

## **RENEWING U.S. POLITICAL REPRESENTATION: LESSONS FROM EUROPE AND U.S. HISTORY**

**RACHEL KLEINFELD WITH RICHARD YOUNGS AND JONAH BELSER**

Democracy in the United States faces a dilemma. Voters feel increasingly unrepresented by both of the dominant parties. Yet these parties now control large swaths of uncompetitive seats at the state and national levels, reducing options for new voices. Obvious solutions, such as increasing party representativeness or creating a third party, may increase polarization, which would likely impede governance. Examples of party revitalization in contemporary Europe and from U.S. history suggest that locally grounded movements that reinvigorate political competitiveness may offer a path forward.

### **The Challenge of Unrepresentative Parties**

**Unrepresentative parties frustrate voters:** A growing plurality of Americans identify as independents (44 percent) rather than Republicans (22 percent) or Democrats (32 percent). Since 2013, a majority of Americans have believed political parties are so unrepresentative that a third party is needed.

**Divided electorate stymied by safe seats:** Despite an extremely divided electorate, 95 percent of Americans live in safe districts where one party's national candidate won by more than 5 percent. In 2014, 43 percent of state legislative elections were not even contested by both major parties.

**Polarization undermines easy solutions:** U.S. polarization, once confined to party activists, has spread to ordinary voters with such intensity that a third party would likely deepen partisan polarization or populism, while increasing gridlock. Such gridlock deepens Americans' dissatisfaction with their parties.

### **Avenues to Reinvigorating Party Representativeness**

- The contemporary experiences of France, Spain, and the United Kingdom (UK), and accounts of the United States during the Gilded Age, suggest that revitalizing parties and creating new parties can foster greater representativeness within two-party systems.
- However, in highly polarized countries, such as Spain and the UK, party revitalization has deepened polarization.
- To energize voters while reducing polarization, movements should follow the lead of France and the historical United States by moving voters away from traditional left/right issues toward new choices, such as open versus closed societies or pragmatic versus ideological policymaking.
- Revitalization movements succeed by signaling a radical departure from the establishment. Anti-establishment rhetoric can acknowledge populist anger, while directing voters away from left/right polarization.
- Grassroots organizing around concrete local issues lends credibility to calls for tangible change and allows movements to bring new, less partisan constituencies into politics.
- Successful organizing requires sophisticated data and technology, although such organizing often appears spontaneous and distinct from the activities of the major parties.
- Revitalizing U.S. politics requires changing electoral structures to open races to greater competition. For example, ranked-choice voting, open primaries, and fusion voting could enable greater representativeness.
- Nonpartisan elections appear to be an attractive way to reduce polarization. Yet they may depress turnout and benefit wealthier, more well-known candidates. Structural changes should retain partisan identifiers, while enabling a broader range of candidates to expand representativeness and increase competition.

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