

State Labor Policy Working Paper Series: Proportional Representation and an Electoral Voice for Labor

The Problem: The Structural Barriers to Worker Representation and Economic Justice in American Elections

Built on a foundation of single-member districts and plurality voting, the American system systematically marginalizes diverse political viewpoints, including those advocating for labor rights and economic redistribution. This winner-take-all approach creates what scholars call Duverger's Law: a gravitational pull toward two dominant parties that squeeze out alternative voices and force voters into an artificial binary choice that rarely reflects their actual policy preferences (Santucci, 2022).

The consequences for pro-labor policies are profound. When working people's political options are restricted to two major parties the range of acceptable debate on economic issues narrows considerably. Policies that enjoy substantial public support and would stand to benefit the working class, including universal healthcare, stronger union protections, progressive taxation, and paid family leave, struggle to gain legislative traction despite polling majorities because neither major party faces a credible electoral threat, where the failure to enact working class priorities would result in their defeat.

The result is a political system where working-class Americans exercise virtually no influence over policy outcomes. Empirical studies confirm that ordinary citizens "have little or no independent influence on policy at all," while elected officials give "no weight" to the views of constituents in the bottom third of the income distribution (Gilens & Page, 2014; Bartels, 2008; Stephanopoulos, 2015). As Lani Guinier argued, winner-take-all systems systematically exclude minority viewpoints and create what she called "the tyranny of the majority," where those who lose elections lose all representation and political voice (Kennedy, 1993). This has bred a profound sense of disillusionment amongst working class Americans, driving down their participation in electoral politics.

Geographic distortions compound these representational failures. Even without deliberate gerrymandering the geographic distribution of the American population ensures that rural votes carry disproportionate weight in legislative bodies. This structural bias particularly disadvantages racial minorities, young workers, and union members, who concentrate in cities (Rodden, 2019). This is clear in states like Ohio, where aggressive gerrymandering has produced state legislatures where anti-labor Republicans hold supermajorities despite receiving roughly half the statewide vote, and, as a result, significant labor-friendly legislation has been blocked without meaningful electoral accountability. It is also possible that there are a number of issues that could unify rural and urban voters, but the structure of the contemporary party system disincentivizes the generation and articulation of ideas that could bridge this cleavage.

The result is a political landscape where labor unions find themselves trapped in increasingly unfavorable internal party coalitions. Within the Democratic Party, unions must compete for influence against corporate donors, tech industry interests, and other actors whose economic priorities often diverge sharply from those of working-class members. Without external pressure from a labor or social democratic party that might pull it leftward, labor's leverage within the Democratic coalition has steadily eroded since the New Deal era: unions can threaten to withhold campaign contributions or volunteer efforts, but they cannot credibly threaten to support a party that better represents their interests, because no such party can viably emerge in the existing electoral system (Schlozman, 2015). The “spoiler effect” ensures that any attempt to build independent working-class political formations risks splitting the anti-Republican vote and producing worse outcomes for workers. It is also worth noting that the nascent effort to organize a union-friendly faction within the Republican Party has been drowned out by that party's more established interests.

The Solution: Proportional Systems and an Electoral Voice for Labor

Proportional representation at the state and local levels offers a structural remedy to the representational failures that undermine working-class political power in the United States. Unlike winner-take-all systems that award all representation to plurality winners, proportional systems allocate legislative seats based on the share of votes each party receives. A party winning 15 percent of the vote would receive approximately 15 percent of the seats, a party winning 35 percent would receive roughly 35 percent, and so forth. This fundamental shift in electoral logic—from geographic monopolies to proportional allocation—creates the conditions for viable multi-party democracy in state legislatures and city councils, including the potential emergence of a labor or workers' party that could represent working-class interests without the constraints imposed by forced coalition inside the two-party system (Drutman, 2025).

What is Proportional Representation?

Proportional representation (PR) systems come in many shapes and sizes. But they're characterized by two basic elements: multi-member districts (rather than single-winner constituencies) and allocation of legislative seats in proportion to a party's vote share (rather than first-past-the-post). At the state level, instead of small districts electing one representative, voters might be divided into large districts that elect five, seven, or more representatives. Similarly, at the local level, voters might elect city councilors from multi-member borough-wide or city-wide districts rather than single-member individual wards.

The way in which seats are allocated in proportion to vote share varies, but three basic systems predominate:

- The most common variant, encompassing roughly 80% of PR systems around the world, is *party list voting*. Seats are allocated to political parties in proportion to their vote share. For example, if the Democrats win 60% of the vote in a five-member district, they win three of the five seats. There are “open” and “closed” variants, the major difference being whether voters can prioritize specific candidates within the party lists (Benadè et al., 2023).
- The *mixed-member system* combines single-member districts and proportional voting. In its original German incarnation, half of the legislature is chosen in single-member district elections, and the other half are selected in a party list vote. In other words, voters cast ballots both for their local, individual representative and for a political party.

- *Ranked choice systems*, also known as Single Transferrable Voting (STV), are the most common form of PR in the United States. Voters rank candidates in order of preference. If their preferred candidate is eliminated or is elected with surplus votes, their vote is “transferred” according to their alternative preferences. The ultimate goal is to mitigate the problem of votes “wasted” on very high or very low vote-getting candidates — and, in so doing, to account for voters’ second choices.

These three models represent the most common approaches, but proportional representation systems can be adapted to local contexts in countless ways—varying district magnitude, electoral thresholds, ballot structure, and other technical features. This report does not advocate for any single PR model as universally superior. Rather, the choice among PR systems should emerge from local coalition-building processes, reflecting each jurisdiction’s particular political culture, existing institutions, and the priorities of reform advocates.

Why Adopt Proportional Representation?

These seemingly technical changes have profound political consequences: they eliminate the spoiler effect that keeps third parties trapped in irrelevance. Workers who prefer a labor party’s platform no longer face a forced choice between “wasting” their vote and settling for a candidate whose primary appeal is simply not being too extreme, rather than any positive commitment to worker-friendly policies. If 12 percent of voters support a labor party, that party wins approximately 12 percent of the seats and gains a foothold from which to build support and influence policy.

Multi-member districts address the geographic distortions that currently disadvantage urban workers and communities of color in state legislatures. By creating larger districts that elect multiple representatives, proportional systems eliminate the possibility of “packing” opposition voters into a few overwhelmingly Democratic districts or “cracking” them across many Republican-leaning districts—the core strategies of partisan and racial gerrymandering. Proportional systems’ relative immunity to gerrymandering could prove even more salient in the wake of the Supreme Court’s gutting of key Voting Rights Act protections in *Louisiana v. Callais*, which has precipitated a spate of redistricting efforts in several statehouses to draw maps intended to dilute the political power of communities of color (Legal Defense Fund, 2026).

To return to the example of Ohio, where Republicans hold supermajorities in the state legislature despite competitive statewide elections, the implementation of proportional representation would see dramatically different outcomes. Pro-worker votes, which in the case of Ohio typically reside in the state’s cities, would no longer be wasted in 80-20 landslides, and rural Republican votes would contribute to representation rather than producing supermajorities that exceed the margin of victory. The result would be state legislative bodies that more accurately reflect actual voter preferences across the state, likely shifting the profile of legislators and creating new possibilities for pro-worker state legislation on minimum wages, paid leave, worker misclassification, and union rights.

The emergence of a viable labor or workers’ party in state legislatures and city councils under proportional representation would fundamentally alter the strategic landscape for working-class politics. Even a party commanding just 8-12 percent of the vote could win enough seats to become pivotal in coalition formation, wielding influence far beyond its raw numbers. European examples illustrate this dynamic: in Portugal, the Left Bloc, operating outside the Socialist Party

government, provided external support on key votes while maintaining independence and the ability to criticize government compromises. This arrangement gave left parties leverage to push the Socialist government toward more progressive policies without requiring them to join the government and share responsibility for neoliberal measures (Meyer & Grassman, 2021). A similar dynamic in American state legislatures could allow a labor party to support Democratic governance on some measures while maintaining independence to advocate forcefully for working-class priorities and oppose compromises that favor business interests over worker protections. At the municipal level, labor parties on city councils could push for living wage ordinances, tenant protections, and community benefit agreements while building the organizational infrastructure to contest state legislative races.

Beyond policy influence, proportional representation would enable more workers and union members to directly serve as elected representatives. Under winner-take-all systems, working-class candidates often struggle to compete against better-funded opponents or gain major party nominations, resulting in legislatures dominated by lawyers, business owners, and other professional elites. PR's lower electoral thresholds mean that candidates with strong support from organized labor or working-class communities can win seats even with less access to traditional campaign resources. This direct representation matters not only for symbolic reasons but because worker-representatives bring firsthand knowledge of workplace conditions, economic insecurity, and enforcement gaps in labor law—perspectives often missing from policy debates dominated by professional politicians.

The psychological and organizational benefits of multi-party competition at state and local levels would extend beyond seat allocation. Labor unions and working-class organizations would gain a credible threat to deploy against parties who resist labor's agenda in state capitals and city halls: the possibility of endorsing and building a party that directly challenges existing parties for working-class votes. For example, this competitive pressure could force Democrats who do not currently prioritize labor and worker preferences to take labor's priorities more seriously or risk losing seats to a potential "Labor Party". Meanwhile, organizing efforts and workplace actions would have clearer pathways to political expression in state and local government. Rather than dissipating after brief moments of mobilization, movements like Fight for 15 or teachers' strikes could consolidate support into a durable party formation that contests state legislative and municipal elections and builds institutional power over time. The mere existence of a viable Labor Party alternative in state politics would shift the boundaries of acceptable political discourse, making previously "unrealistic" policies—single-payer healthcare at the state level, sectoral bargaining statutes, wealth taxes—part of mainstream legislative debate (Drutman, 2025).

The Challenge of Far-Right Representation

Critics reasonably note that proportional representation would likely increase representation for far-right parties, just as it increases representation for labor and left parties. European experience confirms this pattern: PR systems in countries like Germany, Sweden, and the Netherlands have seen far-right parties gain legislative seats that they likely would have been denied under winner-take-all systems. However, the same systems have developed institutional responses that limit far-right parties' ability to translate seats into policy influence. The practice of forming a cordon sanitaire, where mainstream parties refuse to enter coalitions with far-right parties, has, to date, isolated them from executive power at the national level in countries like Germany and France.

Moreover, winner-take-all systems offer no guarantee against success by the most extreme elements of a party: they simply channel it differently. In the United States, more conservative elements of the Republican Party have successfully moved to dominate the party from within, gaining far more power than they would likely wield as a separate party in a PR system. In the United Kingdom, despite its first-past-the-post system, the far-right Reform UK party appears poised to win a substantial number of seats in future elections, demonstrating that plurality voting merely alters the pathway to far-right representation rather than preventing it.

More fundamentally, the emergence of far-right parties reflects underlying social and economic grievances that do not disappear when electoral systems suppress their political expression. Rather than creating far-right sentiment, proportional systems make visible the political divisions that winner-take-all systems hide. This visibility can be politically healthy: it forces mainstream parties to address the economic insecurity, geographic inequality, and political alienation that fuel far-right support, rather than allowing these grievances to fester unacknowledged. In PR systems, the rise of far-right parties should offer an incentive for a labor party or alternative party formations to offer voters an alternative to far-right economic nationalism, by articulating ideas on trade, industrial policy, labor rights, and social protection that go beyond the mainstream and address material concerns without scapegoating immigrants or minorities. In many cases, European parties have failed to do this, but this is likely a better reflection of institutional capacity and party histories than the electoral system in which they operate.

Proportional Representation in the United States, then and now

Far from being impractical or unprecedented, proportional representation has a substantial American history spanning nearly half a century, one in which organized labor was often a driving force behind its adoption.

From 1915 to 1961, twenty-four American cities adopted proportional representation (PR) voting systems, demonstrating that proportional representation can exist in the United States and create meaningful opportunities for labor representation. These experiments emerged in cities where existing parties had split and where out-party coalitions sought to break one-party dominance. In New York City, PR adoption in 1936 was supported by a coalition including the American Labor Party, Teachers Unions, the Central Trades and Labor Council, good-government groups, and far-left parties, who supported the measure as a means of overcoming city corruption. This pattern repeated across the country. In the city's first PR election in 1937, minor parties jumped from 7.5% of the vote and 0% of council seats to 37.5% of the vote and 30.8% of seats, with the American Labor Party, amongst other left-wing parties supported by working class citizens, winning representation. In Cincinnati, labor representation became an accepted feature from the start, with union representatives consistently winning seats and both major parties endorsing labor candidates. While PR was eventually repealed in most cities by the 1960s amid Cold War anti-communist sentiment and changes in labor's proclivity towards the system, its historical success in enabling working-class political representation demonstrates that systems employing proportional representation have and can function effectively in American cities. More to the point, the operation of these systems created space for working class representation through coalition-building and policy advancement.

Portland, Oregon provides the first contemporary American example of this historical pattern repeating itself: working-class and community organizations once again mobilizing to adopt proportional representation as a tool for breaking through exclusionary political structures.

In November 2022, Portland voters passed Measure 26-228, replacing the city's century-old commission system with a structure featuring four multi-member districts electing three councilors each through ranked-choice voting. The reform emerged from years of organizing by community groups, particularly organizations representing communities of color, who documented how Portland's at-large, winner-take-all system had produced a City Council where “the vast majority of Portland's council members have been white men and have come from... areas where residents are far more likely to have a higher income and own (rather than rent) their homes” (Kiefel, Carter & Fung, 2024).

Portland's model combines multi-member districts with ranked-choice ballots, allowing voters to rank individual candidates rather than party lists while still achieving proportional outcomes. The lower threshold for victory—candidates needed roughly 25% rather than 50%+1 to win seats—created viable paths for candidates with strong support from organized labor and working-class communities who would have struggled under winner-take-all rules.

The results from Portland's first election under the new system in 2024 vindicated the reform's promise. Over one hundred candidates filed to run in the new council elections. With so many names and newly drawn districts, the campaign infrastructure unions could mobilize became a decisive advantage. SEIU Local 49's approach was notable for how it used the endorsement process to foreground accountability to workers. In its questionnaire, the union referenced a dispute with a city contractor accused of violating Portland's labor-peace policy with respect to a specific contractor, and pressed candidates on how they would ensure its enforcement. By linking its endorsement to the concrete implementation of a worker-protection policy, SEIU signaled a shift toward a more programmatic, accountability-based approach. Seven of the councillors elected ultimately received SEIU's endorsement. The newly elected council achieved remarkable representational gains: 50% women and 42% people of color.¹ While this was an explicitly non-partisan election, it is notable that one quarter of the elected representatives were members of the Democratic Socialists of America, which shows the potential for electoral reform to create opportunities for viable third parties.

The Portland case illustrates several transferable lessons for advocates of working-class political representation at state and local levels. First, proportional systems can take multiple institutional forms, with STV offering a particularly promising model for American contexts where voters may be skeptical of party-list systems. Second, the organizing strategy matters as much as the institutional design: Portland's reform succeeded because community organizations invested years in leadership development, research, and coalition-building (Kiefel, Carter & Fung, 2024). This is a space in which organized labor, especially union locals, can play an integral role. Third, proportional representation's benefits extend beyond descriptive representation to enable the election of candidates with explicitly pro-worker platforms who face credible opposition from business interests, which is the exact dynamic that FPTP systems suppress through the “spoiler effect”. While Portland's reform is too recent to evaluate its policy

¹ These results align with modeling at the federal level, which projects that a multi-member, proportional House of Representatives would result in greater “power-to-elect” for Black, Asian-American and Hispanic voters (FairVote and More Equitable Democracy, 2024).

impacts, the composition of the council suggests that workers and labor unions now have more avenues for direct representation in municipal government in ways the previous system prevented.

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