



The Founding Generation and Political Incentives

By Jonathan Madison

To achieve the goal of expanding voter participation, this paper advocates for reforms that reduce the influence of partisan primaries and make general elections more competitive.

Executive Summary

This paper examines how modern primary election reforms can realign political incentives with the founders' vision of virtuous and accountable leadership. Currently, candidates are encouraged to cater to narrow partisan factions and avoid cross-party collaboration, leading to increasing polarization and ineffective governance. The primary system further exacerbates this problem, as it is beset by low voter turnout, plurality victories, and uncompetitive general elections. Expanding voter participation through reforms such as open primaries, mail-in voting, and ranked-choice voting can help address some of these issues, but the most effective solutions shift the decisive stage of elections from primaries to general elections, where more voters participate.

To achieve the goal of expanding voter participation, this paper advocates for reforms that reduce the influence of partisan primaries and make general elections more competitive. These reforms include all-candidate primaries, proportional representation, and alternative voting methods that reward broad coalition-building. Additionally, eliminating gerrymandering and increasing the size of legislative bodies would improve accountability and representation. By implementing these reforms, states can create an electoral system that prioritizes broad-based support, encourages responsible governance, and ensures elected officials are accountable to their entire electorate rather than to a small partisan base.

Table of Contents

Executive Summary	1
Introduction	2
Why Virtuous Leadership Matters	3
How Our Current Primary System Falls Short	4
The Legitimacy Problem of Primaries	4
Non-Competitive Elections	5
Extending the Sphere of Participation	7
Open Primaries	7
Mail-in Voting	8
Reforms that Reward Broad Appeal—Runoffs and Majority-Seeking Voting Systems	8
Emphasizing the General Election	9
All-Candidate Primary	9
Proportional Representation	10
Increasing the Size of the House of Representatives and State Legislatures	11
Conclusion	12
About the Author	12

Introduction

The Founding Generation believed that the success of the American experiment depended on the virtuous behavior of its leaders.¹ With virtue as the base of political beliefs, the nation's institutions were designed to check human ambition and prevent the abuse of power, as well as to incentivize and elevate people who exemplified wisdom and integrity. As George Washington extolled in his farewell address, "[i]t is substantially true that virtue or morality is a necessary spring of popular government."² Abraham Lincoln similarly believed that when political incentives encourage leaders to appeal to "the better angels of our nature," the country benefits from greater unity and more effective governance.³ And in *Federalist Paper* No. 57, James Madison expounded on the ideal nature of political institutions, noting that "[t]he aim of every political constitution is, or ought to be, first to obtain for rulers men who possess most wisdom to discern, and most virtue to pursue."⁴ This type of virtuous leadership is dependent on political institutions holding politicians accountable while incentivizing them to both appeal broadly to their constituencies and employ civilized political behavior.

Although the founders possessed now outdated beliefs about who should actively participate in the republic, largely limiting voting to land-owning white males, their insights on the value of virtuous leadership still hold true today. Unfortunately, the current American primary system does not support these ideals and instead rewards divisiveness and short-term partisan gains, fostering dysfunction and eroding public trust.⁵ By studying the words of the founders, we can identify modern primary election reforms that would combat current primary issues and realign the incentives of our politicians with the Founding Generation's vision of America and its leaders.

This paper explores how the current primary system undermines the founders' vision for representative government and how reforms could realign electoral incentives toward virtuous leadership. First, it examines why the Founding Generation valued virtue in political leaders and how modern political science supports their emphasis on the beliefs and character of politicians. Next, it analyzes the flaws in our current primary system, including its legitimacy problem, its role in fostering non-competitive elections, and its tendency to elevate candidates who lack broad support. The paper then examines reforms inspired by the founders' principles, such as expanding the electorate in primaries, implementing alternative voting methods to encourage coalition-building, and shifting the locus of competition to general elections. Finally, it explores structural solutions like increasing the size of legislative bodies to improve representation and accountability. By considering these reforms, we can create an electoral system that fosters broader participation, strengthens political incentives, produces leaders who better reflect the will of the American people, and upholds our founders' vision of virtuous leadership.



By studying the words of the founders, we can identify modern primary election reforms that would combat current primary issues and realign the incentives of our politicians with the Founding Generation's vision of America and its leaders.

1. George Washington, "Washington's Farewell Address to the People of the United States," United States Senate Historical Office, Sept. 19, 1796. https://www.senate.gov/artandhistory/history/resources/pdf/Washingtons_Farewell_Address.pdf.
2. Ibid.
3. Abraham Lincoln, "First Inaugural Address of Abraham Lincoln," The Avalon Project, March 4, 1861. https://avalon.law.yale.edu/19th_century/lincoln1.asp.
4. James Madison, "The Federalist Papers: No. 57," The Avalon Project, Feb. 19, 1788. https://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th_century/fed57.asp.
5. Elizabeth Germino, "How social media has changed the U.S. Congress," CBS News, Nov. 6, 2022. <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/social-media-u-s-congress-60-minutes-2022-11-06>.

Why Virtuous Leadership Matters

The constitutional system of America and its states rests on the beliefs of the politicians who serve them.⁶ Ideally, politicians should believe that they will be held accountable by the electorate, that winning office requires appealing to the broadest possible constituency, and that governance demands civility, compromise, and respect for institutions. When these beliefs guide political behavior, leaders are incentivized to serve the public good rather than pursue narrow, self-interested gains. International research found that politicians and their beliefs about democracy can be one of the most important explanations for democratic success or failure and that political actors with strong commitments to democracy can help their governments survive and progress even “in the face of daunting challenges” such as “poverty, significant ethnic cleavages, deep social inequalities, high inflation, and low growth.”⁷

The founders saw virtue as an essential precondition for our country to function as a republic.⁸ They also astutely understood that, to overcome flaws in human nature, institutions would need to incentivize political actors toward virtue. As Madison pointed out in *Federalist Paper* No. 51: “[i]f men were angels, no government would be necessary.”⁹

Despite noble beginnings, American politicians are currently incentivized to exacerbate polarization, avoid bipartisanship, and pursue self-interests at the expense of their constituents and our institutions. For example, many politicians across the ideological spectrum increasingly view social media popularity as political success, but social media is highly unrepresentative of the broader population and privileges radical voices and angry reactions.¹⁰ Online, politicians build audiences by attacking their opponents and dramatizing their refusal to compromise.¹¹ Current political incentives, such as social media likes and pandering to hyper-partisan bases, reward showmanship and polarization over effective governance. The incendiary beliefs propagated to achieve these incentives, however, generally do not reflect the wider population’s beliefs; many Americans stand far closer together on matters of policy than our current political environment would suggest.¹²

These misaligned incentives have significant negative effects on our republic. In our current zero-sum era of politics, any win for one side is a loss for the other, and in a hyper-polarized environment, the legislative branch suffers the most.¹³ Polarization means that parties cannot, or will not, advance their agenda unless it can be done without compromise. This dynamic was evident in 2024 immigration reform efforts where senate republicans blocked a bipartisan border security bill, despite previously demanding legislative action.¹⁴ These patterns were seen on both sides



Current political incentives, such as social media likes and pandering to hyper-partisan bases, reward showmanship and polarization over effective governance.

6. Robert A. Dahl, *Polyarchy: Participation and Opposition* (Yale University Press, 1971), pp. 125-126.

7. Scott Mainwaring and Aníbal S. Pérez Liñán, *Democracies and Dictatorships in Latin America: Emergence, Survival, and Fall* (Cambridge University Press, 2013), p. 5.

8. Richard Vetterli and Gary Bryner, “Public Virtue and the Roots of American Government,” *Brigham Young University Studies* 27:3 (Summer 1987), p. 29. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43041296>.

9. James Madison, “The Federalist Papers: No. 51,” The Avalon Project, Feb. 8, 1788. https://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th_century/fed51.asp.

10. Germino. <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/social-media-u-s-congress-60-minutes-2022-11-06>; Neeti Pokhriyal et al., “Quantifying Participation Biases on Social Media,” *EPI Data Science* 12:1 (December 2023), pp. 1-20. <https://doi.org/10.1140/epjds/s13688-023-00405-6>; “Partisan Conflict and Congressional Outreach,” Pew Research Center, Feb. 23, 2017. <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2017/02/23/partisan-conflict-and-congressional-outreach>.

11. Germino. <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/social-media-u-s-congress-60-minutes-2022-11-06>.

12. Karl Vick, “The Growing Evidence That Americans Are Less Divided Than You May Think,” *Time*, July 2, 2024. <https://time.com/6990721/us-politics-polarization-myth>.

13. Michael Barber and Nolan McCarty, “Causes and Consequences of Polarization,” in *Negotiating Agreement in Politics*, ed. Jane Mansbridge and Cathie Jo Martin (American Political Science Association, 2013), pp. 19-53.

14. Lauren Gambino, “Senate Republicans block bipartisan border security bill for a second time,” *The Guardian*, May 23, 2024. <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/article/2024/may/23/senate-democrats-immigration-border-bill>.

of the aisle, with party leaders prioritizing political positioning over governance and ultimately abandoning the compromise effort.¹⁵

Furthermore, politicians tend to believe that they will be rewarded for stalemate if they can blame it on the opposition.¹⁶ When this behavior is rampant, the judiciary becomes overly active—as it is the governmental branch most likely to change policy—while the executive branch is incentivized to rely on unilateral actions to bypass stalemates in the legislative branch.¹⁷ Therefore, executive actors who are willing to ignore norms and constraints are perversely rewarded as being the most productive.¹⁸ In contrast, in a healthy political environment, politicians are incentivized to productively find solutions that incorporate competing political viewpoints.

One way we can help repair political incentives and revive collaborative governance is by addressing the problems caused by our current primary system. The wisdom left behind by the Founding Generation offers some direction on how to do so.

How Our Current Primary System Falls Short

Our current primary system was not designed or anticipated by the founders, and it is producing results contrary to their aims and out of step with the American electorate. The founders expressed a desire that public servants should be virtuous, wise, and committed to the common good.¹⁹ They also maintained that the best way to bring this about was to ensure that public servants were accountable to the nation and its people.²⁰ Primaries, as we conduct them today, largely fall short of this standard.

The Legitimacy Problem of Primaries

In many primary elections, candidates can secure their party's nomination for a certain office without the support of a majority of voters. An analysis of the 2024 primary season found that 49 candidates for Congress or statewide office won their party's nomination without winning a majority; seven of these candidates won with less than 30 percent of the vote.²¹ This means a candidate might advance to the general election despite lacking broad support within their own party or their constituency as a whole.²²

Primary elections also frequently experience significantly lower voter turnout than general elections.²³ This means that a small, unrepresentative segment of the electorate determines general election candidates, again potentially sidelining the broader public's preferences. Studies have shown that primary voters are often older



In a healthy political environment, politicians are incentivized to productively find solutions that incorporate competing political viewpoints.

15. Ibid.; Susan Davis, "Senate Democrats failed to advance a bill protecting abortion access nationwide," NPR, May 11, 2022. <https://www.npr.org/2022/05/11/1098368180/senate-democrats-failed-to-advance-a-bill-protecting-abortion-access-nationwide>; Kelsey Snell, "GOP Sen. Lindsey Graham introduces 15-week abortion ban in the Senate," NPR, Sept. 13, 2022. <https://www.npr.org/2022/09/13/1122700975/gop-sen-lindsey-graham-introduces-15-week-abortion-ban-in-the-senate>.

16. Ibid.

17. Ibid.

18. Ibid.

19. Madison, "The Federalist Papers: No. 57." https://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th_century/fed57.asp.

20. Ibid.

21. Bailey Bowman, "'Fewest Votes Wins': 49 Statewide and Congressional Primaries Won with Less than 50 percent of the Vote," FairVote, Aug. 2, 2024. <https://fairvote.org/fewest-votes-wins-49-statewide-and-congressional-primaries-won-with-less-than-50-of-the-vote>.

22. Laurel Harbridge-Yong and Rachel Hutchinson, "The Plurality Problem: Plurality Primary Victors Hurt Parties in General Elections," Institute for Policy Research, Feb. 15, 2024. <https://www.ipr.northwestern.edu/our-work/working-papers/2024/wp-24-07.html>.

23. Joshua Ferrer et al., "The Effect of Open Primaries on Turnout and Representation," Bipartisan Policy Center, Oct. 30, 2024. <https://bipartisanpolicy.org/report/the-effect-of-open-primaries-on-turnout-and-representation>.

and more partisan, which can lead to the advancement of candidates who do not reflect the general population's views or more moderate policy positions.²⁴

A combination of plurality victories and low turnout can result in nominees who neither represent their constituents nor are accountable to the larger populous they represent. This disconnect between elected officials and the electorate undermines the democratic principle of representative governance. Predictably, this can lead to dissatisfaction among constituents. As John Adam's wife, Abigail Adams, poignantly expressed in 1776: "[i]f particular care and attention is not paid to the Ladies we are determined to foment a Rebellion, and will not hold ourselves bound by any Laws in which we have no voice, or Representation."²⁵

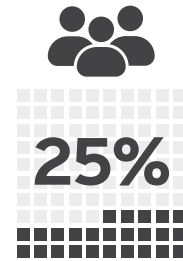
Although Abigail Adams was advocating for the inclusion of women, specifically, in the political process, her sentiment underscores a universal truth: Laws and leaders lack legitimacy when they do not represent their constituencies.

Today, most American adults can participate in elections, but many choose not to. Frustratingly, the behavior of political leaders and our major parties is partially to blame for this. Polling data shows that 25 percent of Americans do not feel represented by either major political party, and individuals who are not strongly partisan in either direction are less likely to feel represented.²⁶ These individuals have less reason to be invested in a partisan primary race, and the candidates who emerge from these primaries—in particular, those who face no meaningful challenge in the general election—suffer from a decline in legitimacy as a result.

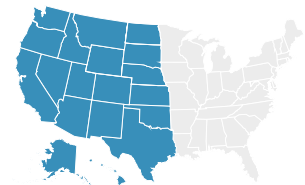
Non-Competitive Elections

In many jurisdictions, general elections have become non-competitive, effectively rendering primary elections the decisive contests. More than one-half of U.S. states saw no general election competition for U.S. House seats in 2024, and 87 percent of House seats were "effectively determined in primaries."²⁷ Of the 49 individuals who won their primary with less than a majority, only 12 advanced to competitive races.²⁸ Geographic sorting and gerrymandering are the main causes of non-competitive elections, with geographic sorting being the larger factor.²⁹ Before looking to a lack of representation among the politicians themselves, it is useful to understand these systemic elements that generate and reinforce uncompetitive elections.

Geographic sorting refers to the tendency of individuals with similar political views to reside in the same areas. Over time, this leads to urban areas becoming predominantly democratic and rural areas becoming largely republican. This clustering means that many electoral districts are overwhelmingly tilted toward one party, reducing the likelihood of competitive elections. As a result, in these "safe"



Polling data shows that 25 percent of Americans do not feel represented by either major political party, and individuals who are not strongly partisan in either direction are less likely to feel represented.



More than one-half of U.S. states saw no general election competition for U.S. House seats in 2024, and 87 percent of House seats were "effectively determined in primaries."

24. Ibid.

25. Abigail Adams, "Letter from Abigail Adams to John Adams," Massachusetts Historical Society, March 31, 1776. <https://www.masshist.org/digitaladams/archive/doc?id=L17760331aa>.

26. Reem Nadeem, "How well the major parties represent Americans, the public's feelings about more political parties," Pew Research Center, Sept. 19, 2023. <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2023/09/19/how-well-the-major-parties-represent-americans-the-publics-feelings-about-more-political-parties>.

27. Ross Sherman, "New Data: In 26 States, There Was Zero Competition for the U.S. House," Unite America, Nov. 19, 2024. <https://www.uniteamerica.org/articles/new-data-in-26-states-there-was-zero-competition-for-the-u-s-house>.

28. Bowman. <https://fairvote.org/fewest-votes-wins-49-statewide-and-congressional-primaries-won-with-less-than-50-of-the-vote>.

29. Joseph Cerrone, "Research Brief: Why Are Most Congressional Elections Uncompetitive?," Unite America, Nov. 14, 2024. <https://www.uniteamerica.org/articles/research-brief-why-are-most-congressional-elections-uncompetitive>.

districts, the dominant party's primary often becomes the decisive election, with the general election offering little in the way of a genuine contest.³⁰

Gerrymandering is the deliberate manipulation of electoral district boundaries to favor a particular party. By strategically drawing district lines, parties can maximize their electoral advantage, often leading to oddly shaped districts that do not reflect cohesive communities. This practice further entrenches incumbents and diminishes competition, as opposing parties find it challenging to secure victories in these engineered districts. Circuitously, the entrenchment of incumbents then makes future gerrymandering easier and more likely.³¹

Both geographic sorting and gerrymandering contribute to a political landscape where a significant number of congressional seats are effectively decided long before the general election, undermining the founder's design for representative democracy by elevating factions over the whole.

Taking these issues together, the United States is left with an electoral system where several winners are determined by primary elections that suffer from low turnout and where candidates can win with less than a majority of votes. Madison warned of the dangers that emerge when elections are decided solely by a single "faction" that may have "some common impulse of passion, or of interest, adverse to the rights of other citizens, or to the permanent and aggregate interests of the community."³² In the 26 U.S. states that had no competitive House races, an average of just 6 percent of eligible voters participated in the primaries that effectively decided the final outcome.³³ This results in officials who are disconnected from their broader constituencies and who will rarely—or perhaps never—face a competitive contest for re-election.

Comfort in one's position as a politician was not envisioned by the founders, who stated that for political officeholders to remain virtuous, they needed to be:

compelled to anticipate the moment when their power is to cease, when their exercise of it is to be reviewed, and when they must descend to the level from which they were raised; there forever to remain unless a faithful discharge of their trust shall have established their title to a renewal of it.³⁴

If competitive and inclusive elections do not take place at some stage, this call to the "faithful discharge" of duties never occurs, and officeholders lack accountability and connection to their constituency.

Ultimately, our current primary system creates poor incentives for candidates, rewarding those who cater to narrow partisan factions and campaign on anger against their opponents. With most elections effectively decided in low-turnout primaries, elected officials face little accountability to the general public, reducing their need to build broad coalitions or govern responsively. This dynamic encourages political entrenchment and ideological extremism, undermining the founders' vision of virtuous and representative government.



If competitive and inclusive elections do not take place at some stage, this call to the "faithful discharge" of duties never occurs, and officeholders lack accountability and connection to their constituency.

30. Ibid.

31. Ibid.

32. James Madison, "The Federalist Papers: No. 10," The Avalon Project, Nov. 23, 1787. https://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th_century/fed10.asp.

33. Sherman. <https://www.uniteamerica.org/articles/new-data-in-26-states-there-was-zero-competition-for-the-u-s-house>.

34. Madison, "The Federalist Papers: No. 57." https://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th_century/fed57.asp.

Extending the Sphere of Participation

Madison, the Father of the Constitution, provided clear guidance for improving electoral institutions that can help us today in our pursuit to improve political incentives. He maintained that the “the people are the only legitimate fountain of power” and that it was essential to “extend the sphere” of participation, bringing in a diversity of interests and factions to prevent any single group from dominating and to compel candidates to build broad coalitions between them.³⁵ As Madison explained, “each representative will be chosen by a greater number of citizens” making it “more difficult for unworthy candidates to practice with success the vicious arts by which elections are too often carried.”³⁶ In Madison’s mind, if constituents are less beleaguered by political controversy, they are freer to center on representatives “who possess the most attractive merit and the most diffusive and established characters.”³⁷

To extend the sphere of participation today, we must increase the number and diversity of voters included in our elections and ensure that elections are competitive enough to incentivize broad coalition building, which rewards the representation of constituent needs. This can be done in two ways: by increasing participation in the primaries themselves or by shifting the locus of competition from primaries to the general election.

Open Primaries

Open primaries allow voters to participate in any party’s primary election, regardless of their own party affiliation or lack thereof, thereby broadening electoral participation. Many voters, particularly independents, are often excluded from primary elections even though primaries frequently determine the final officeholder. By allowing all registered voters to cast a ballot in a primary, open primaries ensure that candidates appeal to a larger and more diverse electorate rather than just the active base of their party.³⁸ An alternative and more limited approach is to permit voters to register with a political party on primary election day, allowing those who may have missed earlier deadlines or who waited to see the candidates in each party the opportunity to participate.

States that have adopted open or nonpartisan primaries have seen higher participation rates compared to closed-primary states, suggesting that increasing voter access to primaries can lead to broader engagement in the overall electoral process.³⁹ Evidence also shows that open primaries can lead to more representative candidates.⁴⁰ However, the effectiveness of open primaries appears to be modest and typically is most impactful in swing districts.⁴¹



States that have adopted open or nonpartisan primaries have seen higher participation rates compared to closed-primary states, suggesting that increasing voter access to primaries can lead to broader engagement in the overall electoral process.

35. James Madison, “The Federalist Papers: No. 49,” The Avalon Project, Feb. 5, 1788. https://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th_century/fed49.asp; Madison, “The Federalist Papers: No. 10,” https://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th_century/fed10.asp.

36. Ibid.

37. Ibid.

38. Ferrer et al. <https://bipartisanpolicy.org/report/the-effect-of-open-primaries-on-turnout-and-representation>.

39. Ibid.

40. Karen M. Kaufmann et al., “A Promise Fulfilled? Open Primaries and Representation,” *The Journal of Politics* 65:2 (May 2003), pp. 457-476. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-2508.t01-2-00009>.

41. Ferrer et al. <https://bipartisanpolicy.org/report/the-effect-of-open-primaries-on-turnout-and-representation>; Barber and McCarty, p. 29.

Mail-in Voting

Another reform that could increase voter participation in primaries is automatically mailing out ballots to all registered voters. Some voters fail to participate in primaries simply because they are unaware of the election, lack sufficient knowledge of the candidates, or struggle to find the time to vote in person. Receiving a ballot in the mail provides a tangible reminder of the election and allows voters the convenience of researching and filling out their ballot from home. This approach has shown promising results. The Massachusetts Institute of Technology's Election Data and Science Lab found that "[t]he safest conclusion to draw is that extending [vote by mail] options increases turnout modestly in midterm and presidential elections but may increase turnout more in primaries, local elections, and special elections."⁴² Similarly, allowing ballots to be returned by mail ensures that voters who receive their ballot at home can easily submit it. Studies have shown that states with universal vote-by-mail policies see higher turnout rates.⁴³



The Massachusetts Institute of Technology's Election Data and Science Lab found that "[t]he safest conclusion to draw is that extending [vote by mail] options increases turnout modestly in midterm and presidential elections but may increase turnout more in primaries, local elections, and special elections."

Reforms that Reward Broad Appeal—Runoffs and Majority-Seeking Voting Systems

Increased turnout at primaries becomes even more effective if candidates are encouraged by the structure of the election to appeal to a large swath of voters.

Runoff elections require candidates to secure a majority (above 50 percent) of votes to win. If no candidate achieves this threshold in the initial election, a subsequent runoff is held between the top-two contenders. This process ensures that the elected candidate has broad support among the electorate, preventing scenarios where a candidate wins with only a small plurality in a crowded field. Moreover, candidates aiming for success in the runoff must appeal to a wider audience, including supporters of eliminated candidates, which may discourage negative campaigning. Research indicates that winners of runoff elections enjoy greater perceived legitimacy among voters, including those who did not support them.⁴⁴

Instant-runoff elections, implemented through ranked-choice voting (RCV), offer the benefits of traditional runoffs in a more efficient and cost-effective manner. In this system, voters rank candidates in order of preference on a single ballot. If no candidate receives a majority of first-choice votes, the candidate with the fewest votes is eliminated, and their votes are redistributed based on the next preferred candidate that they indicate. This process continues until a candidate achieves a majority. RCV eliminates the need for a separate runoff election, which can suffer from lower voter turnout due to the requirement for voters to return for a second round.⁴⁵ While some critics argue that RCV may confuse voters, the evidence suggests that voters understand and effectively engage with the system.⁴⁶ Additionally, RCV maintains the advantage of discouraging negative campaigning, as candidates seek to gain second and third-choice votes from their opponents' supporters.⁴⁷

42. "Voting by mail and absentee voting," MIT Election Data and Science Lab, Feb. 28, 2024. <https://electionlab.mit.edu/research/voting-mail-and-absentee-voting>.

43. Jonathan Madison, "Nevada and the Move Away from Election Day," R Street Institute, Nov. 18, 2024. <https://www.rstreet.org/commentary/nevada-and-the-move-away-from-election-day>.

44. Cynthia McClintock, *Electoral Rules and Democracy in Latin America* (Oxford University Press, 2018), pp. 29-64.

45. Ryan Williamson and Matt Germer, "Reimagining the Ballot: A Comprehensive Look at Primary and General Election Systems," R Street Institute, Oct. 8, 2024. <https://www.rstreet.org/research/reimagining-the-ballot-a-comprehensive-look-at-primary-and-general-election-systems>.

46. Matt Germer, "An Analysis of Ranked Choice Voting in Maine," R Street Institute, Sept. 21, 2021. <https://www.rstreet.org/research/an-analysis-of-ranked-choice-voting-in-maine>.

47. Rachel Leven and Tyler Fisher, "Alaska's Election Model: How the top-four nonpartisan primary system improves participation, competition, and representation," Unite America Institute, October 2023. <https://www.uniteamericainstitute.org/research/alaskas-election-model-how-the-top-four-nonpartisan-primary-system-improves-participation-competition-and-representation>.

In addition to RCV, some reformers point to other options, such as Score Then Automatic Runoff (STAR) voting or approval voting, which are alternative methods that allow voters to express varying levels of support for multiple candidates. In STAR voting, voters rate each candidate on a scale (e.g., 0 to 5). The two highest-scoring candidates then enter an automatic runoff, where the candidate preferred by the majority wins. Approval voting permits voters to select (i.e., “approve”) any number of candidates they find acceptable, and the candidate with the most approvals wins. These systems empower voters to support all candidates they deem fit for office without the fear of wasting votes. This can lead to the election of candidates who have broad, albeit not always intense, support across the electorate, potentially resulting in representatives who better reflect the collective preferences of the community.

Emphasizing the General Election

Although increasing voter turnout in primary elections has tangible effects, many voters choose to forgo primary elections because they perceive them as low-stakes contests.⁴⁸ Therefore, the most efficient reforms are those that extend the sphere of participation by shifting the decisive electoral contests to general elections.

All-Candidate Primary

In an all-candidate primary, every candidate, regardless of party affiliation, competes in a single primary election. Voters can select any candidate they wish, and the top finishers advance to the general election. This approach encourages candidates to appeal to the broadest spectrum of voters possible, rather than focusing solely on their party’s base. By fostering cross-party competition and collaboration, all-candidate primaries can lead to the election of officials who are more attuned to the diverse interests of all of their constituents.⁴⁹

While an all-candidate primary can be used to produce any number of candidates, advancing the top-four candidates provides distinct advantages over more traditional primary structures.⁵⁰ In competitive districts, it ensures that multiple viable candidates have a pathway to the general election, limiting outcomes where generally appealing candidates are forced out before most voters even cast a ballot. More importantly, in areas where one party is overwhelmingly dominant, multiple candidates from the same party are likely to advance. This means that rather than the general election being a mere formality, voters in these districts will still have meaningful choices, selecting between competing candidates within the dominant party. As a result, elections remain competitive, even in so-called “safe” districts, and candidates must earn support from a wider coalition of voters. Lastly, candidates from minor parties have a far greater chance of reaching the general election.⁵¹

Pairing an all-candidate primary with instant runoff voting via RCV in the general election further strengthens this reform. By requiring candidates to compete for



An all-candidate primary approach encourages candidates to appeal to the broadest spectrum of voters possible, rather than focusing solely on their party’s base.

48. Alan S. Gerber et al., “Why don’t people vote in U.S. primary elections? Assessing theoretical explanations for reduced participation,” *Electoral Studies* 45 (February 2017), pp. 119-129. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.electstud.2016.11.003>.

49. Williamson and Germer. <https://www.rstreet.org/research/reimagining-the-ballot-a-comprehensive-look-at-primary-and-general-election-systems>.

50. Ryan Williamson, “Evaluating the Effects of the Top-Four System in Alaska,” R Street Institute, Jan. 31, 2023. <https://www.rstreet.org/research/evaluating-the-effects-of-the-top-four-system-in-alaska>.

51. Ibid.

second- and third-choice rankings, instant runoffs reinforce the need for broad appeal and coalition-building rather than ideological rigidity. This structure ensures that elected officials are more responsive to the entire electorate, rather than just the most engaged partisan factions. If minority party candidates qualify for the general election, their voters can support them without the risk of wasting their vote or inadvertently aiding an undesired candidate. The result is a system that improves incentives for candidates and accountability for officeholders, even in districts where one party dominates.⁵²

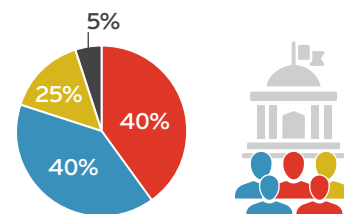
Importantly, this system is not purely theoretical. It has been practiced in Alaska since 2022 with promising early results.⁵³ The reform led to a reduction in uncontested general elections, dropping to 12 percent in 2022 from higher rates in previous cycles.⁵⁴ Additionally, the introduction of intra-party competition in general elections compelled candidates to appeal to a broader electorate, fostering a more competitive political environment in which civility was incentivized as candidates courted second place votes.⁵⁵

Proportional Representation

Proportional representation (PR) offers another structural solution to the issues caused by our current primary system by both eliminating gerrymandering and making general elections the principal arena of political competition. PR directly resolves some of the biggest flaws in the current primary system and constitutes a potential path toward realigning our political system with the founders' vision of accountable and representative government. However, this solution can only be applied to offices that allow multiple winners like the U.S. House of Representatives and state legislatures.

Proportional representation is an electoral system that allocates legislative seats based on the percentage of votes each party or candidate receives. Unlike the current system, where a single candidate wins per district—often with less than a majority—PR uses larger, multi-member districts to elect multiple representatives. If a party wins 40 percent of the vote, it secures roughly 40 percent of the seats in that district, ensuring that election outcomes more accurately reflect voter preferences.⁵⁶

PR significantly reduces or eliminates gerrymandering by making districts larger and ensuring that all votes contribute to representation. Additionally, PR diminishes the influence of partisan primaries by making general elections the true battleground for representation. Since multiple candidates from different parties—or even from the same party—can win seats in the same district, party primaries no longer serve as the decisive stage of the election. Instead, voters have more choices in the general election, where they can select from a broader field of candidates who must compete for a wider base of support. This structure encourages greater voter



Proportional representation is an electoral system that allocates legislative seats based on the percentage of votes each party or candidate receives.

52. Ibid.

53. Leven and Fisher. <https://www.uniteamericainstitute.org/research/alaskas-election-model-how-the-top-four-nonpartisan-primary-system-improves-participation-competition-and-representation>.

54. Ibid.

55. Ibid.

56. Scott Mainwaring and Lee Drutman, "The Case for Multiparty Presidentialism in the US," Protect Democracy, December 2023. <https://protectdemocracy.org/work/case-multiparty-presidentialism>.

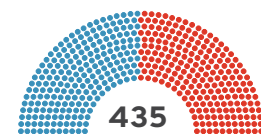
engagement, as every vote meaningfully contributes to the final outcome, even if your vote falls in the minority.⁵⁷

For example, imagine a state with five congressional districts where a minority party makes up 20 percent of the voting population. Under the current system, district lines can be drawn in a way that scatters these voters, preventing them from ever forming a majority in any one district—effectively shutting them out of representation. However, under proportional representation, larger, multi-member districts would be created. Instead of five single-member districts, the state could be divided into two larger districts—one electing three representatives and the other electing two. In this system, it would be much harder, if not impossible, to dilute the minority party’s voting power. Because seats are awarded based on vote share, the minority party could concentrate its support and reach the threshold needed to elect at least one representative, ensuring fairer and more proportional representation.

Increasing the Size of the House of Representatives and State Legislatures

Another way to improve representation and accountability for these offices is by increasing the number of elected representatives at both the federal and state levels. The size of the U.S. House of Representatives has been fixed at 435 members since 1929, despite the nation’s population more than tripling since then.⁵⁸ This has led to congressional districts that are far larger than those envisioned by the founders, diluting representation and making it harder for constituents to engage meaningfully with their representatives.⁵⁹ State legislatures have followed a similar pattern, with many states maintaining the same number of seats even as their populations have grown substantially. Madison cautioned against this, noting that “by enlarging too much the number of electors, you render the representatives too little acquainted with all their local circumstances and lesser interests.”⁶⁰ In the early years of the Republic, both Washington and Madison favored keeping districts smaller as the country grew, with Madison proposing an amendment to that effect. However, the amendment was never ratified, and political infighting eventually brought an end to the expansion of the House.⁶¹

Reducing the size of electoral districts by increasing the number of representatives would enhance the connection between lawmakers and their constituents. Smaller districts would also ensure that each representative is accountable to a more localized electorate, making it easier for voters to communicate their concerns and for representatives to address the specific needs of their communities. Greater familiarity between constituents and representatives would also likely result in more accountability.⁶² Congress could avoid partisan gamesmanship by agreeing to a formula ahead of time that uniformly mandates expansion.



The size of the U.S. House of Representatives has been fixed at 435 members since 1929, despite the nation’s population more than tripling since then.

57. Ibid.

58. Ben Raderstorf, “Expanding the House of Representatives, explained,” Protect Democracy, Jan. 24, 2025. <https://protectdemocracy.org/work/expanding-the-house-of-representatives-explained>.

59. Brian Frederick, *Congressional Representation & Constituents: The Case for Increasing the U.S. House of Representatives* (Routledge, 2009). <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203864616>.

60. Madison, “The Federalist Papers: No. 10.” https://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th_century/fed10.asp.

61. Raderstorf. <https://protectdemocracy.org/work/expanding-the-house-of-representatives-explained>.

62. Ibid.

Conclusion

The Founding Generation understood that the strength of a republic depends on the quality and wisdom of its leaders. They also recognized that to secure the type of leaders the republic needed, the government would have to establish institutions and processes that would bring such individuals to the forefront and encourage them to lean into their best qualities. While they did not foresee today's primary system, they recognized the dangers of factionalism, low voter engagement, and catering to narrow interests.

Our current primary system too often rewards candidates who appeal to narrow, unrepresentative factions, producing elected officials who are disconnected from the broader electorate and who remain unaccountable for their actions. To realign our political system with the founders' vision, we must reform the way we elect our leaders. Expanding voter participation in primaries, adopting alternative voting methods that reward broad appeal, shifting competition from primaries to general elections, and increasing the size of legislative bodies are all viable paths to strengthening representation and accountability. No single reform will resolve every flaw in our electoral system, but each of these options has the potential to move us closer to a political environment where candidates engage with a wider electorate and govern with the interests of all of their constituents in mind. By embracing these changes, we can build an electoral process that elevates leaders who embody the virtues our founders saw as essential to the survival of our republic.



To realign our political system with the founders' vision, we must reform the way we elect our leaders.

About the Author

Jonathan Madison is a governance fellow at the R Street Institute. He has a PhD in global and imperial history from the University of Oxford and writes about the modern history of democracy.