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# Reforms III: Electoral Systems

## Session 23

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17.263: American Elections

# Roadmap

[The Allure of Reform](#)

[An Exercise in Practicable Reform](#)

# The Allure of Reform

## A More Perfect Union?

- ▶ Many reforms to US electoral institutions since country's founding:
  - ▶ Elected judges and senators, the secret ballot, nonpartisan elections, city managers, campaign donation limits, “motor voter” laws, . . .
- ▶ While many people supported these reforms out of self-interest, they was also motivated by a conviction that fine-tuning (“engineering”) electoral institutions would make democracy work better.
- ▶ Of course, many other reforms—from Calhoun’s “concurrent majorities” to congressional term limits—have not (yet) been implemented, and many reforms are currently being debated.

# The Challenge of Reform

Would-be reformers face several important challenges:

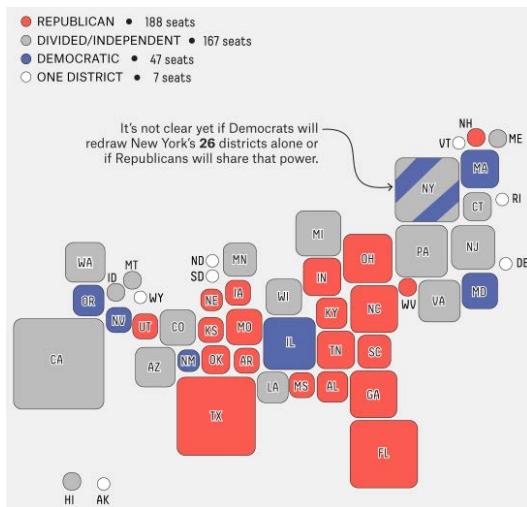
- ▶ Deciding which problems are worth prioritizing
- ▶ Devising potential solutions to those problems
- ▶ Evaluating the effectiveness of proposed solutions
- ▶ Convincing voters and policymakers to implement them

## Partisan Gerrymandering as an Example

Take, for example, partisan gerrymandering:

- ▶ Is partisan gerrymandering a big problem or a modest one?
  - ▶ e.g., consequences for polarization, responsiveness, bias
- ▶ What are potential ways of preventing gerrymandering?
  - ▶ e.g., judicial oversight, independent commissions, “I cut, you choose”
- ▶ What are the likely effects of these proposed reforms?
  - ▶ “side effects” as well as outcomes of primary interest
- ▶ How can these reforms be implemented?
  - ▶ Unless the initiative is an option, need to convince majority party, which presumably controls redistricting, to relinquish control.

# Looking Forward to the 2020 Cycle



Rakich, Nathaniel, and Elena Mejía. "Republicans Won Almost Every Election Where Redistricting Was At Stake." FiveThirtyEight.com. November 18, 2020. © ABC News Internet Ventures. All rights reserved. This content is excluded from our Creative Commons license. For more information, see <https://ocw.mit.edu/help/faq-fair-use/>.

# An Exercise in Practicable Reform



In breakout groups, proceed through the following steps:

1. List the **three** most pressing **problems** with American elections.
  - ▶ Report the problems to the class. I will collect the suggested problems and assign one to each group.
2. Brainstorm **two** (not widely implemented) legal or institutional **reforms** that could mitigate your assigned problem.
  - ▶ Report the potential reforms to the class
3. Returning to your breakout groups, brainstorm at least **one** research design (data + analytic approach) that could provide **evidence** for the effectiveness of **each** reform, considering side effects as well as the problem of interest. Select the most promising reform.
  - ▶ I will then move two students out of each group and into another. The one whose last name comes first alphabetically will play a **Democratic** politician, and the other a **Republican** politician.
4. Original members: Try to **convince** both new members to support your preferred reform. (Assume that your research shows that it will likely achieve its goals.) If **both** new members agree, it passes.

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