

MONOPOLY POLITICS 2014 LITERATURE REVIEW

Monopoly Politics 2014 and the Fair Voting Solution includes a thorough analysis of the problems with U.S. congressional elections and suggests a reform plan to solve those problems. This literature review will give broader context to the report's arguments and conclusions through an examination of the relevant academic literature. It will discuss the findings of research that supports the claims in this report as well as address the research that seems to reach different conclusions about the nature of U.S. congressional elections.

The Systemic Roots of Partisan Bias

One of the most remarkable findings in *Monopoly Politics 2014* is the degree of partisan bias built into the system by the single-member congressional district map. Our model projects that the underlying preference for Democrats in the generic ballot among 2014 voters would need to be 56.4% for Democrats to earn a majority in the House, which translates into about 55% of the two-party vote in 2014.¹ This projection matches nearly exactly the findings of Alan Abramowitz of Emory University, who [explained his approach](#) in a piece for *Sabato's Crystal Ball* in February. Abramowitz estimates that Democrats would need 56.5% of the generic vote to take back the House in 2014.

Partisan bias became a heated topic after the 2012 election, as commentators and political scientists argued over what was to blame for the Republican victory in the House of Representatives despite Democrats winning the most votes nationwide. While gerrymandering was the most popular target of blame for this distorted outcome, most academics agree that it was not a sufficient explanation. Instead, the most significant reason why Democrats failed to take back the House was the underlying bias of American political geography in favor of Republicans: Democrats are concentrated in urban areas while Republican voters are more evenly dispersed.

Several posts on the political science blog *The Monkey Cage* and *The Washington Post's* "Wonkblog" after the election supported the idea that gerrymandering cannot be solely blamed for the distorted outcome in the 2012 election. Political scientists John Sides of George Washington University and Eric McGhee of the Public Policy Institute of California, wrote that

¹ The difference is due to the greater number of Republican incumbents, as incumbents usually receive some degree of a "personal vote" from voters who would prefer a candidate of the opposing party in a race for an open seat.

[“Redistricting Didn’t Win Republicans the House,”](#) Nicholas Goedert of Washington University in St. Louis [agreed](#) that the 2012 result was due to “not gerrymandering, but districting,” and Dan Hopkins of Georgetown University similarly [wrote](#) that “It’s not just about who draws the districts, but also about where Democrats and Republicans live in the first place.”

This underlying partisan bias was well-established in the academic literature before the 2012 election. The most oft-cited paper on the subject is Jowei Chen and Jonathon Rodden’s [“Unintentional Gerrymandering,”](#) which found a ‘natural gerrymander’ in favor of Republicans based on the 2000 presidential election results. Gary Jacobson had previously made similar arguments in “The Congress: The Structural Bias of Republican Success,” and Gary King and Andrew Gelman found that there had been a bias in favor of Republicans throughout the latter half of the 20th century (controlling for incumbency advantage) in [“Systematic Consequences of Incumbency Advantage in U.S. House Elections.”](#)

FairVote, in its [initial Monopoly Politics report](#) in July 1997, also identified the fundamental problem facing Democrats:

Many expect the Republicans to gain seats in 1998 based on the history of poor performance of the president's party in the mid-term elections of a second term. More fundamentally, Republicans have a large edge in the number of districts where Bill Clinton ran behind his national average. There are more very liberal seats than very conservative ones (99 to 82), but overall Clinton ran ahead of his national average in 196 seats and behind it in 239.

There may be a built-in conservative majority in the House, but it need not be a Republican majority. Some of these districts certainly are very competitive and the parties actually have an equal number of vulnerable seats in our calculation. But unless more voters start splitting their ticket again or the Democrats can move into traditional Republican strongholds in New York and New Jersey, the Democrats probably are at a disadvantage.

A few academics, most notably political scientist Michael McDonald of George Washington University and neuroscientist Sam Wang of Princeton University, have contended in the [Huffington Post](#) and the [New York Times](#), respectively, that enacting independent redistricting commissions would be sufficient to eliminate the partisan bias in Congress. While there is little doubt that if all states had used independent redistricting in 2011 it would have mitigated the partisan bias by at least a few seats, *Monopoly Politics 2014* concludes that most of the partisan distortion would remain even if district lines were drawn in a nonpartisan fashion without taking political considerations into account.

The Roots of Polarization: The Role of Primary Rules and Redistricting

Many political observers have also blamed gerrymandering for the continued polarization of Congress. As with partisan bias, gerrymandering has likely contributed to polarization to some extent, but there is little academic support for a strong causal relationship. In the most definitive research paper on the subject to date, "[Does Gerrymandering Cause Polarization?](#)," political scientists Nolan McCarty, Keith Poole, and Howard Rosenthal conclude that gerrymandering does not, in fact, directly or indirectly cause polarization.

Polarization is, of course, a complex process with many possible causes. Aldrich, Perry, & Rhode [drew](#) on the work of Richard Fenno to argue that polarization has risen because power has increasingly been concentrated in party leadership, particularly the Speaker of the House. Elisabeth Gerber and Rebecca Morton [found evidence](#) in 1998 that closed primaries led to the election of more extreme candidates. A more recent [study](#) by Hans Hassell of Cornell College contradicted that claim, arguing that the most committed, partisan voters still control outcomes in primary elections that winnow the general election field to one or two viable candidates. In November 2013, Eric McGhee (Public Policy Institute of California), Seth Maskett (University of Denver), Boris Shor (University of Chicago), Steven Rogers (Vanderbilt University), and Nolan McCarty (Princeton University) collaborated on a [paper](#) entitled "A Primary Cause of Partisanship? Nomination Systems and Legislator Ideology." They summarized their findings thusly: "Many theoretical and empirical accounts of representation argue that primary elections are a polarizing influence. Likewise, many reformers advocate opening party nominations to nonmembers as a way of increasing the number of moderate elected officials. We find that the openness of a primary election has little, if any, effect on the extremism of the politicians it produces."

Instead, as we discuss at length in *The Polarization Crisis* section of *Monopoly Politics 2014*, the rise in polarization stems primarily from a deeper set of trends: the party realignment of the 1980's and 1990's, the sorting of voters into geographic areas with others that share their political persuasion, and the winner-take-all system of elections that turns an entrenched majority of 55% of voters in a district into a guarantee of 100% of representation. Gerrymandering and closed primaries may contribute to the problem, but only on the margins.

In his 2008 book, [The Big Sort](#), Bill Bishop posited that the American population has become more polarized as Americans have clustered into politically like-minded communities over the last several decades. As a result of this sorting, the two major parties have retreated into their geographic strongholds and gerrymandering has become much easier, given the shortcomings of winner-take-all elections. FairVote's analysis of presidential elections supports Bishop's thesis. In a 2005 [report](#), *The Shrinking Battleground*, and a 2013 *Presidential Studies Quarterly*

[article](#), we found that the number of swing states has sharply declined and the amount of partisan change between elections has dropped precipitously.

Lack of Competition

FairVote can confidently project more than 80% of races over a year in advance of the 2014 elections because more than 80% of U.S. House districts are regularly uncompetitive. The decline of competition in House races has been well-documented, including in a [thorough treatment](#) by statistician Nate Silver on his FiveThirtyEight blog. The 2012 election was the least competitive in recent history, with only 63 races (15%) decided by 10 points or less.

The lack of competition is not just a theoretical problem; it has had tangible and damaging effects on our democracy. Abramowitz, Brad Alexander, and Matthew Gunning [found](#) in 2006 that the ‘closeness’ of an election strongly influences the voter turnout in that election. Uncompetitive races, then, can be held partly to blame for midterm election turnout rates that typically hover around 40%. Moreover, as Duncan Macrae noted in the 1950s and Robert Bartlett [corroborated](#) in 1979, when lawmakers lack adequate electoral incentives to consider the broad interests of voters, they tend to engage in more extreme voting behavior.

Incumbency Advantage

In addition to the polarization of congressional districts, another factor contributed to the lack of competition in congressional elections: incumbency advantage. FairVote has tracked what it calls the “[incumbency bump](#)” in congressional races since 1996 based on the margin by which incumbents outperformed their districts’ partisanship, and has found that the average incumbency bump has ranged from 4.5% to 8% over that period. The average bump has been trending towards the bottom of that range in recent elections, however.

The advantage of incumbents is well-established in the academic literature. Richard Fenno and others have observed that incumbents are usually quite adept at cultivating support from their constituents by ‘bringing home the bacon’ from Congress and performing case work that establishes a positive image leading up to an election. Moreover, incumbents generally enjoy an advantage over their potential political opponents in both name recognition and campaign contributions. In 1990, Gelman and Gary King of Harvard University [showed](#) that there had been an advantage for congressional incumbents throughout the 20th century.

FairVote uses the incumbency bump metric in this report for several purposes, including: 1) estimating the overall partisan slant of an election by comparing the average incumbency bumps of the two major parties, 2) estimating whether voters in an election were more “pro-incumbent” or “anti-incumbent” than in other recent elections, and 3) estimating candidate

quality based on how an individual candidate's incumbency bump compared to the average incumbency advantage nationwide.

Money and Elections

Like gerrymandering, campaign spending has been cited as a particularly pressing problem in congressional elections. However, there is little academic support for the idea that the relative amount of money spent by two candidates in a race significantly affects the outcome of the election. Gary Jacobson corroborated previous political science research in his [1990 paper](#) on the effects of campaign spending in House elections, concluding that the amount spent by challengers is much more important than the amount spent by incumbents in congressional elections. In his 1994 paper, "[Using Repeat Challengers to Estimate the Effect of Campaign Spending on Election Outcomes in the U.S. House](#)," Steven Levitt disputed the importance of spending for challengers, finding that "campaign spending has an extremely small impact on election outcomes, regardless of who does the spending."

After the 2012 elections, Lee Drutman of the Sunlight Foundation [observed](#) that "we can find no statistically observable relationship between outside spending and the likelihood of victory." In this report, FairVote reaches a similar conclusion, finding only a weak relationship between relative campaign spending and margin of victory and no significant effect of money on election outcomes.

Fair Representation Voting

This report advocates for an alternative method of electing the House of Representatives that enhances proportionality and provides greater voter choice: ***fair representation voting***, a form of the category of electoral systems known in academia as "proportional representation." Many political scientists, including electoral systems experts [Arend Lijphart](#) and [Douglas Amy](#), prefer proportional representation (PR) systems, as they more accurately translate votes into seats and have been associated with a host of other benefits. In a [2004 study](#), Michael McDonald, Silvia Mendes, and Ian Budge contended that PR tends to more accurately translate societal preferences into public policy than winner-take-all systems. Similarly, John D. Huber and G. Bingham Powell Jr. [determined](#) that what they call "proportionate influence" systems were more successful at bringing about congruence between citizens' self-identified ideology and the ideology of legislators. In a [2012 study](#), Huber also found that proportional representation is associated with lower levels of ethnic and racial polarization.

Andre Blais and R. Ken Carty found in a [1990 report](#) that PR systems tend to produce higher rates of voter turnout, a conclusion that was backed up in Jeffery Karp and Susan Banducci's [1999 study](#) on the increase in turnout in New Zealand after the country switched to a proportional voting system. Richard Matland and Deborah Brown, among many others, have

[found](#) a strong correlation between district magnitude (the number of representatives elected from a district to the same legislative body) and the representation of women in legislatures; fair voting elections require greater district magnitudes than single-member district systems. Former University of New Orleans professor Richard Engstrom has [written](#) several articles about the effectiveness of fair representation systems as vehicles to allow more racial minorities to elect preferred candidates, most recently for the *St. Louis University School of Law*. Finally, John Carey and Simon Hix [identified](#) in 2009 what they called the “electoral sweet spot”: low-magnitude, multi-member districts elected under proportional representation that combine the best virtues of majoritarian and proportional systems.

Many of these authors do not differentiate between the case for party-based forms of PR and candidate-based forms of PR. FairVote has concluded that while party-based forms of PR have often worked well in parliamentary democracies, they are not consistent with the candidate-based culture of American politics and its constitutional system of institutionalized checks and balances. The American system demands less-disciplined parties with individual representatives who can regularly secure compromises with the other major party. The best evidence of the impact fair representation voting would have on Congress may come from Illinois, which used such a system from 1870 to 1980 to elect the lower house of its state legislature. A 2001 commission led by former Congressman Abner Mikva (D) and Governor Jim Edger (R) [recommended](#) its return, lauding the benefits of shared representation and more independent legislators.

Based on these findings, FairVote has developed a [Fair Representation Voting Plan](#) for the entire United States that creates multi-member districts of three to five seats in every state (except those with fewer than three U.S. House seats) that would be elected using fair representation voting systems. These “super districts” lower the threshold required to win a congressional seat from a simple plurality to 17% of the vote in five-seat districts and just over 25% in three-seat districts. Under this proposal, every American (except those living in single-district states) would likely be represented by candidates of both major parties. Because of the lower thresholds, all seats would be potentially competitive in any given election, and voters would be incentivized to turn out in higher numbers. Partisan bias and the problem of gerrymandering would be eliminated. Fair voting would also open the door for candidates from minor parties and independents to win election, and increase the descriptive representation of Congress by electing more women and members of minority groups.

The idea that fair representation voting would transform American democracy for the better in a wide variety of respects has been consistently supported by the academic literature on electoral systems.