



Rules of the Game: Congressional Representation Under a Theoretic Election Reform

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Research Question

How different would the partisan make-up of the House of Representatives be if the electoral rules were changed to a proportional representation system by state?

Foundational Research

1. Proportional representation systems increase voter turnout.

Voter turnout is lower in single member districts than in a proportional representation system (Rainey 2014; Blais 1990). One explanation for this is voters in safe districts (a district where party influence is strong enough to almost guarantee a winner) don't feel the need to vote (Blais 2006). However, a proportional representation system allows voters in a minority bloc to still obtain representation, thus encouraging all people to vote.

2. A proportional representation system would remove the controversial process of gerrymandering.

In a single-member district system, state legislatures determine the geographical boundaries of a district. Since many districts are drawn according to party lines, this often leads to disenfranchisement of voters in the minority party (Bervoets 2010). A proportional representation system doesn't use districts; therefore, gerrymandering would cease to exist.

3. Proportional representation increases diversity in the legislature.

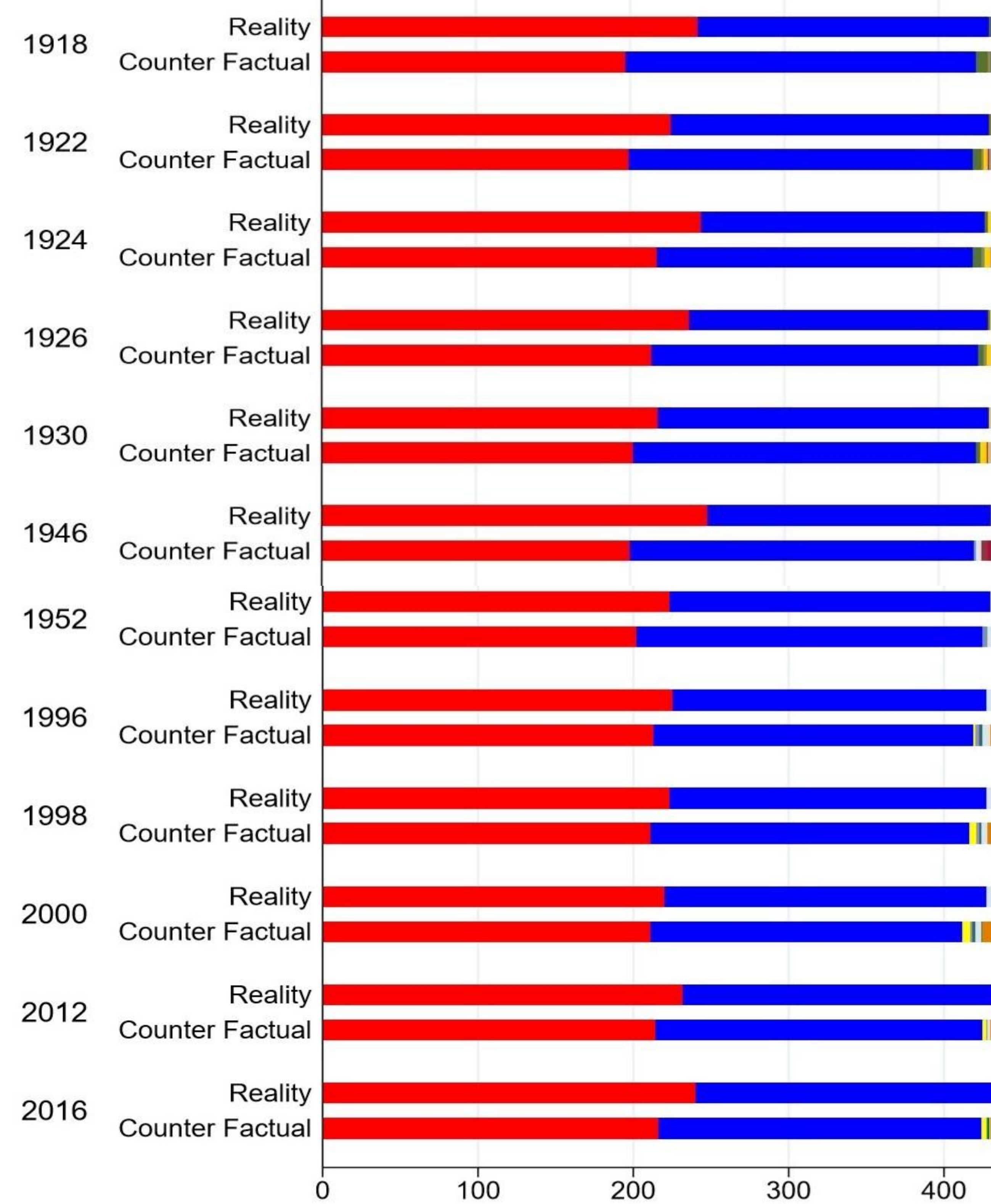
Third parties are better represented in a proportional representation system. This is because proportion representation allows for parties to be represented even if they don't reach a majority. Voters are inclined to vote for the party they agree with rather than one of the two major parties. Women and ethnic minorities are also all better represented in a proportional representation system. This is primarily because "parties can be encouraged to craft a balanced party list," including all cultural and social interest of a society (Johnson-Myers 2016).

Hypothesis

Hypothesis 1: A proportional representation system for the House of Representatives would lead to a more even partisan split in state representatives.

Hypothesis 2: A proportional representation system for the House of Representatives will lead to more representation of third parties.

Results



On average, the party who won the election in a given year would lose 26.35 seats. On the other hand, the minority party would gain an average of 19.62 and third parties would gain an average of 9.15.

Of the 53 elections in the data, 12 (22.6%) would have resulted in a different party gaining the majority. These years are represented on the graphs above.

Methodology

For my research, I used data from the Constituency-Level Elections Archive (CLEA) for the years 1912-2016. For each year, the CLEA provided each candidate that ran in a district, their party, the number of votes the candidate received, if the candidate won the seat, and the total votes in the election.

From these data, I was able to determine the amount of votes that each party received in each state. With this, I calculated the percentage of votes that each party received. I then reallocated the seats to each party by state to match the proportion of votes that they received.

Discussion

The changes from this electoral change are significant. Although many of the most popular bills in the 20th century (Civil Rights Act, Social Security Act, and Clean Air Act to name a few) would still have passed under this new system, the Affordable Care Act would have been defeated. However, the composition of the House greatly affects whether a bill will even be introduced and what the contents would be. Most likely, these bills would have been modified under the alternative election system.

Bringing about this change would have numerous benefits. First, the House of Representatives would more accurately represent the American population. As seen through this study, the current American election disproportionately negative impact on the minority parties in a state. For example, Democrats made up 32.9% of the vote on Alabama, but they held only 1 out of 7 (14.3%) of the Alabama congressional seats. Also, a proportional representation system would eliminate gerrymandering. Although I can't factor in changes in voter behavior for this study, a proportional representation system would also increase voter turnout and the amount of third parties.

References

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