makes our separation-of-powers system so unique, they argue, is the Electoral College and party primaries. Together, these starve the country of third-party growth and, by extension, demand for PR (p. 281).

### **Would PR wreck democracy?**

The question comes in two forms, and two of the books have answers. In one version, PR-presidentialism is a "difficult combination," largely because PR lets socialist parties into the legislature. As these parties are non-majority, they have little hope of winning presidencies. Executives therefore end up in conflict with legislatures, presumably because socialists find ways to stop executives from assembling legislative majorities. That would return us to Drutman's "doom loop" of executive aggrandizement (Mainwaring 1993). In a second version of the "wreck democracy" thesis, PR gives extremist parties legislative footholds, which they then can use to ramp up their vote shares (Hermens 1936).

Executive format notwithstanding, Drutman and Rodden agree that, in a two-party system, extremists can capture an existing party.<sup>5</sup> They also agree that, under PR, remaining

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<sup>4</sup> By 1836, with the "unit rule" in effect for Electoral College contests, our path to presidentialized parties was largely complete. Presidential elections, not legislative politics, would become the main goal of party competition, setting the stage for Drutman's "doom loops."

<sup>5</sup> See Blum (2020) for an example of this process.

“moderates” might go their own way, perhaps as Rodden’s party of urban fiscal conservatives. Then they might join the opposing coalition, forming a *cordon sanitaire* around the extremist group.<sup>6</sup>

Drutman also draws on recent populism research, noting that the best strategy may be measured accommodation. By granting small concessions (e.g., policies, cabinet posts), mainstream actors can cool the resentments that fuel populist voting. This is an important point. By one interpretation, not playing this strategy is what brought down Weimar democracy — the very case that inspired Hermens’ critique of PR. According to Lepsius (1978: 69, 72), the critical failure of the Weimar coalition was to reduce welfare spending and corporatism. This facilitated growth of the Communist Party. Middle-class parties shrank, and, by 1933, the Nazis were in coalition with what remained of the right. Had another election been held in 1934, it is likely that power would have swung to the Communists. Therefore, at the time, important actors saw Hitler as a safe bet, agreeing to forego further democratic elections. Stronger commitment to social democracy might have been an antidote.

Finally, Taylor et al make an under-appreciated point about presidential democracies: most are quite multiparty. Of six such democracies in their 31-country sample, three are in the region that inspired worry about PR-presidentialism: Brazil, Chile, and Colombia. In each of these countries, from 1990-2010, precisely 100 percent of cabinets had multiparty representation. This suggests the use of cabinet posts to construct legislative coalitions — a strategy Drutman hints at in his concluding chapter, which imagines politics in post-reform America.

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<sup>6</sup> This might be a difficult choice for “mainstream” conservatives to make. See the next paragraph on strategic concessions.

In short, Drutman deals extensively with the question of democratic stability. And Taylor et al provide plenty of important facts. Anyone prone to reject PR outright — e.g., by pointing to modern-day Israel and Italy — might update their priors by reading these books.

### **Theories of change**

Assuming reform is desirable, what is the plan for achieving it? Both Drutman and Rodden call for sitting lawmakers to suspend self-interest and adopt PR. Yet all three books acknowledge the more plausible path: incumbent self-protection in the face of new parties. Both Rodden and Drutman draw extensively on Boix (1999), who famously argued a divided establishment might turn to PR to contain socialism. Subsequent work has qualified this argument (e.g., Kreuzer 2010, Leeman and Mares 2014, Cox et al 2019, Emmenegger et al 2019), but the basic insight remains: *little chance of PR without more parties first* (Colomer 2005). And it should not be taken for granted that new parties even want it. As Penadés (2008) finds, where last century's labor movements either could colonize or overtake establishment parties, they opposed the switch to PR.

On closer inspection, though, modern reform processes start to look like coalition reshuffling — especially when they involve new parties who do indeed want reform. All three books therefore pay special attention to New Zealand, which replaced SSD plurality with mixed-member PR in 1993.<sup>7</sup> From the outside, the process was highly participatory, involving supportive minor parties, a Royal Commission, sustained organization of civil society, and,

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<sup>7</sup> Mixed-member PR (MMP) systems have two sets of seats: one elected in single-seat districts, then a second set elected from party lists. The list-based allocation is meant to even out seat-vote disproportionalities arising in the district elections. In one version of MMP, the voter gets two votes — one in the district, then another in the list “tier.” This tends to generate more third-party voting, as the list vote is less subject to strategic incentives. In a one-vote version, third parties still can play spoiler roles.



critically for each book, the referendum tool. But how did this referendum even come to pass? One short answer is: a series of spoiled elections, bargaining between Greens and dissatisfied Labour backbenchers, a broken Labour promise to hold a referendum, another spoiled election, then another round of bargaining, this time among Greens, Labor backbenchers, and the opposing major party (Vowles 1995, Nagel 1998). In Japan, which added PR seats in 1994, Taylor et al (p. 127) point to similar bargaining. Finally, in these episodes, post-reform party systems largely reflected the lines of the reform bargains themselves.

### **Thorny voting-rights issues and reform in America**

According to one argument, multi-party politics may not be possible in America. The reason is a unique developmental trajectory among Western democracies: simultaneous slavery and mass party politics. The basic idea is that slavery created an underclass, so that democracy always threatens redistribution. Relatively high immigration levels (such as those in Rodden's Commonwealth cases) reinforce this possibility. Therefore, much of our politics turns on blocking the redistributive coalition, via selective restriction of voting rights (Valelly 2016). I want to trace what this might mean for reform going forward, by considering what it meant in U.S. history. This is not the first time that Americans have flirted with PR and the idea of multiparty democracy.

Return for a moment to the multidimensional model. And let us assume, with each of the books, that the current coalition structure needs changing. The only way out of the 50-50 world — the cause of Drutman's doom loops — is to assemble some coalition with “fiat power” to change the electoral rules (Benoit 2004). Given our constitution, this is likely to be a legislative

supermajority: three of his four key groups, for the sake of argument. Finally, we can expect that coalition to design an electoral system that perpetuates its own power (Riker 1980).

One possible coalition involves Drutman's populists, progressives, and classical liberals. Its economics are center-left — not too much for the liberals. Its cultural policy might limit immigration somewhat, as a concession to populists. Clearly, the short-term losers are the conservatives (on culture and economics alike). Drutman sketches something like this in his post-reform vision (p. 268). As shorthand, call this the “left reform coalition.” This is because leftists (on economics) constitute a majority of the supermajority. They get to set the policy agenda.

Another possible coalition replaces populists with conservatives. Or the conservatives replace progressives. Or they replace both, and PR wins very narrowly. Any of these might be called a “business reform coalition.” That is because rightists (on economics) constitute a majority of the (super)majority in each.

In the early 1890s, a left reform coalition began emerging in America. In the Western states, this involved Democrats and disaffected Republicans “fusing” on ballots to present joint candidacies at many levels of government. Institutional Republicans cracked down, passing anti-fusion laws and the secret ballot (so as to keep fusion candidates off it). The election of 1896 saw further crackdowns on fusion, this time by Democrats at the expense of the Populist Party (Argersinger 1980). In southern states like North Carolina, however, the reaction was more extreme. Blacks and poor whites had won control of the state legislature, under the banner of a Republican-Populist coalition. Democrats revolted (literally) against the state government, broke the coalition by priming racial animus, and instituted Jim Crow laws (Edmonds 1951, Hunt 2006).

Yet third-party voting rebounded, peaking in 1912, and persisting into the 1920s, as Drutman notes. The reaction was to stop this, not accommodate and contain it (e.g., by adopting PR). First, the House of Representatives fixed its own size 435 members. Had the House been allowed to grow in 1920, then again in 1930, as it had throughout the course of American history, seats would have gone to the most urbanized states. These are where left-party voting concentrated, especially among recent immigrants (Kromkowski and Kromkowski 1991: 134).<sup>8</sup> Second, Northern states began adopting “mild” Jim Crow devices, e.g., property qualifications, literacy tests, voter registration on tight deadlines, and so on (Keyssar 2008: 136-8).

For PR advocates, Jim Crow represented both constraint and opportunity. Deprived of third-party voting, they switched their focus to local government, where reform could be linked with “anti-corruption.”<sup>9</sup> By blending “ranked choice” PR (the single transferable vote) with non-partisan ballots and reductions to the sizes of local assemblies, they were able to win PR in 24 cities. Most other cities, however, removed PR from this package, instead choosing at-large-plurality voting (Santucci 2017). According to Bridges and Kronick (1999), winning either reform package was easier where laws had contracted working-class turnout.<sup>10</sup>

As far as we can tell, urban reform coalitions were more of the “business” kind. Writing in 1930 for the National Municipal League, Joseph P. Harris reviewed the movement’s progress so far. At the time, eight cities had used PR, and four of these had repealed it. He writes (p. 49):

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<sup>8</sup> On the importance of assembly size for the number of parties, see Shugart and Taagepera (2017). On decennial increases in the size of the U.S. House, there is only one other instance in which Congress did not do so: 1842, when the House shrank itself. Drutman’s reform plan does call for increasing the size of the House.

<sup>9</sup> Hoag and Hallett (1926: 188) write, “[Hoag] initiated the policy, which the League has followed since, of concentrating its efforts on the adoption of P.R. for city councils, so as to get actual demonstrations of its merits, if only on a small scale.”

<sup>10</sup> Ashtabula (OH) was the first city to switch to PR. Hatton (1916: 58) writes, “Though the vote was light, proportional representation carried in all but five of the fifteen precincts of the city.”

“The election of a large council under P.R. has serious defects. Large councils do not attract first-class candidates. When used under P.R., even with a district system, a large council facilitates racial voting. The election of a smaller number of candidates, from the city at large, makes this more difficult. The candidates must have the backing of more than a single foreign group, and thus strictly racial representation is discouraged.”

Harris’ recommendations would inform PR adoptions in 16 more cities. In only one of them (New York) would multiple parties have staying power — largely because they had already been present, and therefore were able to shape the reforms (Prosterman 2013). By the late 1950s, the movement would collapse, in part due to ethnic and racial animus (Amy 1996). Not even small assemblies could keep candidates “first-class.”

### **Final thought**

I do not want to claim that history will repeat itself. Maybe the country has changed. But the goal of reform is to reshuffle coalitions, as each book ultimately suggests. Further, each suggests that reshuffling begins with construction of the reform coalition itself. The challenge going forward — if PR we must have — is to address thorny issues in the choice of reform partners. Voting rights may depend on it.

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