

Majoritarian Elections and Misinformation

A Report for Fix Our House

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How Should We Think About Misinformation and Electoral Reform?

In this report, we are interested in the pieces of the sprawling system that is our electoral democracy that relate to the mechanisms of elections. Therefore, our questions and the alternatives considered will be around issues of actual voting, such as what strategic factors must a voter consider when casting their vote? How many candidates can they realistically choose between and how many parties do those candidates represent? Perhaps most crucially, how are votes counted? Not examined in this report or the literature specific to this discussion are other related aspects of the voting and information space such as who can vote, campaign finance laws, or election fraud. While there are a variety of alternative answers to those the American system gives for these other aspects, they are not of main concern of this report.

Our answers to these sorts of questions and the alternative approaches to democracy that they represent can be sorted, at a high level, along a loose scale from Majoritarian to Consensus-based (a simplified version of Arend Lijphart's original typology).¹ Lijphart provides a useful breakdown of the methods that typify these systems and what countries use them, reprinted below.²

¹ Lijphart, Arend. "Democratic Political Systems: Types, Cases, Causes, and Consequences." *Journal of Theoretical Politics* 1, no. 1 (1989): 33–48; Lijphart, Arend. *Patterns of Democracy*. Second edition. Grand Rapids: Yale University Press, 2012. <https://ebookcentral-proquest-com.libproxy.berkeley.edu/lib/berkeley-ebooks/reader.action?docID=3421026&ppg=1>.

² Lijphart, *Patterns of Democracy*

Plurality and majority formulas	{	Plurality formula	{	BAH	BAR	BOT
				CAN	IND	JAM
				MAU	TRI	UK
				US		
				NZ (1946–93)		
		Majority-plurality		FRA (except 1986)		
		Alternative vote		AUL		
Semiproportional formulas	{	Limited vote		JPN (1946)		
		Single non-transferable vote		JPN (1947–93)		
		Parallel Plurality–PR	{	KOR		
	JPN (1996–)					
Proportional representation	{	List proportional representation	{	ARG	AUT	BEL
				CR	DEN	FIN
				GRE	ICE	ISR
				LUX	NET	NOR
				POR	SPA	SWE
				SWI	URU	
				FRA (1986)		
				ITA (1946–92)		
		Mixed member proportional formula	{	GER		
				NZ (1996–)		
				ITA (1994–)		
		Single transferable vote	{	IRE		
					MAL	

FIG. 8.1 A classification of the electoral formulas for the election of the first or only chambers of legislatures in thirty-six democracies, 1945–2010

Majoritarian voting systems ensure the winner is whichever candidate or party receives the largest share of votes—whether that is an actual majority or simply a plurality—more than any other candidate. The most simple and dominant method of majoritarian voting is First-Past-The-Post: to win, a candidate running in a single member district (wherein one and only one representative will be elected) need only pass the ‘post’ of fifty percent of the votes plus one, or, failing this, garner more votes than anyone else. First-Past-The-Post is both the most extreme version of majoritarian voting and the dominant method in the US, where it is used to elect members of the House of Representatives, Senate, most State Legislatures, and a variety of other positions at all levels of government.

As used, First-Past-The-Post or any majoritarian system sacrifices fairness in service to government accountability and effectiveness.³ Only one candidate wins the entirety of the positions at stake even though they have received only fifty percent plus one votes (if that, considering the likelihood of a plurality victory), hence the alternate name for this sort of simple majoritarian voting method, “Winner-Take-All.” Following the implications of such a system up the chain of government, we can easily imagine (and in practice see) that such systems will ensure that governments can form majorities in a legislature despite winning a minority of votes. This is not a hypothetical of the kind often discussed in the US regarding winning the presidency with a slim plurality of votes in just those states most overrepresented in the Electoral College, but a by-design feature of First-Past-The-Post systems, which routinely exaggerate the legislative majority of whichever party gets more votes than the others.⁴

The dynamics of a First-Past-The-Post election have a variety of impacts on the outcome of elections. Theoretically, by allowing only one candidate to win, First-Past-The-Post elections incentivize voters to abandon their real preferences in order to vote strategically for candidates more likely to be able to win a plurality.⁵ In theory, First-Past-The-Post also discourages ideologically similar candidates from running in the same election while incentivizing those from the ideological extremes because similar candidates risk splitting similar voters between themselves while extreme candidates face little opposition and can capture seats with a small but united base of support.⁶

To illustrate this possibility, consider a hypothetical House district with 4 candidates: one Democrat, two Republicans, and one extreme Libertarian. Voters in this district are split such that Republicans will reliably win; 25% vote reliably Democrat, 35% reliably libertarian, and 40% reliably Republican. However, with two Republicans splitting their votes equally, the extreme Libertarian wins the seat with 35% of the vote while each Republican wins only 20%. Faced with

³ Norris, Pippa. “Choosing Electoral Systems: Proportional, Majoritarian and Mixed Systems.” *International Political Science Review* 18, no. 3 (1997): 297–312.

⁴ Norris, *Choosing Electoral Systems*

⁵ Blais, André, and R. K. Carty. “The Psychological Impact of Electoral Laws: Measuring Duverger’s Elusive Factor.” *British Journal of Political Science* 21, no. 1 (January 1991): 79–93. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0007123400006037>; Brams, Steven J, and Peter Fishburn C. “Voting Procedures.” In *Handbook of Social Choice and Welfare*, 1:173–236, 2002. <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S157401100280008X>

⁶ Brams & Fishburn, “Voting Procedures”

this predictable result, we can easily see why the Republican candidates are disincentivized to run against one another or why Republican voters are disincentivized to vote for their preferred of the two, instead rallying around one regardless of their real preferences. This example also illustrates the inherent unfairness of a winner-take-all election: with no candidates splitting their party vote, Republicans would reliably win the seat with less than a majority of votes and leave both Democrats and Libertarians in the district without any direct representation.

Consensus voting systems, on the other side of the spectrum, eschew requiring strict and simple majorities or pluralities in order to win seats, and instead focus on translating voter preferences into government accurately. To definitively win in a consensus-based system, parties must receive a definitive majority; because it is unlikely any party will garner such a clear majority (especially if there are more than two candidates or major parties), consensus governments are not usually controlled by one party. Instead, a wider array of interests and social groups share power, often via coalition governments. Such systems generally produce more diversity and fairness of representation in government at the cost of efficacy and direct accountability.⁷ Proportional Representation (PR) is the most extreme and common version of consensus-based democracy, as it completely does away with single member districts in favor of awarding seats in the legislature in direct proportion to the share of votes earned by each party nationally.

PR, and consensus-based electoral systems in general, have the following benefits to the practice of democracy. First, the loser-deficit—the anger and discontent felt by supporters of a losing party or candidate after an election—should be lower as not only do fewer people feel like they have lost but being a loser does not mean one's opponents have taken complete control. Secondly, voters will likely be more content with democracy and their government in general in a consensus-based system because of the higher likelihood that they will have a representative who reflects them in government. Unlike a winner-take-all system, consensus systems offer the chance of a representation for voters who would otherwise have lost in district elections (ergo, those who would vote for a candidate in a First-Past-The-Post election and lose with 49% of the vote or less, thus ending up without any representation, would end up with some representation under consensus).

Thirdly, consensus systems should lead to a greater number of parties both represented in government and competing for seats because the threshold to win any seats is lowered from winning a majority or plurality in successive head-to-head contests with large parties. This benefit also may follow from allowing more voters to vote based on their conscience rather than strategic estimations of the chance of their preferred candidate winning.⁸ Greater representation of third parties may also correspond to greater representation for minorities—both social and ethnic.

⁷ Norris, "Choosing Electoral Systems"

⁸ Blais & Carty, "The Psychological Impact of Electoral Laws"

Somewhere in the middle of the spectrum between majoritarian and consensus are systems like Single Transferable Vote (STV) and Ranked Choice Voting (RCV), both of which rely on ranking preferences and eliminating candidates in successive rounds of voting or vote counting. Both of these systems function as a mixture of consensus and majoritarian principles, combining some of both their benefits and drawbacks.

Electoral reform, then, aims to shift from one of these methods of voting to another, or along this spectrum, usually in the direction of consensus as simple majoritarian methods have been the norm for most of democracy's history due in no small part to the influence of the Westminster and the US models.⁹ Importantly, the other defining feature of a democracy—and the main difference between the two influential models just noted—whether it is Unitary or Federalist in structure—is to some extent irrelevant in discussing electoral reform from this high a level. A federal government can be elected using First-Past-The-Post or PR, and the same goes for a parliamentary government. There is no theoretical link between the type of system and its voting rules, allowing comparisons, albeit with some qualifications as to covarying factors like the number of parties, across countries using majoritarian and consensus-based election methods regardless of their governmental structure.

The other focus of this report is misinformation, a much discussed but often tricky to define concept. Here, we will take it to mean deliberately shared wrong information, like disinformation or fake news but distinct from simple misperceptions (i.e., genuine mistakes). This definition puts our work in a slightly difficult place; to definitively call something misinformation, it is necessary to know about the intentions of someone creating or spreading wrong information.¹⁰ However, such a move is necessary and will not make analysis too difficult as, as we will see later, the reasons for sharing misinformation are distinct from those for wrongly believing false information and the two are more easily separable because of this than is commonly thought. Due to its uses to score political points or denigrate the opposition, misinformation is also closely linked to hostility in both its uses and drivers, as we will discuss further below.

The dangers of misinformation to a well-functioning democracy are clear. Most obviously, believing misinformation will decrease a voters' chances of voting with their real interests. Successfully doing so is called 'correct voting' in the theoretic literature; meaning how a voter would vote under a circumstance of full and objectively true information and given their real preferences.¹¹ With this concept in mind, while a democracy might appear healthy if it has a large percentage of the population that votes, this measure might not truly represent its overall health if many of these votes are not cast 'correctly' due to misinformation.¹² Examples of this abound in recent history, as with uninsured conservative Americans opposing candidates who

⁹ Norris, "Choosing Electoral Systems"

¹⁰ Nyhan, Brendan. "Facts and Myths about Misperceptions." *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 34, no. 3 (August 1, 2020): 220–36. <https://doi.org/10.1257/jep.34.3.220>

¹¹ Lau, Richard R., Parina Patel, Dalia F. Fahmy, and Robert R. Kaufman. "Correct Voting Across Thirty-Three Democracies: A Preliminary Analysis." *British Journal of Political Science* 44, no. 2 (April 2014): 239–59

¹² Lau et al., "Correct Voting"

support the Affordable Care Act due to misinformation about its policies and use of ‘death panels.’¹³ Under perfect information, many of these same voters might have supported the legislation that would have given them healthcare.

The spread of misinformation is also an evolving issue due to the rise of social media. Worries about the effect of social media on a variety of our institutions are widespread and well-documented. Especially worrying is the increased opportunity for other governments or nonstate actors to spread misinformation that could affect the outcome of elections. The new online environment, with its possibility for anonymity and the wide reach of social media posts, also means that misinformation can be spread with less risk to one’s social status and to a much wider audience.

Affective Polarization

Before turning to the premises for analysis, it will be useful to introduce another facet that will prove vital to our understanding of the challenges to effective democracy: affective polarization. The simplest definition for this term is the degree to which a partisan identifies with their own party and against an opposing party based on their social identity.¹⁴ The inclusion of social identity is key here as affective polarization is distinct from, and possibly much more impactful than, ideological polarization—a simpler measure of the distance between partisans on policy. As we will discuss, this difference and increasing rates of affective polarization have a variety of disturbing implications for democracy.

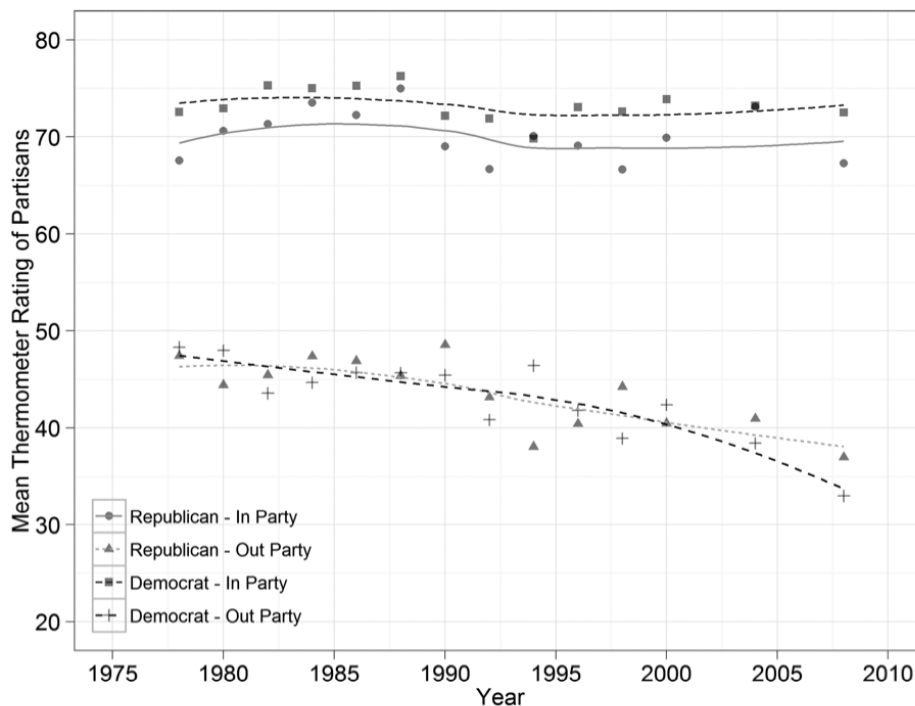
Shanto Iyengar, Gaurav Sood & Yhphatch Lelkes, provide strong evidence that affective polarization is on the rise using the most common measure: in-group vs. out-group thermometer differentials (the difference between how positively a voter feels about their own party compared to how positively they feel about another party). Using data from six different surveys of US and UK voters, they show that while both major parties in the US have a fairly consistent level of in-group support (positive feeling towards their own party) there is a clear downward trend in out-group feelings, as shown in the graph below, reprinted below from the article.¹⁵ This increasing negative feeling does not appear to be related to specific elections or ideological battles. Iyengar, Sood and Lelkes further find that this partisan identity divide is growing far stronger than the same cleavage between Black and White or Protestant and

¹³ Berinsky, Adam J. “Rumors and Health Care Reform: Experiments in Political Misinformation.” *British Journal of Political Science* 47, no. 2 (April 2017): 241–62.

¹⁴ Iyengar, Shanto, and Sean J. Westwood. “Fear and Loathing across Party Lines: New Evidence on Group Polarization.” *American Journal of Political Science* 59, no. 3 (2015): 690–707.

¹⁵ Iyengar, Shanto, Gaurav Sood, and Yphatch Lelkes. “Affect, Not Ideology: A Social Identity Perspective on Polarization.” *Public Opinion Quarterly* 76, no. 3 (September 2012): 405–31. <https://doi.org/10.1093/poq/nfs059>.

Catholic Americans.¹⁶ This fits with later research by Iyengar et al. that shows that seventy percent of partisans show a consistent bias in favor of their own party on implicit bias tests.¹⁷



Noam Gidron, James Adams & Will Horne reach similar results in a more expansive study of Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (CSES) data on multiple elections in twenty western democracies. They find that Americans between 1996 and 2017 were relatively tepid towards their own parties, unusually hostile towards their opponents, and slightly above average in terms of overall affective polarization, as shown in their graph of comparative measures of affective polarization reproduced below.¹⁸ Gidron, Adams & Horne also conclude that out-party dislike has risen in the US to a greater extent than other countries observed.

¹⁶ Iyengar, Sood, and Lelkes, "Affect, Not Ideology"

¹⁷ Iyengar, Shanto, Yphtach Lelkes, Mathew Levendusky, Neil Malhotra, and Sean J. Westwood. "The Origins and Consequences of Affective Polarization in the United States." *Annual Review of Political Science* 2019 (2019): 129–46.

¹⁸ Gidron, Noam, James Adams, and Will Horne. *American Affective Polarization in Comparative Perspective*. Elements in American Politics. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020. <https://www.cambridge.org.libproxy.berkeley.edu/core/elements/american-affective-polarization-in-comparative-perspective/1E3584B482D51DB25FFF837A8044F204>.

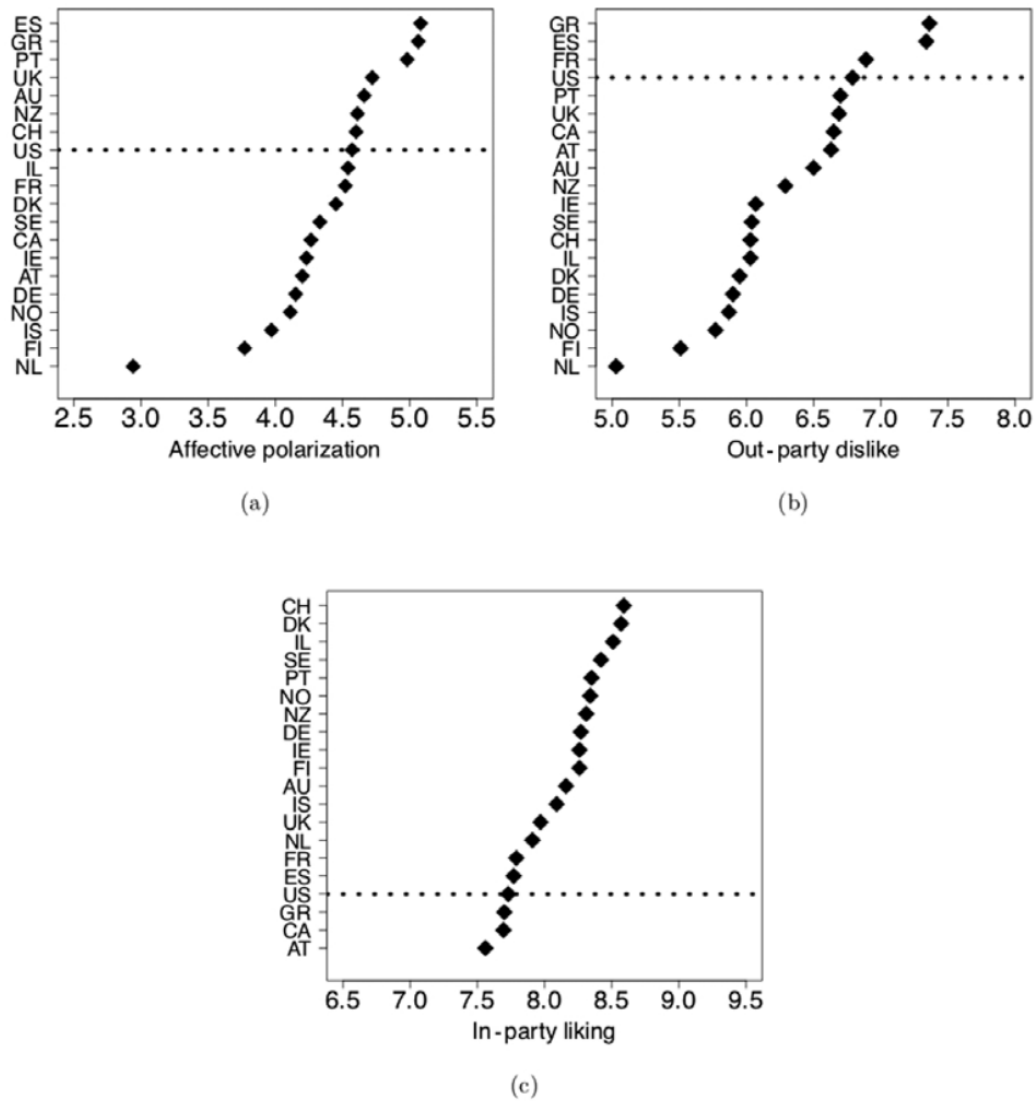


Figure 1 Cross-national variations in affective polarization and its components

Note: Figure 1 presents aggregate country averages over the 1996–2017 period covered in our data. Figure 1A presents country-level affective polarization averages, where higher values on the x-axis denote higher levels of affective polarization. Figure 1B presents country-level averages for out-party dislike, where higher values on the x-axis denote more intense out-party dislike. Figure 1C presents country-level average of in-party liking; higher values on the x-axis denote higher in-party liking. In the three sub-figures, the dashed lines highlight values for the United States. Abbreviations are as follows. AU: Australia; AT: Austria; CA: Canada; DK: Denmark; FI: Finland; FR: France; DE: Germany; UK: Great Britain; GR: Greece; IS: Iceland; IE: Ireland; IL: Israel; NL: Netherlands; NZ: New Zealand; NO: Norway; PT: Portugal; ES: Spain; SE: Sweden; CH: Switzerland; US: United States.

Lilliana Mason provides further evidence towards the separation of ideological and affective partisanship, by using American National Election Studies (ANES) data from 1972 to 2004 to show how partisan strength consistently had a stronger positive effect than ideological strength on the bias between parties, political activism, and anger felt towards the opposite party's candidate, while sorting (a measure that combined the two) had the strongest effect overall.¹⁹

The literature suggests three main causes for this growth in division: partisan sorting, media fragmentation, and campaign rhetoric. First, the sorting of Americans into parties that closely correspond with their ideological views over the last fifty years has decreased the chance of partisans encountering those with differing views to theirs, causing them to make more generalizations about their rivals, identify more strongly with their party as a part of their socio-economic and racial identity, and react more emotionally to perceived threats to this identity.²⁰ Second, the proliferation of partisan specific news sources may create echo chambers where only one point of view is expressed or persuade viewers to adopt extreme views due to repetition.²¹ However, as we will see later, this effect is not as clearly established. Finally, increasingly negative campaign rhetoric may confirm and heighten feelings of interparty hostility, especially for those in battleground states who are most exposed to this sort of aggressive media.²²

The influence of this growing divide is very powerful by a wide variety of measures found throughout the relevant literature. In behavioral tests, Americans given the choice consistently reward copartisans over members of the opposition in decisions about who to hire, how to award financial compensation, and who to award academic scholarships to.²³ Lelkes and Westwood's experiment is an especially troubling example as, when given their choice of team members for a group task, participants chose copartisans ninety-four percent of the time and out-party players only fifty-four percent of the time despite this choice weakening the qualifications of their team. Furthermore, players openly admitted that partisan identification was the reason for their choice.²⁴ Partisans also increasingly assign positive traits to their own party while negatively stereotyping the opposition as 'selfish' or 'close-minded' among other traits.²⁵ Americans have also become increasingly unhappy to see their child marry someone from the opposite party and unlikely to date, marry, or even befriend someone from the

¹⁹ Mason, "I Disrespectfully Disagree"

²⁰ Iyengar et al., "The Origins and Consequences of Affective Polarization"; Mason, "I Disrespectfully Disagree"

²¹ Abramowitz, Alan I., and Steven W. Webster. "Negative Partisanship: Why Americans Dislike Parties But Behave Like Rabid Partisans." *Political Psychology* 39, no. S1 (February 2018): 119–35. <https://doi.org/10.1111/pops.12479>.

²² Iyengar et al., "The Origins and Consequences of Affective Polarization"; Mason, "I Disrespectfully Disagree"; Iyengar, Sood & Lelkes, "Affect, Not Ideology"

²³ Iyengar et al., "The Origins and Consequences of Affective Polarization"

²⁴ Lelkes & Westwood, "The Limits of Partisan Prejudice"

²⁵ Iyengar, Sood, and Lelkes, "Affect, Not Ideology"

opposite party themselves.²⁶ Thus, affective polarization represents the convergence of a political and social divide that Americans are increasingly unwilling to cross.²⁷

²⁶ Iyengar, Sood, and Lelkes, "Affect, Not Ideology"; Iyengar et al., "The Origins and Consequences of Affective Polarization"

²⁷ Iyengar and Westwood, "Fear and Loathing across Party Lines"