



Fusion Voting: A common sense solution to America's polarization problem

The American two-party political system is broken. Republicans and Democrats each see the other as mortal enemies, not merely political opponents. This leads them to focus on winning power at all costs, not on solving the nation’s problems. Bad-faith actors also exploit this partisan division, challenging democratic norms, spreading disinformation, and aggressively and even violently ignoring the rule of law. We have a system that rewards extremism and radicalization.

The majority of voters, however, reject extremism, are [increasingly frustrated](#) with the two major parties, and are eager for more choices. Yet citizens are forced to sort themselves into just one of two warring camps every time they vote. In a country of 330 million people, it’s unrealistic to expect everyone to fit into two boxes. New parties would expand and enrich our political landscape, but without rules changes that remove the unconstitutional constraints placed on them by major parties, the new parties – which provide more choices for voters and lead to more cross-partisan cooperation on policy solutions – simply cannot thrive. Fusion voting is the missing link.

What is fusion voting?

Fusion voting, once used in every state in the nation, is a practice in which a candidate can appear on the ballot as the nominee of more than one party. This easy-to-understand sample ballot shows how a new party, with its own platform and set of values, “fuses” with a major party in support of the same candidate:

| Congressional District 3 | |
|--------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| Vote for 1 | |
| <input type="radio"/> | Claire Farmer (Major Party A) |
| <input type="radio"/> | Alex Miller (Major Party B) |
| <input type="radio"/> | Claire Farmer (United Wisconsin) |

| Hypothetical Election Result | |
|------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| Farmer wins 51% - 49% | |
| <input type="radio"/> | Farmer 47% (Major Party A) |
| <input type="radio"/> | Miller 49% (Major Party B) |
| <input type="radio"/> | Farmer 4% (United Wisconsin) |

Candidates nominated by the two major parties are listed on the first two lines. On the third line, Farmer is listed for a second time, as the nominee for a new party (here, “United Wisconsin”). In a close race, the votes on the United Wisconsin line could make the difference between a win and a loss for Farmer. Under fusion, new parties can become meaningful players, as candidates and both major parties look to appeal to new party voters and hope to secure new party nominations in the future.

Reinstating fusion voting is a common sense solution to counter the extremism and polarization ingrained in our political system. Fusion voting benefits:

- **Voters:** Fusion voting gives voters the ability to vote for a major party candidate on a party line that best matches their values. “Vote for the candidate you prefer under the party label closest to your values” is the traditional pitch of organizers in a fusion-legal regime. The voter neither “wastes” their vote on a new party candidate who has no chance of winning, nor “spoils” the election by unintentionally helping

their less preferred major party candidate. Fusion also allows voters to vote for a major party candidate they like (or can tolerate), without having to signal support for a major party they don't support.

- **New Parties:** Fusion voting gives new parties more influence over the political agenda by forcing major party candidates to appeal to the voters represented by that new party.
- **Candidates:** Fusion voting produces more votes for major party candidates who appeal to multiple constituencies and are thus able to secure additional party nominations.

Why can't the two major parties fix our democracy under the current system?

Parties are critical to a functioning democracy. *Political Science for Dummies* notes that "Parties are found in every working democracy...they're necessary to organize participation, aggregate interest, and serve as the link between society and the government." Most people don't have time to research every candidate and policy issue; parties help individuals vote efficiently and engage in politics. But the two major parties are trapped in an ever-escalating hyper-partisan cycle that rewards polarization and punishes compromise. Primaries, gerrymandering, geographic self-sorting, and news and social media bubbles keep us locked in partisan warfare. The system won't self-correct by exhorting politicians to be more reasonable or to listen to the other side. Change will only come if the rules are structurally altered to incentivize cooperation and compromise.

Fusion voting would help change current incentives. In this era of political extremes, fusion would serve as a moderating force. As this reform enables new parties to play a constructive role in our politics, more parties are incentivized to emerge, including those that represent the political center.

Imagine a "centrist" or "rule of law" party that does not run its own slate of candidates, but reviews the records of the two major party candidates and nominates the one with the clearest commitment to cross-partisan cooperation, problem solving, and the rule of law. It wouldn't take long for the nomination of this new party to be an important, even decisive, factor in many elections. This, in turn, could encourage more compromise and productivity in policy making as the major parties compete for those voters. Ultimately, fusion voting would enable parties representing a range of viewpoints to emerge, as is the case in most healthy democracies. More parties would enrich the political discourse and move us beyond just red versus blue. For example, in Connecticut and New York, fusion voting has produced durable and constructive smaller parties, like the Conservative Party on the right and Working Families Party on the left.

Fusion voting is a meaningful and winnable reform

Fusion voting is not only viable, it used to be a widespread and crucial feature of American politics. In the 19th and early 20th centuries, smaller and emerging party voters consistently leveraged fusion voting to advance their agendas. (It was fusion parties that helped to form the Republican Party, right here in Wisconsin!) But the two major parties banned fusion in order to stamp out competition and consolidate their power. Most legal scholars believe this was, and is, an [unconstitutional](#) limit on the freedoms of speech, association, and assembly that all citizens should enjoy. As a practical matter, the fusion ban has made it impossible for new voices and parties to exercise real power and influence over the political agenda. This in turn has helped cement the dysfunctional, zero-sum nature of the two-party system and the dysfunctional government that it produces.

Unlike some proposed election reforms, fusion is a winnable solution to our polarization problem. Because bans on fusion voting were passed at the state level, removing those bans requires state action only, bypassing the gridlocked U.S. Congress.