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What We Know About Fusion Voting

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Political Reform

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Key Takeaways

- Fusion ballots are not more confusing for voters than regular ballots and can provide voters with more information about candidates, give a more nuanced view of the electorate, and increase turnout under certain circumstances.
- Fusion voting creates incentives for minor parties to form, develop a brand, and invest in their organizational and mobilization infrastructure, but there remain many impediments to their growth in single-member districts.
- Fusion voting systems give minor parties policy influence, particularly when they can withhold endorsements, credibly threaten to spoil a race, or contribute votes in excess of the margin of victory, especially in pivotal races. There are many cases illustrating the influence that fusion voting gives minor parties, but systematic and rigorous research is needed to assess the impact of fusion voting on the policymaking process.
- Fusion voting has the potential to disrupt pernicious patterns of polarization and moderate the party system, but these theories have not been tested in the context of contemporary political dynamics.

Introduction

The two-party system in the United States has resulted in a variety of political problems, including voter disaffection, polarization, and extremism and the flattening of electoral conflict into binary us-vs-them dynamics. Majorities of Americans disapprove of both the Democratic and Republican parties and think that a third party is needed.¹ And yet, new parties are unable to emerge and participate in politics in a meaningful way because of the country's electoral rules.

Fusion voting—the electoral practice of allowing minor parties to cross-nominate major party candidates on their ballot line—promises to alleviate many of these problems by injecting much-needed competition into elections, strengthening minor parties, and moderating the party system without necessarily changing the electoral system. It is a party-centered reform that seeks to strengthen minor parties and give them a way to participate in elections without spoiling races.

The current push for re-legalizing fusion voting is inspired by the role that minor parties played in the nineteenth century when fusion was legal across the country and that minor parties have continued playing in states where fusion is still practiced. Historical accounts and contemporary anecdotal evidence suggest that fusion voting could facilitate the formation of coalitions by giving minor parties a more prominent and influential role in elections and the policymaking process. As new minor parties emerge, they can become the political home of disaffected voters who no longer feel at home within their party but are not willing to vote for the opposite party. Fusion voting could also disrupt pernicious trends in American politics by giving voters more choices at the ballot box, allowing a way to express a more nuanced vote, and creating new partisan identities that could reduce animosity toward other parties.

“Fusion voting could facilitate the formation of coalitions by giving minor parties a more prominent and influential role in elections and the policymaking process.”

This report seeks to provide a comprehensive overview of fusion voting, how it is supposed to improve American politics, and the existing evidence about its

impact. Much of the evidence on the effects of fusion voting comes from historical and anecdotal case studies, and there is scarce systematic, empirical research on the topic. Where possible, the report brings in original analysis of elections in New York and Connecticut, the two states where fusion voting in its traditional disaggregated form is actively used, to complement existing research. Still, there are many open questions. Many of these questions about the impact of fusion voting will only be answerable once more states re-legalize fusion voting, but we identify various questions that can be addressed sooner.

After explaining how fusion works and tracing a brief history of fusion voting, this report focuses on three main areas: (1) the effects of fusion on voters and politicians, (2) the impact on parties and the party system, and (3) how fusion voting would affect broader political outcomes like polarization and deeper electoral reforms. We find some evidence that, under certain conditions, fusion voting provides voters with more information about candidates and is associated with greater voter turnout. We find no evidence that fusion ballots are confusing for voters. This is an area where survey experiments could help us improve our understanding of the effects of fusion ballots on voters in different contexts across the country.

We also find that fusion voting brings in more votes for the major parties, making some elections more competitive. Fusion creates incentives for the emergence of minor parties and investments in their organizational and mobilizational infrastructure. But minor parties that endorse major party candidates through fused ballots still face many impediments to their growth, such as a lack of direct access to office through their own candidates. Fusion also gives minor parties influence when minor parties are able to provide decisive votes in elections, although in New York and Connecticut this is increasingly rare as districts have become less competitive. Still, based on historical examples, we observe that the power of fusion voting in states like New York and Connecticut has come from minor parties contributing decisive votes in pivotal races for control of a legislative body or an office. We provide various examples of cases where minor parties, like the now defunct Liberal Party of New York and the active Working Families Party in New York and Connecticut, used their influence from fusion ballots to help pass legislation. More rigorous research is needed, however, to identify the impact of fusion voting on the ability of minor parties to influence policy.

Our assessment of the effects of fusion voting on system-wide outcomes—like the resurgence of a political center, reductions in polarization, or possibilities for deeper electoral reforms—is more speculative because fusion voting has not been tested in different contexts in the current political climate. We identify various mechanisms through which fusion voting could lead to these broader outcomes, but we are left with more questions than concrete answers. We conclude with a list of these questions and suggestions for how to approach them.

“Fusion voting is an expression of the right of political parties to come together and nominate candidates.”

While it is important to study the effects of fusion voting to understand how it works and what to expect out of it, it is equally important to remember that fusion voting is an expression of the right of political parties to come together and nominate candidates. There are normative reasons rooted in the First Amendment to advocate for the restoration of fusion voting as a way to allow parties to fully avail themselves of political rights.² As long as fusion voting does not infringe on the ability of other groups to exercise their rights—such as by making voting more difficult—it should be taken to represent a step forward in the ability of citizens to fully exercise their political rights, both individually as voters and collectively through parties.

How Fusion Works

Fusion voting refers to a system in which political parties can nominate a candidate eligible for the office, even if that candidate is the nominee of another party. Voters can cast their vote for a candidate under the party line they prefer, and each party’s votes are then pooled together in support of the common candidate. This practice allows minor parties to emerge, form strategic or practical alliances, introduce new perspectives, and give voters more choices while participating in elections in a meaningful way that does not spoil a race.³

For a minor party to nominate a major party candidate, it must first secure ballot access. New York, for example, has a more permissive system than Connecticut for allowing minor parties to emerge and fuse, as they can be formed with signature petitions to start nominating candidates from other parties in that same electoral cycle. In Connecticut, for a minor party to endorse another party’s candidate, it must have won at least 15,000 votes in a previous state election for governor, secretary of state, state treasurer, state comptroller, or attorney general.⁴ Minor parties can maintain ballot access for future elections by meeting certain criteria. In New York, a minor party must obtain the highest of either 2 percent of the vote share or 130,000 votes in races for governor and president every two years. In Connecticut, a minor party must obtain at least 1 percent of the total vote share cast for an office to maintain its status.

The fused candidacies appear on different lines or columns depending on the design of the ballot. In state elections in New York, for example, the candidates appear on different lines. The Seneca County sample ballot (Figure 1) shows various fusion candidacies for the 2022 election. At the governor level, Kathy Hochul appears on both the Democratic and Working Families lines, while Lee Zeldin appears on both the Republican and Conservative lines. In the congressional race, the Democratic candidate is not endorsed by other parties, whereas Republican Claudia Tenney also appears as a Conservative Party candidate.

Figure 1 | Example of a Fusion Ballot

Office	Governor and Lieutenant Governor (Vote for one)	Comptroller (Vote for one)	Attorney General (Vote for one)	United States Senator (Vote for one)	State Supreme Court Justice (Vote for up to three)	Representative in Congress (Vote for one)	State Senator (Vote for one)	Member of Assembly (Vote for one)	Coroner (Vote for up to two)	Town Justice (Vote for one)	
Democratic A	<input type="checkbox"/> Kathy C. Hochul Antonio Delgado	<input type="checkbox"/> Thomas P. DiNapoli	<input type="checkbox"/> Letitia A. James	<input type="checkbox"/> Charles E. Schumer	<input type="checkbox"/> Roman Moula	<input type="checkbox"/> Maroun Ajlaka	<input type="checkbox"/> Steven Holden	<input type="checkbox"/> Thomas F. O'Mara	<input type="checkbox"/> Philip A. Palmeseano	<input type="checkbox"/> Frank Elmerje, Jr.	<input type="checkbox"/> Eileen M. Schmidt
Republican B	<input type="checkbox"/> Lee Zeldin Alison Esposito	<input type="checkbox"/> Paul Rodriguez	<input type="checkbox"/> Michael Henry	<input type="checkbox"/> Joe Pirose	<input type="checkbox"/> James A. Vaccaro	<input type="checkbox"/> Jason L. Sobel	<input type="checkbox"/> Claudia Tenney	<input type="checkbox"/> Thomas F. O'Mara	<input type="checkbox"/> Philip A. Palmeseano	<input type="checkbox"/> Willie Mugello	<input type="checkbox"/> Frank Elmerje, Jr.
Conservative C	<input type="checkbox"/> Lee Zeldin Alison Esposito	<input type="checkbox"/> Paul Rodriguez	<input type="checkbox"/> Michael Henry	<input type="checkbox"/> Joe Pirose	<input type="checkbox"/> James A. Vaccaro	<input type="checkbox"/> Jason L. Sobel	<input type="checkbox"/> Claudia Tenney	<input type="checkbox"/> Thomas F. O'Mara	<input type="checkbox"/> Philip A. Palmeseano	<input type="checkbox"/> Willie Mugello	<input type="checkbox"/> Frank Elmerje, Jr.
Working Families D	<input type="checkbox"/> Kathy C. Hochul Antonio Delgado	<input type="checkbox"/> Thomas P. DiNapoli	<input type="checkbox"/> Letitia A. James	<input type="checkbox"/> Charles E. Schumer	<input type="checkbox"/> Roman Moula	<input type="checkbox"/> Maroun Ajlaka	<input type="checkbox"/> Steven Holden	<input type="checkbox"/> Thomas F. O'Mara	<input type="checkbox"/> Philip A. Palmeseano	<input type="checkbox"/> Willie Mugello	<input type="checkbox"/> Frank Elmerje, Jr.
LaRouche E				<input type="checkbox"/> Diane Sore							
Write-In											

Official Absentee Ballot for the General Election
November 8, 2022
County of Seneca
Ballot ID: 1001
Town of Covert
E.D. (v) 1
See instructions on the other side
Remember to vote both sides

A sample ballot from Seneca County, New York, showing how fusion was used for different offices in 2022.

Source: Official Website of Seneca County, New York

When votes are counted, each party’s votes are tallied up separately, and then the votes for the fused candidacies are aggregated for the final results. This makes it possible to distinguish the votes that minor parties get on their own line from those of the major party, unlike in aggregated fusion or “dual-labeling” systems where it’s impossible to disentangle the two. In doing so, disaggregated fusion voting—as practiced in New York and Connecticut—provides a clear picture of the electoral strength of minor parties.

A Brief History of Fusion Voting

Today, fusion voting is actively used only in New York and Connecticut in its disaggregated form and in Oregon and Vermont in its aggregated form. It is currently legal in Idaho and Mississippi but not used, and it remained legal but

rarely used in Delaware and South Carolina until it was banned in 2011 and 2022, respectively.⁵ California allows for fusion ballots only in presidential elections. But in the nineteenth century, fusion was more the norm than the exception, and it was instrumental to the success of minor parties and fluid coalitional politics that instigated important policy changes at the time.

Prior to the Civil War, fusion voting was believed to have empowered anti-slavery factions and the creation of parties like the Free Soil Party, the Liberty Party, and the Anti-Nebraska Party.⁶ Coalitions between these parties and anti-slavery politicians of the major parties helped push the abolitionist movement into the political limelight. After the Civil War came the heyday of fusion voting and minor parties. In the North, it was common for Democrats to fuse with the Populist Party to form a coalition of wage earners and farmers in opposition to Gilded Age Republicans.⁷ In the South, fusion helped formalize electoral coalitions between newly enfranchised African Americans and poor white farmers in opposition to the rich merchants that made up the Democratic Party.

During this period, minor parties were able to succeed at the ballot box. Peter Argersinger's account of the history of fusion voting in the late nineteenth century describes how minor parties "received at least 20 percent [of the popular vote] in one or more elections from 1874 to 1892 in more than half of the non-Southern states" and "held the balance of power at least once in every state but Vermont" from 1878 to 1892.⁸ The Populist Party, one of the most successful third parties of the time, emerged toward the end of this period, along with other influential minor parties like the Greenback Party and the Silver Party.

Bernard Tamas's analysis of the electoral performance of minor parties in congressional elections since 1870 offers a contrasting view—that fusion voting was widespread in only three national elections following the Civil War.⁹ Tamas also shows that in the nineteenth century, elections when fusion ballots were used the most did not correspond to elections when minor parties obtained the most votes. Based on this analysis, Tamas argues that it is not clear if fusion helped strengthen minor parties or if minor parties that were already strong are the ones more likely to cross-endorse a major party candidate.

Fusion voting eventually went out of use in most states at the turn of the century with the introduction of the Australian ballot—secret ballots printed by the state and not by the parties. With states now controlling access to the ballot, the major parties—particularly the Republican Party—were quick to enact ballot access qualifications and rules that effectively banned fusion, such as requiring that candidates are only listed once.

In some states, however, fusion voting continued or made brief comebacks. In New Jersey, Governor Woodrow Wilson reintroduced fusion ballots in 1911 in an effort to give voters more influence over elections, but they were once again banned in the 1920s.¹⁰ In New York, fusion ballots remained legal, and their legal

standing was solidified with judicial decisions in 1910 and 1911 and later with the Wilson-Pakula Act of 1947.

New York's continued use of fusion voting facilitated the organization of influential third parties in the state, including the American Labor Party in the 1930s, the Liberal Party in the 1940s, the Conservative Party in the 1960s, and the Working Families Party (WFP) in the late 1990s. At its apogee, the Liberal Party contributed a meaningful, often decisive, number of votes to both Democratic and Republican candidates in its efforts to "strengthen the liberal wings of both parties" and used that electoral strength to advocate for progressive policies in the state.¹¹ It was said that Democratic candidates could not win statewide races if the Liberal Party ran its own candidates and spoiled the election, while no Republican could win in New York City without the support of the Liberal Party.¹² The party achieved impressive political influence by providing the winning votes in various races at all levels of government. The Liberal Party's top-heavy leadership, shifting demographics, and excessive and often corrupt use of patronage ultimately spelled its demise, but the "year-round minor party" model it pioneered inspired the rise of other influential minor parties in the state, such as the Conservative Party and the WFP, which continue to participate actively in New York politics and have contributed to important policy decisions.

“Fusion would revitalize the political center and provide a partisan home to disaffected voters who no longer feel welcomed in the major parties.”

The next chapter of the history of fusion voting in the United States is currently being written as efforts are underway to relegalize fusion voting in various states. The impetus for bringing back fusion voting in states other than New York and Connecticut comes from the argument that fusion would revitalize the political center and provide a partisan home to disaffected voters who no longer feel welcomed in the major parties, particularly within the Republican Party.

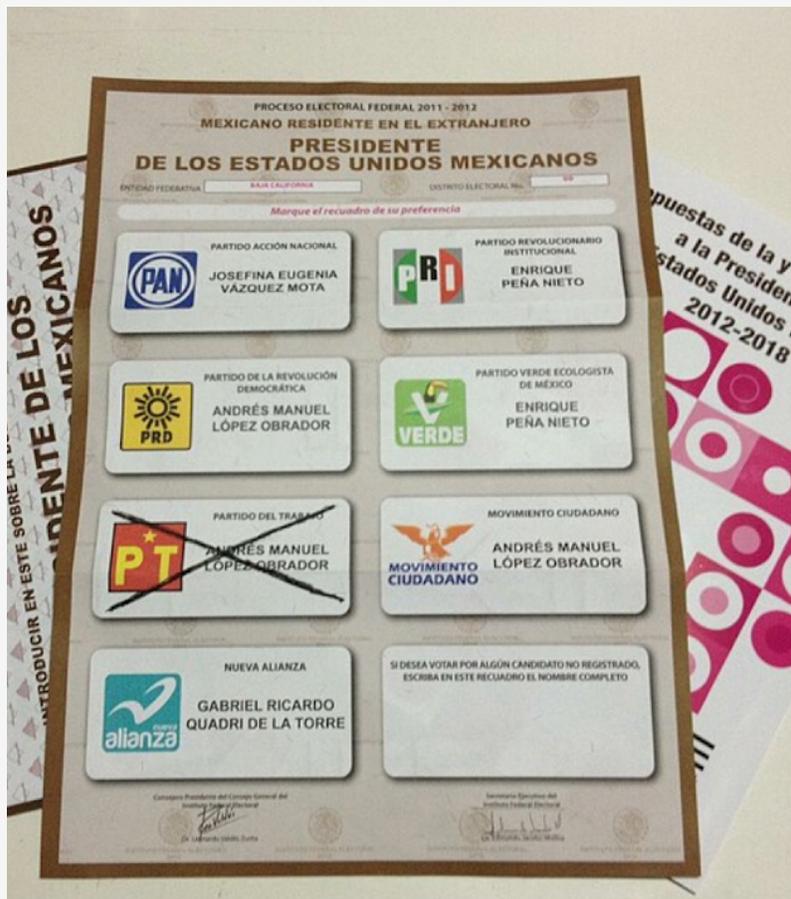
There are some parallels between the context that gave rise to the Liberal Party and the current political climate that give grounds to this argument, but some important differences will inflect the reemergence of fusion voting today with different electoral dynamics. As Daniel Soyer explains, the emergence of the Liberal Party happened at a time when the political system was in flux and soon to experience a partisan realignment; the Liberal Party positioned itself to catch disaffected Democrats "disgusted with their party's white supremacist and

machine wings and...liberal, internationalist [Republicans].”¹³ There are certainly many disaffected voters today, including many Republicans who are similarly disgusted with the extreme wing that has taken over the party, and many more voters who would appreciate more options on their ballots. The key difference today is that the major parties are extremely polarized in contrast to the blurred partisan lines of the mid-twentieth century when there were liberal Republicans and conservative Democrats and the Liberal Party could easily build its progressive coalition with these politicians. This means that fusion voting will probably facilitate new unlikely coalitions that are currently not represented by the left-right partisan dimensions, much like it did during other periods of high polarization.

→ FUSION AROUND THE WORLD

Fusion voting is used in other countries as part of formal electoral coalitions, allowing multiple parties to pool their votes. This is most common in races for single-winner offices, like the presidency, but forms of fusion do occur in legislative races in both majoritarian and proportional systems.

In Mexico, for example, candidates appear under different party labels, and votes for each party are counted separately by party prior to aggregating the total vote count for each candidate. Below is a sample ballot for the 2012 presidential election in which the Institutional Revolutionary Party and the Green Parties fused in support of Enrique Peña Nieto, and the Party of the Democratic Revolution, Labor Party, and Movimiento Ciudadano parties fused in support of Andrés Manuel López Obrador.



A ballot from Mexico showing how fusion was used for the 2012 presidential election.

Source: *Wikimedia Commons/Lguweqaakljgh*

In proportional electoral systems, parties can form formal alliances in the practice known as appurtenment.¹⁴ Each party list is shown separately on the ballot, but the votes for the parties under appurtenment are pooled together to determine the number of seats the coalition wins. Then, seats are allocated proportionally based on the individual vote shares of each party.

Methodology

In this report, we review existing evidence about fusion voting and its effects on political outcomes and provide an original analysis of how fusion has been used in New York and Connecticut. The limited use of fusion voting in contemporary elections makes it challenging to systematically study fusion voting and its impacts. While there are many historical accounts of fusion voting and minor parties in American politics, there is limited social science research on fusion voting, and we hope this report inspires more research interest in the subject.

In this report, we assess the core claims about fusion voting based on the limited available evidence and clarify the arguments of how fusion voting affects various outcomes of interest. We rely on academic research and commentary, our own quantitative analysis, and interviews with practitioners. The data used in the report comes from a variety of sources. Data on congressional elections comes from the [MIT Election Lab](#), and data for state-level legislative races was collected from each state's board of elections. Turnout data comes from the voting age population in each congressional district, obtained from the National Historical Geographic Information System and the U.S. Census Bureau.

We conducted 10 online interviews, focusing on the four states where fusion—disaggregated (full fusion) and aggregated (partial fusion, or dual-labeling)—is currently practiced: New York, Connecticut, Vermont, and Oregon. We interviewed expert practitioners across three areas of the political ecosystem: (1) third-party organizers, (2) affiliated interest group leaders, and (3) third-party elected officials. Interviewees were found through a combination of desk research, personal reference, and snowballing. One result of these limitations is that the interviewee pool over-represents members of the Working Families Party, self-identified progressives, and New Yorkers. However, our findings indicate many promising areas for future research, including expanding the study size with a larger sample and greater diversification.

Effects on Voters and Politicians

Fusion voting has the potential to facilitate voting and re-engage voters who feel disaffected with the current state of politics. Fusion voting can make it easier to vote thanks to outreach and educational efforts by minor parties and the additional information that fusion ballots provide about fused candidates. Fusion voting can also re-engage voters by providing a way for them to send a stronger message with their vote. As Working Families Party (WFP) co-founder Bob Master said, fusion allows voters to “vote their values,” which can make it easier for a voter to show up to the polls and vote for a candidate with whom they don’t align fully. By doing so, fusion voting can make elections more informative for parties and politicians.

In this section, we focus on the effects of fusion on voters and politicians. Regardless of broader political dynamics, we would expect fusion to give more information to voters and politicians and to be a tractable balloting system for voters. We explain how fusion voting provides more information to voters and present some evidence on the topic. We then show that fusion is associated with increases in voter turnout in certain circumstances and identify some research showing that fusion ballots are not confusing for voters. The empirical research on the micro-foundations of fusion voting—how it affects individual voters and politicians—is limited, and many questions remain unanswered. Yet, this is an area where clever surveys and polling experiments could quickly improve our understanding of fusion voting.

Fusion Ballots Provide More Information to Voters and Politicians

A benefit of fusion voting is that fusion ballots can convey more information about candidates and the electorate. When voters see the name of a candidate followed by a party label other than Democrat or Republican, they may infer additional characteristics about candidates and their policy positions and priorities. This additional information from the ballot can help candidates stand out and prove particularly useful for voters in races that do not receive much media coverage, such as local elections. For parties and politicians, the results of elections done with fusion ballots are more informative than elections done without fusion because the votes coming from fused lines can be indicative of a particular policy demand, a political message the electorate is trying to send, discontent among the electorate, and the electoral strength of minor parties.

The additional information provided by fusion’s cross-nominations can reduce the costs associated with voting. Voters who do not follow politics or do not have the bandwidth to research all the candidates that appear on the ballot may use

the fused ballot as a heuristic, choosing to vote for those candidates that have been endorsed by their preferred minor party. By simplifying the vote choice process, fusion voting may increase the likelihood that voters will turn out to vote. Barbara Dudley, a member of the Oregon WFP, summarized this function, saying that fusion “is not just about endorsements...it shows up on the ballot. So for the less engaged citizen who’s not reading the left press all the time or reading any press all the time, they see that somebody is a Democrat/Working Families [candidate] and somebody else is not...and that makes a difference to people.” Dudley elaborated that seeing the cross-nomination on the ballot gives “the signal that your kind of people, your tribe, approves of this person, and this person has agreed to support the issues that matter to your tribe...it is a good housekeeping seal of approval.”

For candidates, the minor party brand can also help them distinguish themselves and communicate their values. At the height of its power, the Liberal Party of New York was a highly coveted endorsement because its attendant party label helped candidates convey liberal values to voters. When Robert F. Kennedy’s liberal credentials were in question during his run for the New York Senate seat in 1964, the Liberal Party brand helped make the case to voters that Kennedy was committed to liberal causes.¹⁵ When Republican candidates wanted to signal progressive values to be able to win citywide races in New York City, the Liberal Party brand gave them “the progressive imprimatur that was absolutely imperative if they hoped to capture the mayoralty.”¹⁶

For fusion ballots to provide additional information to voters, minor parties need to develop a strong and recognizable brand. The experience of parties using independent-related labels illustrates the power of a strong brand. In several of our interviews, it came up that one of the reasons why the Independence Party in New York was so successful was because it had an appealing brand, and voters wanted to identify themselves as independent on the ballot. Joe Dinkin, a WFP campaign director, said that “the number of votes that the Independence Party in New York used to get is some evidence [of the power of] the brand of the Independence Party, even if it did not [reflect] the reality of what the organization was.” Dudley agreed with this argument, explaining that in Oregon, “there were many eras and many races where the Independent Party was the most sought-after line because of their name and only that.” Candidates also often seek the nomination of minor parties with descriptive names to use the minor party brand as a way to signal their policy priorities. Andrew Cuomo, for instance, ran with the Women’s Equality Party when running for governor of New York to ostensibly signal his support of the Women’s Equality Act; George Pataki ran with the “Tax Cut Now” Party to signal that he would reduce taxes if elected; and many New York Republicans have run with the ballot line of the “Right to Life” Party to communicate their opposition to abortion.¹⁷

Party brands must also be consistent to be informative to voters: The candidates endorsed by a party must deliver policies aligned with what the brand promised if

elected.¹⁸ Doing otherwise risks diluting the brand of the party, making it less useful for voters when selecting candidates.¹⁹ Minor parties that offer a cohesive programmatic platform and choose candidates based on that platform, will have an easier time building a consistent brand—in turn, making it more likely that they survive through more election cycles—than minor parties that do not offer a clear platform. The experience of the Liberal Party is instructive. Karen Scharff, a founding member of the WFP and former leader of Citizen Action of New York, said that the Liberal Party “got very confused and kept changing [what it stood for] over time, and nobody knew what it was anymore.” Eventually, the party became a “patronage mill,” as described by Bill Lipton, another WFP co-founder, and ultimately disappeared.

We know of only one empirical study that tests whether fusion ballots help voters learn about the ideological positions of parties. Eric Loepp and Benjamin Melusky carried out a survey experiment that presented participants with ballots that had different combinations of fused candidacies or no fused candidacies at all.²⁰ The experimental nature of their study allowed them to compare the perceived party ideological positions between participants who used fused ballots and those who did not have fused ballots: If a fused ballot conveyed information that helped voters update their beliefs about a party’s ideology, then participants who used a fused ballot would have different perceptions of a party’s ideology than those who did not. Loepp and Melusky, however, find no evidence that fusion ballots have any effect on the perceived ideology of major or minor parties among participants.²¹

The absence of a significant effect is largely due to voters already having a clear idea of the party’s ideology, so new information does not alter their beliefs. This suggests that the power of the minor party brand comes from seeing the party label prior to voting during the campaign and not from seeing the party label on the ballot itself. In their experiment, participants rated the Republican and Conservative parties as similarly conservative, so whether they appeared fused or not fused on a ballot did not affect perceptions of where they stood. Indeed, the only scenario in which fusion had a small effect on perceptions of party ideology was when a major party was fused with a relatively unknown minor party, and voters could update their perceptions based on new information.²² Whether these findings generalize to other settings or to actual elections—when parties are actively campaigning and the media spotlight is on candidates—is an open question.

“In a two-party system where voters often have to engage in strategic voting, these results do not indicate if voters voted begrudgingly for the candidate, if voters agree entirely with the platform of the party, or if voters wanted to send a message.”

Elections carried out with fusion ballots also provide more informative results to parties and politicians. Without fusion ballots, electoral results indicate who wins, by how much, and where. But in a two-party system where voters often have to engage in strategic voting, these results do not indicate if voters voted begrudgingly for the candidate, if voters agree entirely with the platform of the party, or if voters wanted to send a message with their vote in addition to electing the candidate. Fusion ballots allow for this additional information to come through in the electoral results by separating the votes for the same candidates by the different parties that endorsed them. The vote shares obtained from the minor party lines can inform major parties about the popularity of the platforms of minor parties, what direction voters want the party to move toward, and the strength of minor parties. As we discuss in greater detail [later in the report](#), this information can influence the behavior of politicians in the legislative process.

Fusion Ballots May Increase Turnout

Fusion voting can increase voter turnout through its effects on parties and voters. On the party side, third parties have strong incentives to engage with voters and mobilize them to the polls to clear the electoral threshold that keeps them on the ballot in future elections and increase their policy influence by garnering more votes on their line. To the extent that parties care about being able to participate in future elections or about their policy influence, they will invest resources to mobilize voters to vote on their line. If such mobilization efforts reduce the cost of voting for voters, we would expect turnout to increase with fusion. The success of the Liberal Party of New York, for example, was largely dependent on its ability to drive voter turnout, which it did by investing in a dense network of labor unions and party clubs throughout districts and neighborhoods.²³

Fusion can also increase turnout through its direct effects on voters. For fusion voting to affect the decision to turn out to vote or not, voters need to be aware of fusion ballots in their district, know which parties are fusing with which, and

perceive a meaningful difference between the parties fusing. If voters are aware of fusion ballots, then fusion ballots give voters more choices without spoiling their vote, which can encourage voters to turn out to vote because they now have multiple options and may find a party that is closer to their views. As [previously explained](#), fusion ballots can also provide information to voters that reduces the costs of voting, potentially facilitating greater turnout.

Fusion ballots can also allow voters to use their vote for a third party to better express their policy preferences, which can increase turnout among voters who want to use their vote expressively as opposed to as a way to select a candidate. As Karen Scharff said, “Fusion gives voters a way to self-identify with a set of principles and platforms that then makes the voting more relevant to them, more interesting, and more worthwhile...which is even more true now when people are more and more turned off by the political system and the two parties.” According to Vermont’s Lieutenant Governor David Zuckerman, “there are people who wouldn’t have voted at all if a third party wasn’t on the ballot,” echoing arguments that more choices on the ballot would increase voter turnout.

Thus, even in districts that are safe for a Democratic or Republican candidate, we could expect increases in voter turnout if fusion allows voters to add nuance to their votes. For instance, the vote of a Democratic voter in a deep blue district is not pivotal. Without fusion, that voter may opt not to turn out because the winner will always be the Democratic candidate. With a fused ballot, however, the outcome may be the same, but the voter may use the fused lines to express a stance on a particular issue or platform or to send a message to the Democratic candidate. “It allows people to express their choices in a way that makes it clearer what they’re voting for,” said Scharff. Reinforcing this notion, Bob Master suggested that “voters who vote for the Republicans on the Conservative Party lines are saying, I am an anti-abortion Republican, I am not some Republican in name only.”

Another mechanism through which fusion voting can increase voter turnout is if it makes elections more competitive. In more competitive elections, the probability that a voter is pivotal in the election and their vote matters in deciding the outcome increases. As the probability that a vote can be pivotal increases, voters may be more motivated to turn out because their vote matters more. There is a cyclical nature to the argument here: Fusion leads to more competitive elections by increasing turnout, and turnout increases because elections are more competitive.

“Fusion leads to more competitive elections by increasing turnout, and turnout increases because elections are more competitive.”

It is also theoretically possible for fusion voting to have no effect on turnout or even to depress turnout. If voters are not aware of fusion voting, then fusion voting would not affect voter turnout (it could still have an effect through the third parties if they are mobilizing voters). If voters are confused by the multiple choices on the ballot because they are unfamiliar with how fusion ballots work, or if voters do not perceive a meaningful difference between the fused parties, fusion would not boost turnout or could even discourage it.

One published study examines the effect of fusion on turnout in a special election for a seat in the Nassau County Legislature in New York, finding that the fusion of the Democratic candidate and the WFP increased turnout.²⁴ The special election was carried out soon after the death of a recently elected Democratic candidate; the deceased candidate’s son decided to run for the seat, endorsed by the WFP, the Independence Party, and the Liberal Party. The study hinges on the premise that a counterfactual to the vote share of the Democratic candidate in the special election is the vote share of the deceased Democratic candidate in the general election since the WFP had not endorsed the candidate in that election.

Under this assumption, the researchers find that each additional vote on the WFP line resulted in between 0.6 and 1.03 extra votes for the Democrat in the special election, as the “WFP induced people to come to the polls who would not otherwise have voted.”²⁵ A methodological concern in the study, however, is the validity of the counterfactual: The candidates are different, the death of the candidate could have galvanized voters, the electorate for a special election can differ from that of a general election, and so on. For this reason, it is not clear that the fusion of the WFP with the Democratic candidate led to changes in turnout as opposed to a variety of other factors.

Our own analysis of turnout rates in congressional elections in New York and Connecticut suggests that fusion ballots might have a modest effect on turnout levels under certain conditions.²⁶ In this analysis, described in greater detail in *The Realistic Promise of Multiparty Democracy in the United States*, we compare turnout rates in races with and without fusion within the same congressional districts over the same decade to account for changes in redistricting and for other district-specific characteristics.

Accounting for presidential election years—when turnout is higher—and for turnout in the previous electoral cycle, we find that races in which Democratic candidates are endorsed by minor parties have a turnout level that is 1.6 to 2.8 points higher than in races where they are not endorsed, depending on the model used. Turnout levels are about 2.2 points higher in races where Republicans are endorsed by minor parties relative to races where they are not. However, any association between fusion and turnout disappears once we account for the influence of incumbency.

Table 1 | The Relationship between Fusion and Voter Turnout

This table shows the results of regressions where the dependent variable is the turnout rate at the district level. Each model controls for district and decade fixed characteristics.

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3 (NY Only)
Fused Democratic Candidate	0.016+ (0.008)	0.028* (0.012)	0.023 (0.017)
Fused Republican Candidate	0.009 (0.008)	0.022+ (0.013)	0.020 (0.016)
Lagged Turnout	-0.573*** (0.038)	-0.575*** (0.038)	-0.561*** (0.043)
Presidential Election Year	0.090*** (0.010)	0.088*** (0.010)	0.094*** (0.011)
Both Candidates Fuse		-0.019 (0.014)	-0.013 (0.018)
Incumbent Running			0.004 (0.010)
Observations	586	586	486
R2	0.86	0.86	0.87
R2 Adj	0.795	0.795	0.81

Standard errors shown in parentheses.

+ significant at the 10% level; * significant at the 5% level; ** at the 1 percent level; *** at the 0.1% level

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As with other sections of this report, it is important to emphasize that such an analysis describes an association between fusion ballots and turnout and cannot be interpreted as causal. Fusion endorsements are not made randomly and may be influenced by factors that also affect turnout. If, for example, a minor party endorses candidates that are already popular, then higher turnout levels in their races would reflect that pre-existing popularity and not the endorsement.

Fusion Voting Is Not Confusing to Voters

Critics of fusion voting argue that listing a candidate twice on the ballot under different party lines confuses voters and can lead to mistakes. Another concern is that fusion ballots get overcrowded and confuse voters. In legal cases considering the renewed legalization of fusion ballots, the importance of making the voting process easy for voters has outweighed the associational rights of parties.²⁷

Avoiding voter confusion is a legitimate concern, but there is no systematic evidence that fusion ballots are more confusing than regular ballots. In their survey experiment, Loepp and Melusky measured how long participants took to vote and the number of clicks they made when voting.²⁸ They found that participants did not take longer or click more times when using fusion ballots compared to those who did not use fusion ballots when casting their votes. They also asked participants to rate their voting experiences and again found no differences between those who voted with and without fusion ballots: Both groups found both types of ballots to be clear and understandable and reported that it was easy to pick a candidate at the same rate. Loepp and Melusky also found that survey participants who live in states that allow fusion ballots are faster at submitting their ballot than those who live in states that do not have fusion. This last finding suggests that the use of fusion over time would increase familiarity with this type of ballot.

Beyond survey experiments, the experience of election workers managing elections in fusion states also indicates that fusion voting is not confusing to voters. As described in the legal brief submitted in favor of fusion voting in New Jersey, election administrators report receiving few questions from voters confused about fusion ballots, with “no more than a handful of [election administration] inquiries involve questions about fusion.”²⁹ Moreover, according to Miles Rapoport, the former Secretary of State of Connecticut, “concerns of ballot overcrowding...are unwarranted and have never...materialized.”³⁰

Our own analysis confirms this last statement. In the 2022 elections for the House of Representatives, neither New York nor Connecticut had the highest average number of candidates in congressional races. Ranked by the average number of candidates per district, from highest to lowest, Connecticut was number 14 with an average of three candidates per district, and New York was number 42 with an average of 2.11 candidates per district. In terms of the average number of parties contesting elections, each of which would have its own line and contribute to a longer ballot, neither Connecticut nor New York had the highest average number of parties. Counting independent candidates as a party, Connecticut ranked in the ninth place, with an average of 3.8 parties contesting elections in 2022, and New York ranked in the 12th position, with an average of 3.5 parties contesting elections. Vermont, New Jersey, Colorado, Tennessee, Alaska, Delaware, and Wyoming all had an average of four parties or more on the ballot (Alaska had a final four voting system in place).

While voters may initially find any new electoral system confusing, voter confusion is something that can be addressed with the right information and the right ballot design, so it should not be an impediment to reform. Different ballot designs can be tested, and parties can play an important role in informing voters about how to use fusion ballots.

The party members we interviewed agreed that sometimes voters are initially confused about fusion but that an important task of a minor party in a fusion system is to educate voters about fusion ballots. Joe Dinkin, the WFP's campaign director, recalled explaining to voters that fusion ballots allowed them to choose their party and their candidate. Bob Master, WFP co-founder, acknowledged that voters at first often do not understand how "the same candidate can be on two different lines...but they get used to it." He added that one effective way to educate voters about fusion ballots is to explain that it allows them "to vote their values or to send a message with their vote." Lindsay Farrell, a senior political strategist for the WFP, agreed: "Just say if you vote for a candidate on our line instead of the major party line, your vote still counts to elect that candidate, and it also sends a message." These messaging strategies echo those used by the Liberal Party when it was first making appeals to voters by saying that a vote on the Liberal Party line would serve two purposes: (1) reelect Franklin Delano Roosevelt and (2) "build a permanent party with progressive principles."³¹

For Steve Hughes, a senior strategist for the WFP, talking to voters about fusion also opens up discussions about parties and the role of minor parties in the current system. Hughes explained that "being able to educate people about fusion requires being able to educate about parties...what parties are to begin with, and that we could be so audacious to be the protagonists of our own political future." Dinkin pointed out that talking about parties with voters is challenging because people "don't rate parties particularly high...[but] what if there was a party that you did have and that you liked? It's hard to get people to imagine that." He added that it takes resources and scale to successfully have these conversations with voters.

Party-Level Dynamics

We now turn to party-level dynamics. Besides—and because of—its effects on voters and politicians, fusion voting can also affect the party system by increasing electoral competition, encouraging the creation of new minor parties and giving them a meaningful way to influence politics, and facilitating the creation of coalitions. Alongside identifying relevant but limited research, we provide original analysis of elections in New York and Connecticut, as well as perspectives from minor party members, to illustrate how fusion voting helps minor parties achieve their goals. Much of the research on how fusion affects parties comes from historical work, so we try to contextualize it to contemporary political dynamics.

“Fusion voting can also affect the party system by increasing electoral competition, encouraging the creation of new minor parties and giving them a meaningful way to influence politics, and facilitating the creation of coalitions.”

We find evidence that fusion voting brings more votes to major parties. The added vote shares make some elections more competitive but can also accentuate the lead of dominant parties. In contemporary politics, where fusion voting has the greatest impact is in very tight races where minor parties can provide the margin of victory. These decisive votes give minor parties policy influence and relevance. We bring in various cases where minor parties played important roles in passing legislation by strategically endorsing candidates to form coalitions and leverage their influence over elected officials during the policymaking process. While these cases are illustrative, more systematic and rigorous research is needed to understand if and how fusion voting affects the policy influence of minor parties. By giving minor parties a meaningful way to participate in politics, fusion voting encourages their creation and their strengthening. However, we identify various challenges to party building, particularly co-optation by major parties and not running their own candidates. We also show that both Democrats and Republicans in New York have benefited from fusion voting.

Fusion Voting Increases Votes for Major Parties, Making Some Elections More Competitive

Many of the salutary effects of electoral democracy—the ability to hold politicians accountable, responsiveness of politicians to public opinion, and high levels of public participation—rely on healthy levels of competition. If the outcome of an election is decided in primary elections, parties have limited incentives to mobilize and engage voters or to improve their performance in office. Can fusion voting help enhance accountability, responsiveness, and participation by making elections more competitive?

Fusion voting is believed to increase electoral competition through two main mechanisms: by (1) increasing turnout (discussed [previously](#) in more detail) and (2) expanding the voter base of the less popular major party in a given district. Because fusion voting allows for the creation of coalitions between major parties and smaller parties, it can broaden the voter base of a major party by helping it reach constituencies that feel better represented by the policy views of the minor parties with which it fuses. It is also possible that minor parties are more likely to endorse candidates in races that are already highly competitive because that is where the additional votes they bring could have the greatest impact, giving them more leverage after elections.

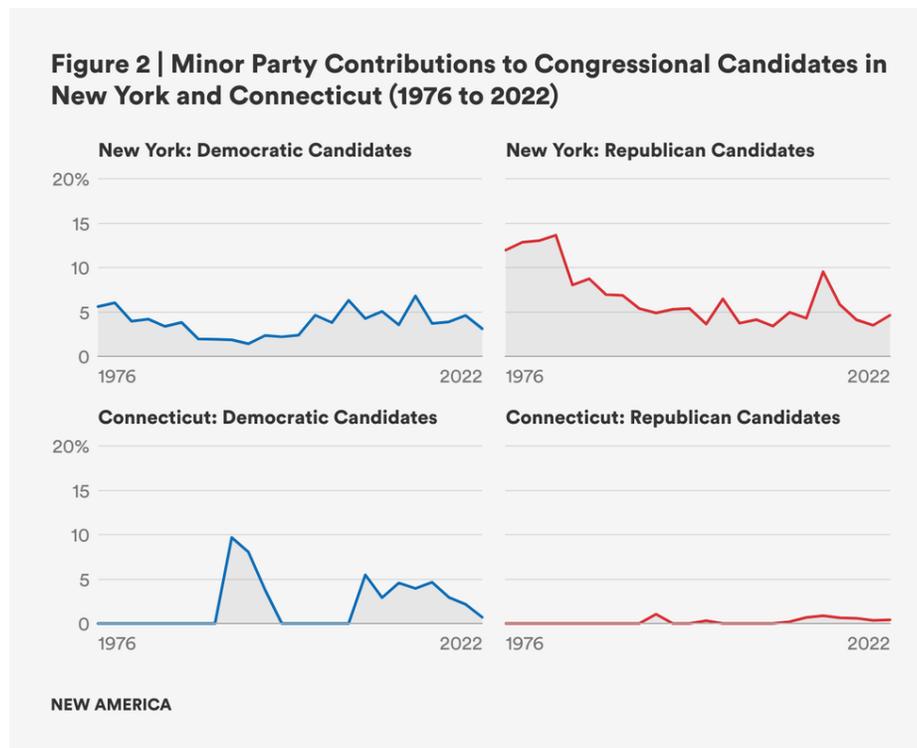
Julie Kushner, the State Senator for Connecticut’s 24th District who ran as a Democrat endorsed by the WFP, explained that “the most important reason [for why a fusion line is helpful] is that when a candidate like me seeks election or reelection, we are looking to include as many people as possible to bring into our program.... We seek to bring in people who don’t want to identify with either major party, people who see themselves as independent of either the Democrats or the Republicans and want a place where they can vote that demonstrates that they’re not pledging to support all Democrats or all Republicans. And so that brings people in that might otherwise not have a place to vote.” A similar dynamic can take place within primaries if the minor party unofficially helps promote a candidate of the major party against another major party candidate, making primaries more competitive.

To the extent that the activation of these segments of the electorate translates to broader support or greater turnout for the less popular of the two major parties in a district, there would be greater electoral competition, as it would decrease the difference in the vote shares of the winning candidate and the runner-up. For instance, in a district that has historically leaned Republican, a Democratic candidate may increase their vote share by fusing with a moderate party, making the election more competitive if they are able to garner a non-trivial number of votes through the moderate party line.

Fusion voting, however, also allows for the more popular party in the district to create coalitions with third parties. In this case, fusion would enable the

dominant party to solidify its position in a district, and we would see either no change or reductions in electoral competition. In a deep red district, for example, the Republican candidate may fuse with another party and obtain more votes, which would make the election less competitive.

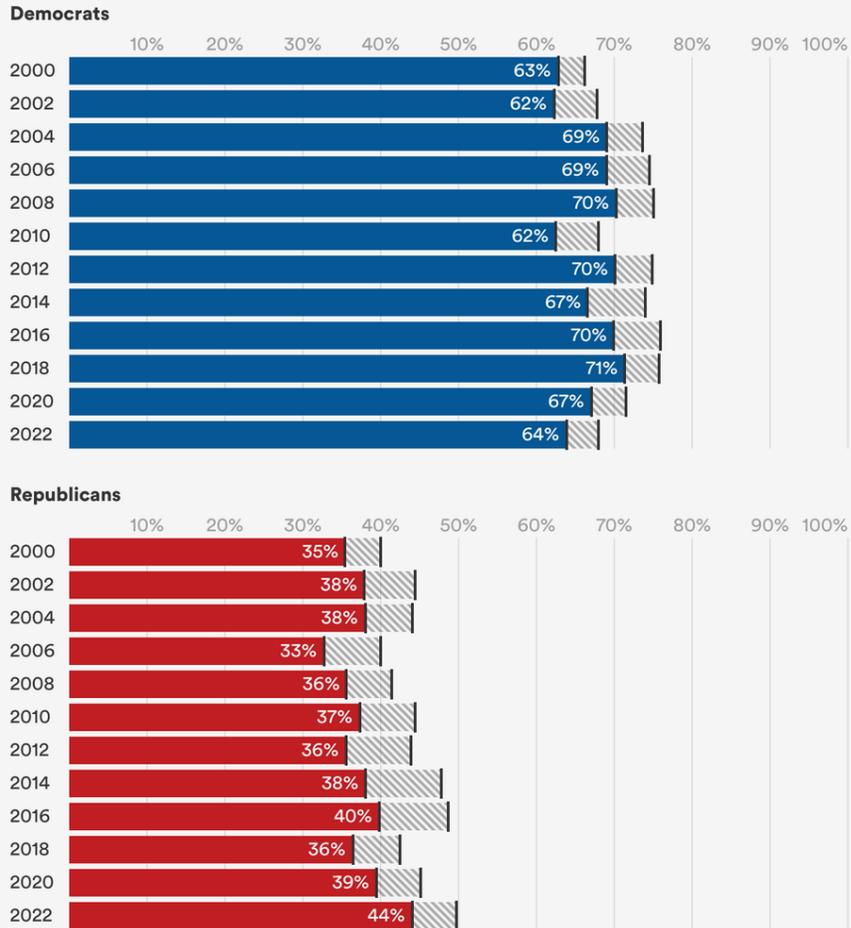
Benjamin Kantack uses data from New York congressional elections from 1952 to 2014 and various control variables like the incumbency status of candidates, whether an election coincides with a presidential election, and whether the cross-endorsing minor party is a qualified minor party or a party created by signature drives. He finds that major party vote shares are significantly higher when they fuse with a qualified minor party but not when they fuse with unqualified minor parties (those created by signature drives).³² Figure 2 shows our own analysis of congressional races in New York and Connecticut from 1976 to 2022. We find that over this time period, minor parties contributed an average of 3.8 percent of the total Democratic vote share in New York and 6.7 percent of the total Republican vote share in New York. In Connecticut, from 1976 to 2022, minor parties contributed an average of 2 percent and 0.2 percent of the total vote share of Democrats and Republicans, respectively.



For races for the New York State Assembly from 2000 to 2022, we found that minor parties contributed an average of 5 percent of the total vote share of Democratic candidates and an average of 7 percent of the total vote share of Republican candidates, as shown in Figure 3.

Figure 3 | Average Vote Shares for the New York State Assembly Without and With Fusion Votes

From 2000 to 2022, fusion lines contributed an average of 5% to the vote share of Democrats and 7% to the vote share of Republicans. The shaded area of the bars represent the average additional vote share contributed by fusion lines each year.



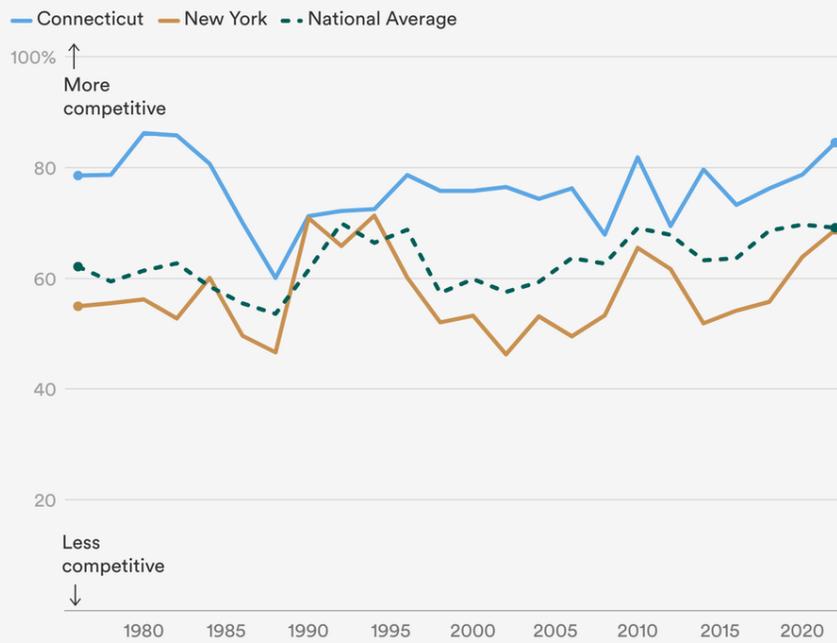
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Measuring electoral competition as one minus the difference between the winner and the runner-up candidate in a district, we show that elections for congressional seats in New York are, on average, less competitive than the national average, while those in Connecticut tend to be more competitive. In races for the state assemblies of New York and Connecticut, with 150 and 151 districts, respectively, electoral competition is lower. In both Connecticut and New York, races for the state assemblies have gotten less competitive over time, although there has been an increase in electoral competition in the last couple of years. Throughout this time period, New York has had lower levels of electoral competition compared to Connecticut. From this data, it is not possible to

determine what role fusion plays in electoral competition. The data simply shows that New York, a state that happens to have fusion voting, generally has lower levels of electoral competition than the national average in the case of congressional races and than Connecticut, both at the congressional and state assembly level. Whether this is because of fusion voting is not possible to say. It's possible that without fusion voting, races in New York would be even less competitive than they are now or that fusion voting is not enough to reduce the impact of partisan sorting, polarization, and other factors on electoral competition.

Figure 4 | Electoral Competition in Congressional Races (1976 to 2022)

The graph shows the average levels of electoral competition per year in New York, Connecticut, and at the national level. Electoral competition is defined as one minus the difference between the vote shares of the winning and losing candidates.

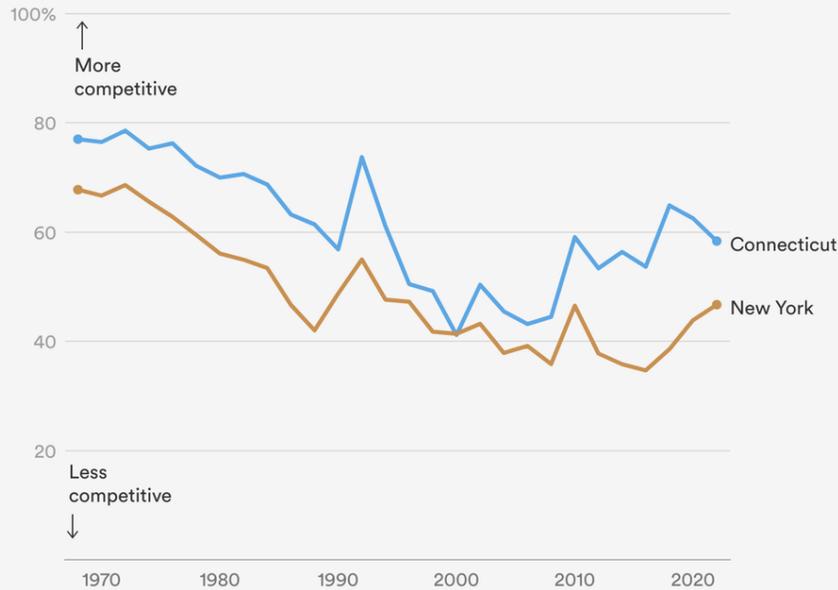


Source: Data from the MIT Election Lab

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Figure 5 | Electoral Competition in Assembly Races in New York and Connecticut (1976 to 2022)

The graph shows the average levels of electoral competition in the state assemblies of Connecticut and New York from 1976 to 2022. Electoral competition is defined as one minus the difference between the vote shares of the winning and losing candidates.



Source: Data from 1968 to 2016 comes from Carl Klarner's State Legislative Election Returns. Data from 2018 onwards was compiled by authors.

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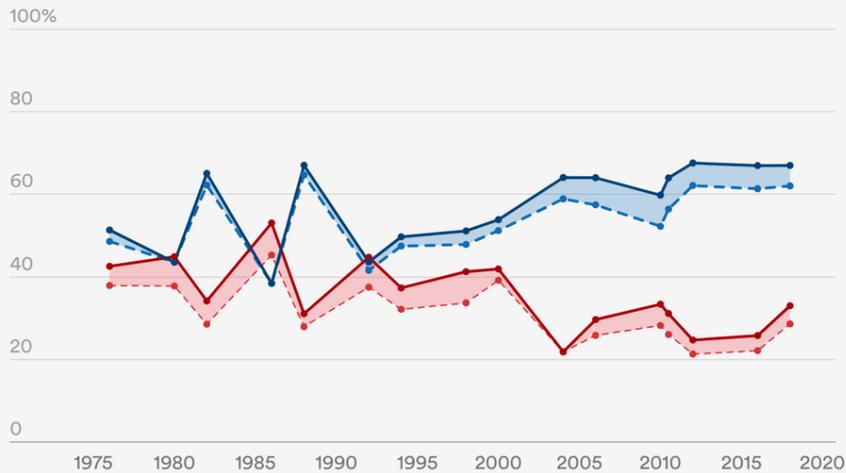
The contributions of minor parties to major party candidates are similar when looking at senate and gubernatorial races, and both major parties have benefited from fusing with minor parties. From 1976 to 2018, minor parties contributed an average of 3.8 percent of the total vote share of Democratic candidates for the Senate and 4.8 percent of the total vote share of Republican candidates. In races for governor, these figures are 4.2 and 5.7 percent, respectively. In Connecticut, fusion ballots have been used less frequently in senate and gubernatorial races. Only six candidates for Senate from 1976 to 2018 have used fusion ballots, and in 1992 and 1994, minor parties contributed an impressive 20 percent and 26 percent, respectively, to the total vote share of the candidates. For governor races from 1962 onwards, there were no fused candidacies until 2010.

As Figures 6 and 7 show, there have been instances when these additional minor party votes have been pivotal for the final electoral results. In close races, votes from fusion ballots are sure to galvanize the election and have the greatest effect on electoral competition. But because both major parties are actively endorsed by minor parties, minor party contributions to major party candidates mostly result in an upward shift in the final vote share at the state level. It remains

unclear whether and how fusion ballots currently affect electoral competition in a state like New York, where the dominant party benefits from minor party votes. However, fusion voting could play a bigger role—and with more far-reaching effects nationwide—in swing states where the margins between the two major parties are smaller.

Figure 6 | Minor Party Contributions to Senate Candidates (1976 to 2018)

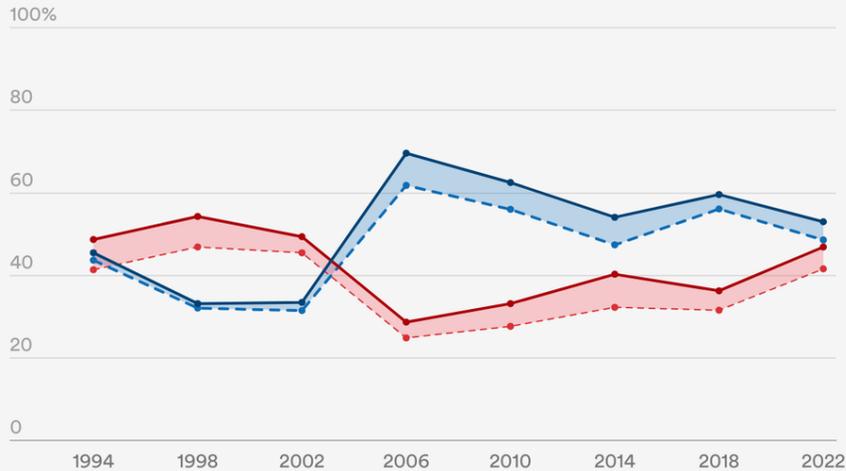
The dotted lines represent the vote shares Democrats and Republicans received on their lines, and the solid lines represent the total vote share for each party after adding votes from fused minor party lines.



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Figure 7 | Minor Party Contributions to Gubernatorial Candidates (1994 to 2022)

The dotted lines represent the vote shares Democrats and Republicans received on their lines, and the solid lines represent the total vote share for each party after adding votes from fused minor party lines.



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Fusion Voting Encourages Minor Party Building and Growth —to an Extent

In a two-party system where only one candidate can win in each district, it is difficult for additional parties to emerge and play a meaningful role in electoral politics. Minor parties that do manage to form struggle to win votes, as voters tend to vote strategically for one of the two main parties. When they do garner significant electoral support, minor parties run the risk of spoiling an election. This is usually a concern because the winning candidate does not reflect the majority’s will, but in times of extreme polarization, the concern is also that a third party would spoil the race, resulting in the election of an extreme candidate who would not have won otherwise.

Fusion voting is supposed to give minor parties a way to participate meaningfully in politics while maintaining their independence and developing their own brand and policy agenda. Fusion voting does not entirely solve the spoiler problem since minor parties can still decide not to fuse (and, in fact, threatening to spoil a race is an important source of power for minor parties). However, it does allow minor parties to influence politics even if they do not win elections, especially if they are able to deliver decisive vote shares or if their brand helps major party candidates communicate certain positions or commitments. As Daniel Soyer puts

it, fusion “allows third parties to have their political cake and eat it too—retaining independence while exerting real influence on elections and policy.”³³

“Fusion ‘allows third parties to have their political cake and eat it too—retaining independence while exerting real influence on elections and policy.’”

According to Bob Master, fusion provides a way of “establishing independent political capacity and power that enables [minor parties] to exert significant influence on one or the other of the major parties without succumbing to the spoiler problem.” Similarly, Lindsay Farrell stated that fusion “seemed like a good alternative and a good solution to what I had seen as the initial problem with third parties, which was being a spoiler, but it also kind of created a space for us to put economic issues front and center.” For Lieutenant Governor David Zuckerman, one of the highest third party elected officials in the country, the American electoral systems are “a spoiling system,” and “our system needs to change so people have more choices, but everybody has a right to run and has a right to get their voice out. And we need a system that allows that.”

By facilitating a more active role in politics for minor parties, fusion voting encourages the creation of minor parties and creates some incentives for party growth. Party formation is affected by (1) the permissiveness of the electoral system and (2) the interaction between political entrepreneurs willing to start a party and societal demands for representation. Party building and growth are affected by a variety of factors, including electoral thresholds, access to office, media attention, and demographic changes, among others.

Fusion voting may incentivize party building through at least two mechanisms. First, to survive as a party and maintain ballot access, minor parties have to meet a certain electoral threshold. To garner enough votes on their ballot lines and meet this threshold, minor parties have to invest in their mobilizing infrastructure and brand. A minor party must make sure that enough voters know it exists, what it stands for, and its positions and be willing to turn out to vote on its ballot line. Second, fusion voting can also encourage party building because minor parties obtain more power by winning more votes on their ballot lines. If minor parties want to be able to have leverage and influence policy, they need to show their electoral strength. All this requires a certain degree of organization and party infrastructure as well as a clear program that voters can recognize as distinct enough from the major parties.

Minor parties, however, face tough constraints because fusion voting gives them a larger role when they endorse major party candidates instead of running their own candidates. As pointed out by Matthew Shugart, a political scientist and expert on electoral systems, fusion voting can stunt the candidate recruitment and development process of parties since third parties rarely nominate their own candidates.³⁴ Candidate recruitment is an integral aspect of party building, and parties without their own candidates who can win office may have a harder time surviving and, importantly, growing over time. The literature on party building emphasizes winning elected office as a crucial ingredient for the growth and development of parties.³⁵ Winning office provides access to a variety of resources that can help parties organize and mobilize, including media coverage, opportunities for constituency services, and legislative staff.³⁶ As a result, it may prove quite challenging for third parties that do not often run their own candidates in fusion systems to grow in size and influence.

There are also concerns that fusion voting may not be entirely conducive to minor party growth. Bernard Tamas argues that fusion may actually weaken third parties because they get co-opted by the major parties.³⁷ Instead of challenging the main parties independently and posing a more credible threat to major parties, fusion voting encourages minor parties to work within major parties. This sentiment was echoed by Brad Lander, comptroller of New York City, who said that “fusion actually can strengthen the major parties and prevent fragmentation.”³⁸ Tamas also points out a tension in how fusion is supposed to strengthen third parties: “On the one hand, fusion is seen as a way for voters to avoid wasting their votes on third-party candidates, and on the other, fusion is believed to promote third parties.”

Perhaps this tension is resolved by considering that fusion voting fosters the creation of a different type of party. Fusion voting may not create strong parties that run their own candidates, more akin to a multiparty democracy. Instead, it incentivizes the development of minor parties that rarely run their own candidates but serve at least four other valuable functions that are facilitated by having a ballot line: (1) mobilizing voters, (2) providing more information to voters and about voters, (3) advocating for particular policies, and (4) building and sustaining coalitions. These minor parties can be flank parties, pulling the major parties to the extremes; center or hinge parties supporting moderate politicians; or issue-based parties promoting particular issues that are not being raised by the main parties. Currently, as Figures 8 to 11 in this section show, the minor parties that most participate in elections through fusion ballots in New York are flank parties: the Conservative Party on the right and the Working Families Party (WFP) on the left. This reflects the current political dynamics of New York. The landscape could look different in other states with different partisan distributions or different histories of political organizing.

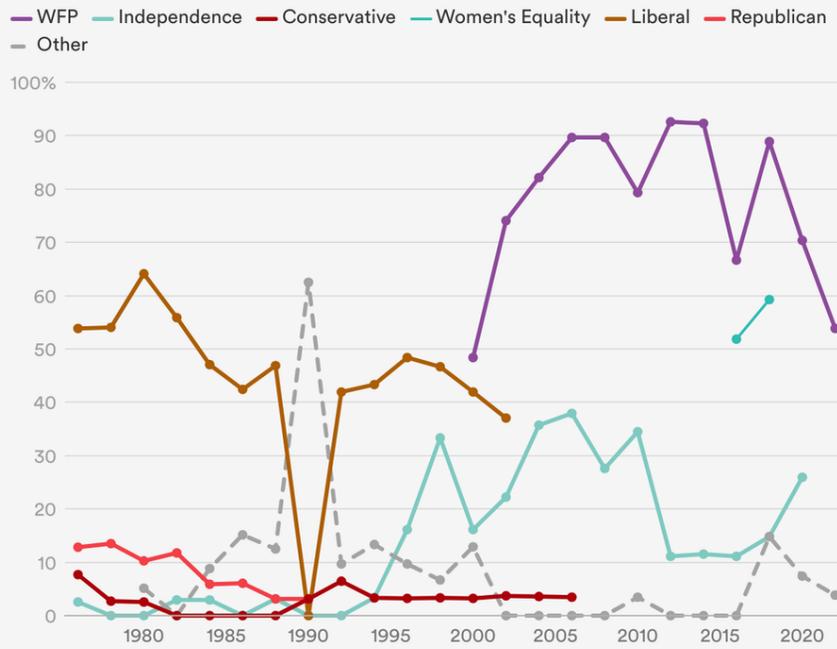
Rarely, minor parties are created to burnish the credentials of politicians with descriptive names or to deceive voters, but these parties tend to disappear over a

couple of electoral cycles. The Women's Equality Party, for example, was created by former New York Governor Andrew Cuomo in 2014 to ostensibly promote the Women's Equality Act. But many observers believe it was created to confuse voters since its acronym, WEP, was so similar to the WFP, which Cuomo had been at odds with. The party lost ballot access in 2018.

Various political parties from across the political spectrum have emerged in New York and participated in elections both by fusing their lines and as standalone parties. The Liberal Party used to be the minor party that most endorsed Democratic candidates up until the turn of the century. Since then, the WFP has emerged as the minor party that most often endorses Democratic candidates. The share of Democratic candidates for Congress endorsed by the WFP was at its highest in 2012, 2014, and 2018, reaching almost 90 percent of Democratic candidates, but that share dropped to 54 percent in the latest congressional election in 2022. In races for the State Assembly, the WFP also stands out as the most frequent endorser of Democratic candidates, with about 60 percent of Democratic candidacies endorsed by the WFP in most elections from 2000 to 2022. The Independence Party of New York also endorsed many Democratic candidates at both the congressional and state levels until it lost its ballot access after not getting enough votes on its line in 2020, and the use of the words 'independent' or 'independence' was banned in New York in 2022 to prevent voters mistakenly registering for a party as opposed to declaring themselves independent.³⁹

Figure 8 | Share of Democratic Candidacies for Congress Endorsed by Smaller Parties in New York (1976 to 2022)

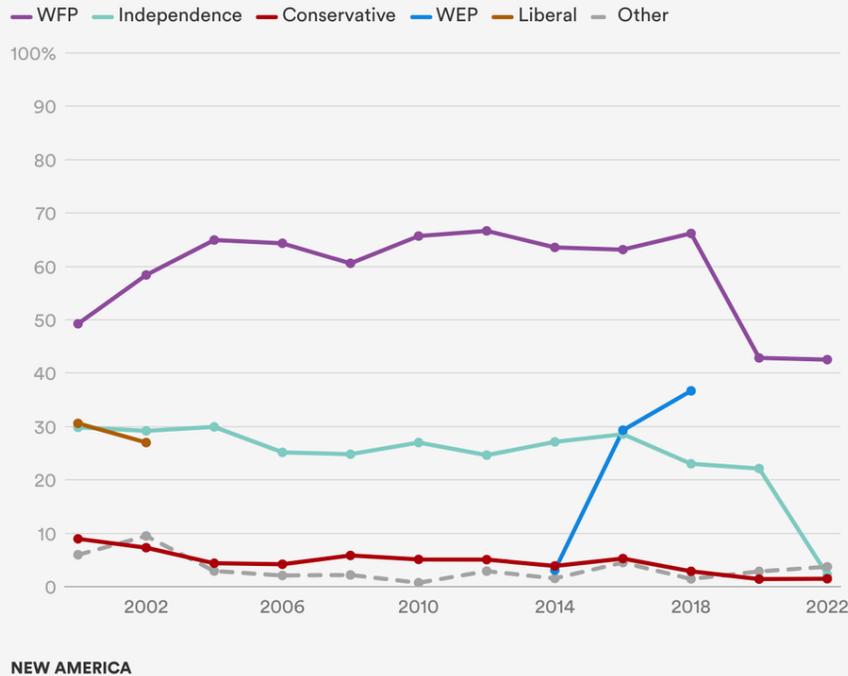
Note that one candidate may be endorsed by multiple parties.



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Figure 9 | Share of Democratic Candidacies for the New York Assembly Endorsed by Smaller Parties (2000 to 2022)

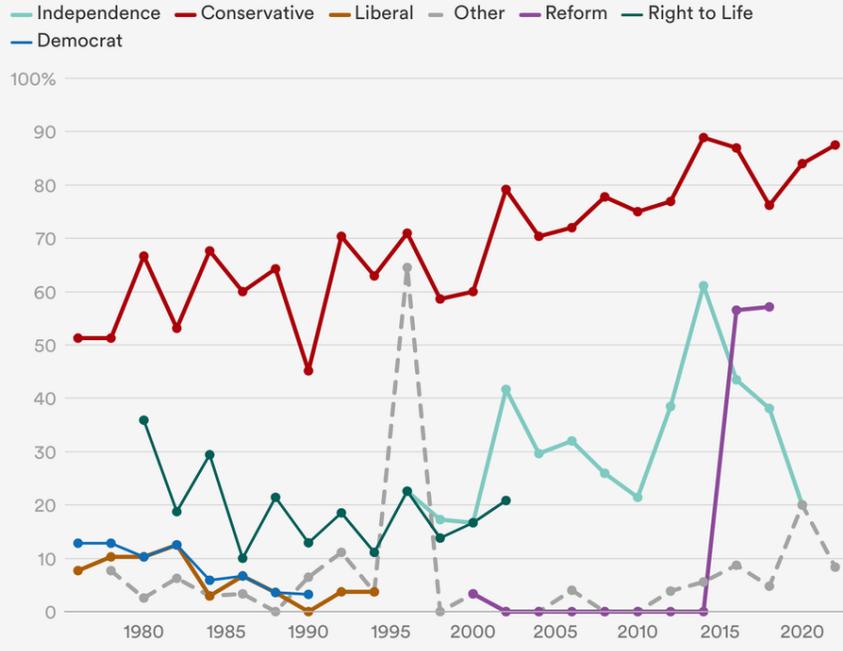
Note that one candidate may be endorsed by multiple parties.



On the Republican side, the Conservative Party of New York has been the most common endorser of Republican candidates. In recent elections, the share of Republican candidates endorsed by the Conservative Party has increased to a high of almost 90 percent for Congress and the State Assembly. The Independence Party also endorsed about half of Republican candidates for the State Assembly. In certain elections, single-issue parties have emerged and tend to endorse Republican candidates. These include parties like the Right to Life Party, the Tax Revolt Party, and, more recently, the Medical Freedom Party, which arose in opposition to vaccine mandates.

Figure 10 | Share of Republican Candidacies for Congress Endorsed by Smaller Parties in New York (1976 to 2022)

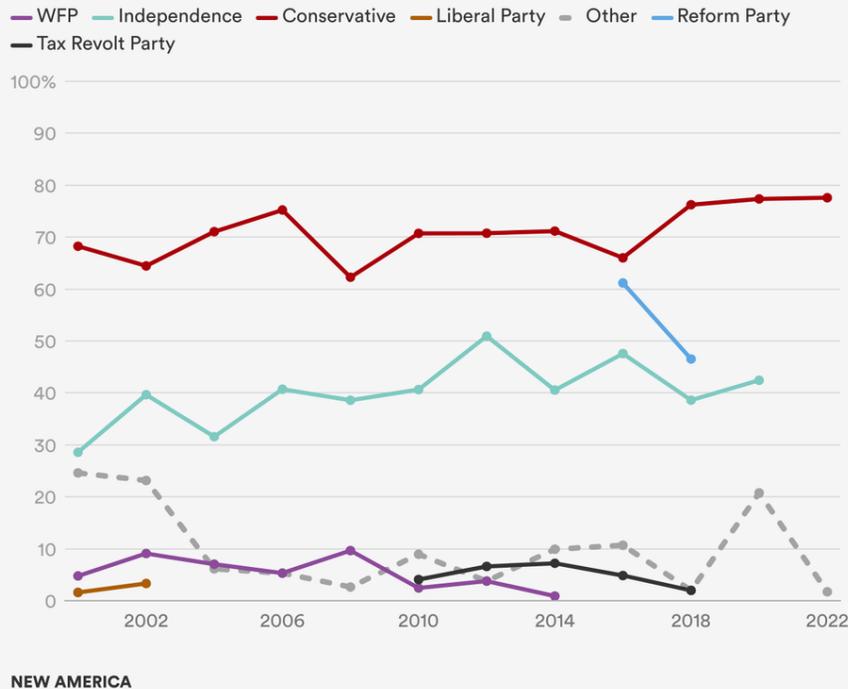
Note that one candidate may be endorsed by multiple parties.



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Figure 11 | Share of Republican Candidacies for the New York Assembly Endorsed by Smaller Parties (2000 to 2022)

Note that one candidate may be endorsed by multiple parties.



Fusion Voting Gives Minor Parties Policy Influence

Fusion voting can give minor parties opportunities to influence the policymaking process.⁴⁰ Melissa Michelson and Scott Susin identify the mechanisms through which minor parties can exert their influence thanks to fusion: “a) acting as a spoiler by nominating their own candidate instead of making a cross-endorsement, b) making or withholding cross-endorsements in order to influence the major parties, and c) giving a line (and possible victory) to a candidate denied a major party line.”⁴¹ In addition to these influence channels, minor parties can also use their platforms to make issues salient and can strategically endorse candidates who favor certain issues to create a coalition in support of an issue they care about.

The greater the mobilizing power and electoral strength of a minor party, the more it will be able to flex its muscles and influence the policymaking process by withholding endorsements, credibly threatening to spoil a race, or providing the winning votes for a candidate. Various episodes in the history of the Liberal Party of New York illustrate how fusion voting helps minor parties influence major parties, particularly when minor party votes provide the margin of victory for a

candidate. For instance, in 1964, the Liberal Party withheld endorsements from four Democratic state legislators who opposed the party's position on state relief rules. The legislators, who had relied on the party in the previous election, reversed their positions to regain the Liberal Party's endorsement.⁴² In 1954, the Liberal Party's votes were pivotal in the governor race, resulting in the election of Averell Harriman. This gave the party leverage to demand positions in the administration and promote progressive policies. Similarly, the party's votes were decisive for the elections of Republicans John Lindsay and Rudolph Giuliani as mayors of New York City in 1965 and 1993, respectively, enabling the party to secure appointments in city hall and influence policies like keeping city colleges tuition-free, limiting transit fare hikes, and preventing the elimination of the Division of AIDS services.⁴³

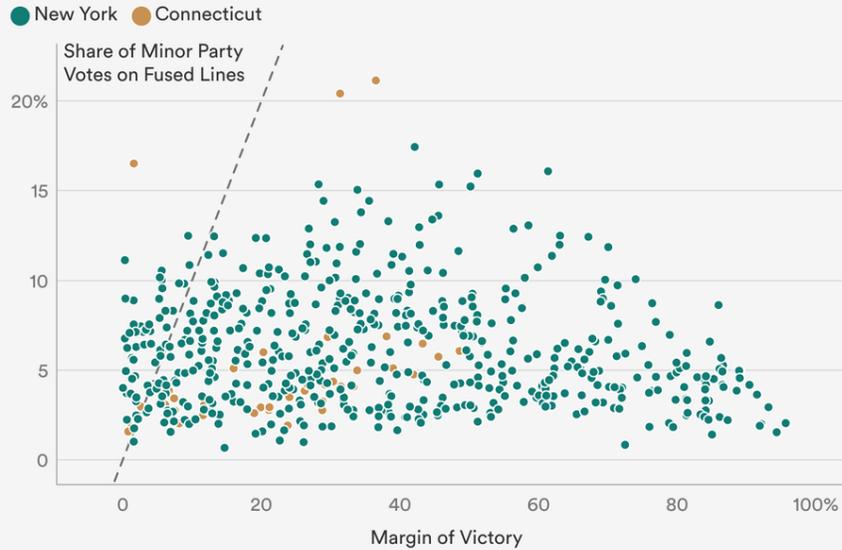
“The greater the mobilizing power and electoral strength of a minor party, the more it will be able to flex its muscles and influence the policymaking process.”

The Liberal Party was able to exert such influence thanks to its mobilizing capacity and ability to deliver the margin of victory in important races, especially in New York City. Minor parties delivering the margin of victory does not happen often, but providing the margin for even one important race or swing district can be consequential. As seen in Figure 7 above, in gubernatorial elections since 1994, minor party votes were only decisive in the election of George Pataki when the Conservative Party and the Tax Cut Now Party pushed the Republican over the victory line. In Senate races, as Figure 6 above shows, the minor party votes have only been pivotal twice since 1976, both times for the election of Al D'Amato in 1980 and 1992 with the help of the Conservative Party and the Right to Life Party.

In elections for the House of Representatives in New York and Connecticut since 1976, minor parties have contributed vote shares in excess of the margin of victory in 54 races, about 6 percent of the total number of races in both states combined. In 23 of these races, or 2.6 percent, the votes delivered by minor parties proved to be decisive in determining the winner of the election. At the state level in New York, we see a similar pattern in Assembly races from 2000 to 2022, with only 57 instances where the vote share contributed by minor parties on fusion lines was greater than the margin of victory.

Figure 12 | Margin of Victory in Congressional Races and Vote Shares Contributed by Minor Parties

Points above the diagonal line indicate races where the votes contributed by minor parties to the winning candidate exceeded the margin of victory. In 54 cases, the vote shares from the minor parties exceeded the margin of victory. In 23 cases, these votes flipped the outcome of the election.

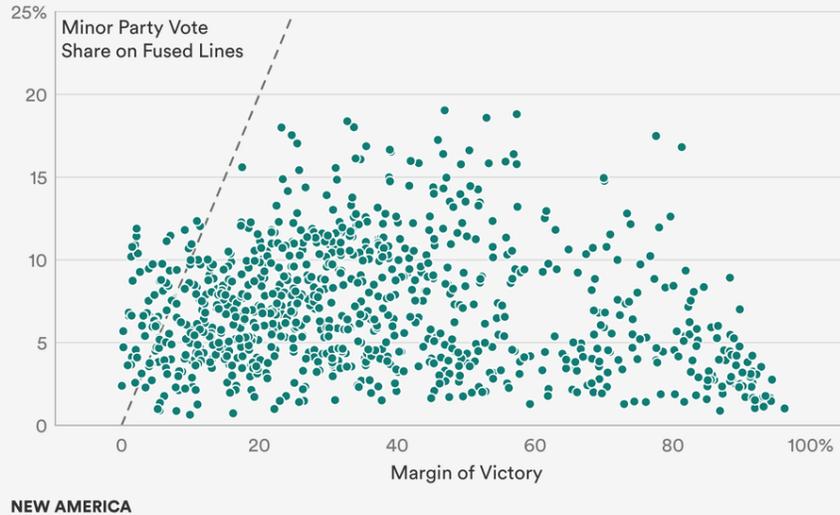


Districts with only one candidate or where the winning candidate did not fuse are not shown.

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Figure 13 | Margin of Victory in New York Assembly Races and Vote Shares Contributed by Minor Parties

Points above the diagonal line indicate races where the votes contributed by minor parties to the winning candidate exceeded the margin of victory. From 2000 to 2022, the vote shares from the minor parties exceeded the margin of victory in 57 cases.



These numbers on congressional, assembly, senate, and governor races indicate that votes from minor parties have rarely been decisive in New York. But the power of fusion voting in these contexts does not come from how often minor parties deliver pivotal votes, but rather from when and where they do. In a state like New York, where the Democratic Party has greater dominance than the Republican Party, Democrats will win most of the time, so we should not expect fusion votes to be decisive frequently.

But fusion voting can be important in swing districts, which can then have repercussions for control of the legislative chambers. Providing strong electoral support for even one senate or governor race can provide a minor party with enough leverage to push its policy agenda, as the history of the Liberal Party shows. In the 2022 midterm election, when control of the House of Representatives initially came down to a difference of nine seats, minor parties in New York provided votes in excess of the margin of victory in five races (the Conservative Party in four districts and the WFP in one); in Connecticut's fifth congressional district, the WFP's vote share exceeded the margin of victory in a very close race. In states like New York and Connecticut, where one party has come to dominate most races for office, minor parties rarely achieve power by spoiling or threatening to spoil an election but rather by mobilizing voters for their endorsed candidates—particularly for endorsed candidates in highly competitive races where they can provide the winning votes. In states where there are more competitive districts, it is likely that fusion voting would give

minor parties even greater leverage by allowing them to provide more decisive vote shares in more races.

In contemporary times, minor parties in New York and Connecticut have used their influence to help advance their policy agendas. One example that repeatedly came up in interviews with WFP members was the increase of the minimum wage in New York in the early 2000s. As a party representing workers and the middle class, advocating and passing an increase to the minimum wage was—and continues to be—a top priority for the WFP. To win support for the increase, the WFP made strategic endorsements. Karen Scharff said the WFP is “willing to endorse people who are not the perfect candidate when they can advance our platform and values.... It is a practical approach to getting people in office who can move our agenda.”

Joe Dinkin, the Campaigns Director for the WFP, explained the strategy for building a coalition in support of the minimum wage. He said that there were a “number of pro-labor Republicans in New York and some purple district Republicans who received the WFP endorsement over their vote to raise the minimum wage. And that was understood as part of a political transaction: You have a better chance to hold onto your seat because you’re getting the minimum wage done.” The strategy paid off. According to Dinkin, by having some influence over Republican legislators, the “WFP succeeded in not only getting the Republicans in the state senate to pass a minimum wage raise but [they also] got them to override the veto of the Republican governor: A Republican state legislative body overriding their own party’s governor to raise the minimum wage.”

Dinkin argued that the pragmatic approach to securing policy victories—including endorsing Republican legislators when it could help the cause—is, in part, encouraged by being a fusion party. Dinkin said that because a fusion party has to play an active role in coalitions, it has to “wrestle as part of that coalition and [has to have] a perspective and be able to make compromises to be part of a winning coalition.” Dinkin said that minor parties that fuse “tend to believe it matters if you win or lose,” whereas for minor parties that do not fuse, politics is more about “protest, not a politics of governance.”

Members of the WFP also cite the 2011 adoption of paid sick days in Connecticut as another example of the party’s influence in the policymaking process. In this case, the strategy revolved around making the issue salient, forcing politicians to take a position on the issue, and prioritizing paid sick days as a factor in the candidate endorsement process. Dinkin said that the WFP “effectively put [the issue] on the ballot”: “[Paid sick days] went from not being an issue in political discourse, to being something the Democrats had to make their mind up on, to being something that was a winning issue in Democratic primaries, [then] a way for Democrats to win the general election, a way to win the WFP endorsement, to being a statewide law in Connecticut by 2011.” By making paid sick days a

“deciding factor in the WFP endorsement process,” the party was able to make paid sick days “an issue that Democrats had to consider and be for or against,” Dinkin elaborated.

Another way of influencing policy, according to WFP members, is to endorse their own candidates in primaries. For Bob Master, “the key to making the party effective is being able to intervene in primaries and make a difference.” Barbara Dudley, the senior advisor to the WFP in Oregon, agreed, adding that “primary challenges get [the major parties’] attention.” The 2004 election of David Soares as district attorney in Albany County illustrates this strategy. In that race, the incumbent district attorney—Democrat Paul Clyne—was predicted to win, but as part of a push to reform the Rockefeller Drug Laws, the WFP endorsed David Soares in the Democratic primary. Soares unexpectedly won the primary, went on to win the general election, and eventually contributed to reforms to the Drug Laws.

Master said that “this was another example where it was not just an endorsement process, but an intervention in a primary that was made possible by the fact that [the WFP] had an existing coalition, a process to endorse a candidate, and the resources [and] the staff to make an intervention that allowed [the WFP] to unblock the logjam” around reforming the Drug Laws. Bill Lipton, co-founder of the WFP and a former director of the party in New York, added that this example of beating an incumbent Democrat in a Democratic stronghold in the primary “showed the complexity of the leverage you have when you have a party that is validated by fusion.”

Quantitatively assessing the impact of fusion voting on influencing policies is challenging because of the complex nature of policymaking and the many variables that affect the process. We are aware of one research project that establishes an association between minor party vote shares a legislator receives and their legislative behavior in the New York State Assembly. Arguing that more votes from minor parties empower major party candidates to deviate from the party line, Cassidy Reller finds that increases in the vote shares from minor parties are associated with minor party endorsed legislators shifting their ideology based on their roll call votes in the opposite direction of their primary party.⁴⁴ While this association may be indicative of the effects of fusion voting, another mechanism at play could be that minor parties may be more likely to endorse candidates who already deviate from the party line. Moreover, often the power of fusion voting comes from providing the margin of victory in close races and not necessarily from greater vote shares: A minor party is likely more influential in a swing district where it was pivotal than in a safe district, even if it obtains more votes in the safe district where candidates have more leeway to deviate from their party anyways. Systematically connecting minor party votes from fusion ballots with legislative behavior remains an important research task that deserves more attention.

Fusion Voting Helps Create and Sustain Coalitions

In the nineteenth century, when fusion voting was legal across the United States, American politics was characterized by the active and influential participation of various minor regional parties organized around particular issues: the Workingmen’s Party in Philadelphia, the Granger Movement in the Midwest, the Greenback Party, the Populist Party, and the Free Soil Party, among others.⁴⁵ These parties often fused with the existing major parties of the time and were pivotal in the creation of coalitions to advance particular policy issues and agendas.

Minor parties were key, for example, in sustaining and bolstering the political coalitions formed against slavery.⁴⁶ With their electoral participation facilitated by fusion ballots, minor parties were able to provide support to anti-slavery factions within the Whigs and the Democrats.⁴⁷ In North Carolina following the Civil War, poor white tenant farmers and African Americans found common ground in the coalition of the Populist Party and the Republican Party, which emerged in opposition to the rich voters that constituted the Democratic Party. The alliance between the Populists and the Republicans led to short-lived electoral victories of Black Republicans and white populists who wanted to protect voting rights and expand education, among other policies.⁴⁸

Fusion voting is believed to have enabled these “improbable coalitions.”⁴⁹ With minor parties with electoral backing in constituencies other than their own, factions of major parties had serious and useful partners to pursue joint policy goals. By creating coalitions, the fusion of minor and main parties was able to bring certain issues to the forefront that would not have had the opportunity to emerge otherwise.

“By creating coalitions, the fusion of minor and main parties was able to bring certain issues to the forefront that would not have had the opportunity to emerge otherwise.”

The ability of fusion voting to create more fluid coalitions remains one of the most promising aspects of bringing back fusion ballots across the United States. In several of the interviews we carried out with members of the WFP, the role that fusion ballots play in helping create and sustain coalitions was cited as a

central benefit of fusion. Karen Scharff, founding member of the WFP, said that because of the two-party system, it's nearly impossible to break into electoral politics as a third party, but "by being able to cross-endorse with the major parties, it allowed [the WFP] to be a part of a governing coalition and part of the electoral winning strategy." She added that these coalitions are "essentially a multiparty governing coalition that is dominated by the two parties," which echoes arguments in favor of fusion that it formalizes factions within parties. Having a line on the ballot is key for sustaining a coalition since it creates incentives for staying and working within the party to keep the party active. Scharff said that "the ballot line is a real glue because people don't want to leave because they want to continue to have a say over how the ballot line gets used." Bob Master, also a WFP co-founder, agreed, saying that "a ballot line makes it more possible to build a sustainable, vibrant coalition because people come into the coalition recognizing that they are going to have influence over who appears on the ballot."

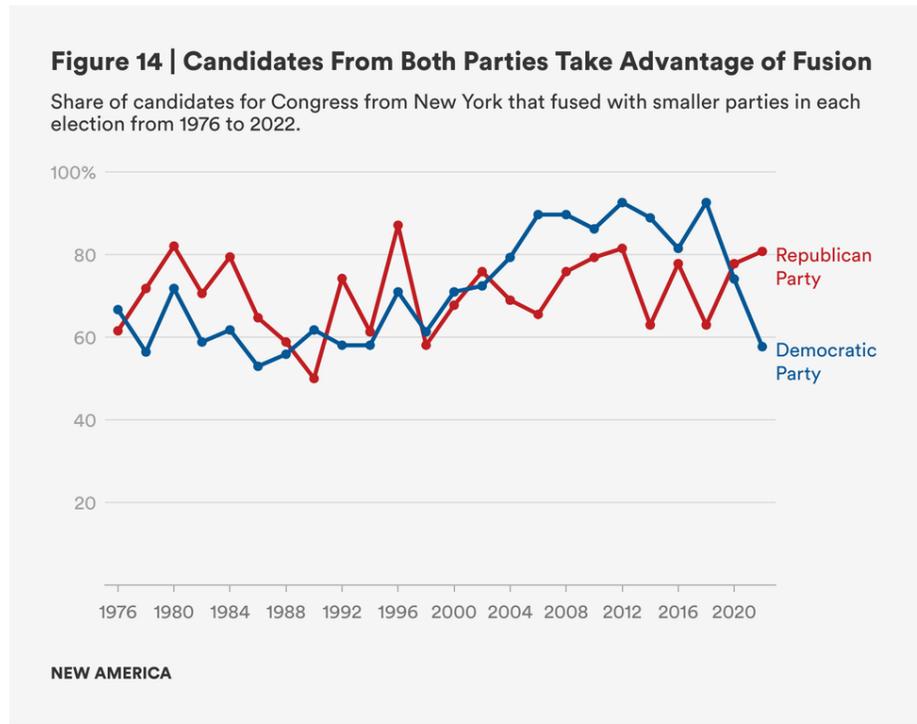
Particularly in a time when politics are so nationalized and polarized along a left-right dimension, fusion alliances between major party factions and minor parties could focus attention on issues that don't fit well on this one dimension of politics. Recent work has identified various dimensions of American congressional politics beyond the traditional left-right that could be uncovered by the active participation of minor parties at the federal level and the creation of new—and maybe surprising—coalitions along these dimensions.⁵⁰

Fusion Ballots Are Used by Parties across the Ideological Spectrum

One of the most prominent contemporary examples of minor parties that avail themselves of fusion ballots is the WFP. In both New York and Connecticut, the WFP has achieved significant influence by endorsing mostly Democratic candidates. Their success and visibility have led to the association of fusion voting with the progressive agenda of the WFP. Many WFP members, both current and former, are also at the forefront of efforts to revitalize fusion voting across the country—that so many of our interview subjects are WFP members is a reflection of this.

Despite the prominence of the WFP in fusion voting efforts, the use of fusion ballots is not a partisan strategy. In fact, it is used by parties across the political spectrum. In New York, for example, both Democratic and Republican candidates receive the endorsements of minor parties. Up until the twenty-first century, more Republican candidates were endorsed by minor parties. With the emergence of the WFP in New York, the period from the early 2000s to 2018 saw more Democratic candidates being endorsed by minor parties than Republican candidates. This pattern reversed in more recent elections. In both the 2020 and

2022 congressional elections, more Republican candidates were endorsed by minor parties, mostly by the Conservative Party, than Democratic candidates.



Moreover, current efforts to revitalize fusion voting are meant to restore the center-right as a way to provide a political home to Republicans who no longer feel aligned with the current Republican Party. In Michigan, former Republicans are the ones leading efforts to start a center party that could take advantage of fusion voting if it were re-legalized.⁵¹ In New Jersey, the push is coming from the center as well, as a way to give disaffected Republicans a way to vote for moderate Democrats.⁵² In Kansas, the United Kansas Party is hoping to gain recognition and provide a center “common-sense” ballot line for voters.⁵³ Fusion voting is not a tool of the left or the right; it’s simply a tool that any party can use to express its preference and endorsement for a candidate.

System-Wide Effects

The United States is currently experiencing instability and uncertainty, with democracy itself under threat. High polarization is eroding the political middle, which was once maintained by cross-partisan coalitions, and giving way to extremism. This is uncharted territory, and it is unclear how fusion voting would affect these broader political patterns, as it has not been tested in this context. Consequently, this section is speculative and in that it seeks to delineate—based on historical and theoretical assumptions—how fusion voting could potentially strengthen the political center, reduce polarization, and lead to deeper electoral reforms.

Whether fusion voting gives rise to parties that serve as moderating forces will depend on the state-level distribution of partisans and on state-level demographics. In some states, fusion voting can promote and strengthen parties to the left and the right of the current parties, as has happened in New York. In other states, fusion voting might encourage the creation of moderate minor parties and can help bridge moderate Democrats and moderate Republicans. This results in unclear effects of fusion voting on polarization and extremism, though we see the potential for fusion voting to reduce extreme partisanship if minor parties create new and more flexible partisan identities. Finally, we describe pathways through which fusion voting could precipitate deeper electoral reforms and identify important roadblocks that need to be addressed for fusion voting to be a stepping stone toward a true multiparty system.

Rise of Moderate Parties Depends on State-Level Partisan Distribution and Demographics

The current momentum for fusion voting is based on its potential to restore moderate political forces in American politics and create new partisan options for voters who no longer feel represented by their parties. Specifically, as the Republican Party has moved to the far-right, fusion voting could facilitate the emergence of a moderate party that endorses candidates committed to democracy and provides a way for disaffected Republican voters to vote for these candidates on the moderate party line. For this to happen, moderate parties have to emerge, and voters have to be willing to vote on their ballot line, even if it ultimately means that they are voting for an opposing major party candidate. Whether these premises hold are open empirical questions.

Political parties emerge from a combination of electoral supply and demand, and their survival often depends on the permissiveness of the electoral system and whether they garner enough electoral support. Fusion voting can make the system more permissive to the extent that minor parties are willing to endorse

major party candidates. But the supply and demand dynamics will be affected by a variety of state-level factors, including the willingness of political entrepreneurs to start a party and fuse with major parties and the partisan and demographic composition of the electorate.

In states like New York and Connecticut today, moderate parties have not re-emerged given the contemporary political landscape of these states. In fact, the influential minor parties in New York are on the flanks of the ideological spectrum. This was not always the case. The Liberal Party, although it started as a progressive party seeking to pull Democrats to more liberal positions, was able to play a moderating role by endorsing Democrats and Republicans and providing decisive vote shares to their candidacies. It was able to do so because it initially offered a clear programmatic agenda that appealed to a broad enough segment of the electorate and because there were liberal Republican and conservative Democratic candidates for the party to endorse. As middle-class voters moved out of New York City and the demographics of the electorate changed, the support base of the Liberal Party eroded, contributing to its ultimate decline.⁵⁴ States with a more equal distribution of partisan voters may offer more fertile ground for moderate parties to emerge today.

In addition to having the partisan and demographic electoral base, any potential moderate party has to face two additional issues to succeed in a fusion voting system: One is the availability of major party candidates to endorse, and the other is what they offer to voters in terms of policy.

The ability to endorse or withhold an endorsement to candidates in the major parties is one of the main tools that fusion systems give minor parties to influence the major parties. By endorsing moderate candidates in the Democratic and Republican parties, a moderate minor party may be able to pull the parties to the center and strengthen the political middle. This presumes, however, that there will be moderate candidates to endorse in the major parties, which in many states is becoming increasingly unlikely on the Republican side. While the short supply of moderate candidates in certain districts could represent a challenge for moderate parties seeking to endorse a candidate with fusion ballots, it could open up political space for minor parties to run their own candidates—especially in districts that established parties write off as a sure victory for the other party.

Barbara Dudley, an Oregon Working Families Party (WFP) member, acknowledged that in Oregon, “[the WFP] actually cross-nominated a few key Republicans who supported [their] issues, but there is no such thing anymore... the extreme division between the two parties has caught up with Oregon.” Even the middle-of-the-road Independent Party of Oregon has fewer opportunities to cross-nominate. Dudley added that historically, “Independents have cross-nominated both Republicans and Democrats, but as the Republicans have gone further and further to the far-right, the Independent Party cross-nominates Democrats far more often.” If moderate minor parties do not find candidates to

endorse in the Republican Party, then they lose one of the main leverage channels available to them and the ability to pull the party to the middle. Moderate minor parties may still provide a home to disaffected Republican voters who no longer feel at home in their party, but they are unlikely to moderate Republican politicians.

Of course, the supply of candidates is not static, and moderate parties can themselves encourage candidates to moderate or inspire moderate candidates to run for office by offering their ballot line and mobilizing resources. This is the theory of change of the **recently formed United Kansas Party**, a moderate party that seeks to capitalize on voter disaffection, the growing number of independent voters in the state, and increasing frustration with the two-party system. By giving their ballot line to Democratic or Republican candidates who align with their stated policy agenda, the United Kansas Party hopes to create a moderating force in Kansas politics.⁵⁵ This approach has worked in the past, and time will tell if it works in today's nationalized and extremely polarized politics.

Finally, any potential moderate party that seeks to be a year-round party to influence politics must also figure out its policy program. While the moderate label is appealing by itself to voters, defining what the moderate party stands for and explaining how it differs from the major parties is important to secure electoral support from voters over the long term. Defining a policy program will also guide how the moderate party uses any potential leverage it gets from elections to influence the policymaking process and ensure that the parties are influential moderate forces and not just electoral vehicles.

Ambiguous Potential Effects on Polarization and Extremism

Fusion voting is promoted as a way to lessen polarization. By facilitating the emergence of a moderate party and allowing for more minor parties to actively participate in coalitional politics and influence the major parties, fusion voting could disrupt the zero-sum dynamics that have come to characterize American politics. To our knowledge, there is no systematic research exploring whether fusion voting can achieve these outcomes in the current political climate—it remains an open question that will have to be assessed when more states adopt fusion voting. For now, we identify the possible mechanisms through which fusion voting could mitigate polarization and clarify what types of polarization it could affect, be it elite-level ideological polarization or affective polarization.

Focusing first on elite-level polarization, the degree of ideological differences between elected officials and party leaders, most of the academic literature emphasizes a multiplicity of causes and aggravating factors of elite-level ideological polarization—including the realignment of the party system following the Civil Rights movement in the 1960s, a rise in economic inequality, and the increasingly razor-thin margins for control of the Senate and Congress.⁵⁶

Notably, the connection between electoral systems and elite-level ideological polarization is unclear. It is not obvious, then, how fusion voting would be able to revert the effects of the underlying causes of elite-level ideological polarization. Contemporary polarization in the United States is also characterized by asymmetry, with the Republican Party moving far more to the right than the Democratic Party has moved to the left. For fusion voting to reduce this polarization, it would have to mostly moderate the Republican Party.

One possible mechanism to reduce elite-level ideological polarization is that fusion voting facilitates the emergence of a moderate party that pulls the major parties to the ideological middle, which helps elect moderate candidates. The ballot line of a moderate minor party can provide the bridge that traditionally Republican voters need to be able to vote for a moderate Democrat. The hopes are that these dynamics provide an exit ramp to Republican voters who no longer feel at home within the Republican party and do not want to vote for far-right candidates. As explained in other sections, this is not a guaranteed outcome of fusion voting everywhere. In some contexts, fusion voting could contribute to more polarization if it strengthens parties on the fringes. In New York, for example, the WFP tends to pull the Democratic Party to the left while the Conservative Party tends to pull the Republican Party farther to the right, which could end up widening the ideological space between candidates from the two main parties. It is also not guaranteed that enough partisan voters would vote on a minor party line for an opposing party candidate.

Increasingly, however, elite-level polarization has also inflected views of democracy in the United States, and new, unexpected coalitions could arise to protect democracy. In this case, a moderate party could become the party of politicians and citizens on the center-right who are committed to democratic values. In competitive races, the moderate party could endorse Democratic candidates, but in races that usually go to Republicans, the Democratic party could endorse the moderate party candidate. At a time when democracy is on the ballot, fusion voting could help bring about much-needed coalitions that stand up for democracy and revitalize electoral competition. These are new political dynamics for the United States, so this argument is yet to be tested and faces the formidable challenge of voters prioritizing partisanship over democracy.⁵⁷ But if fusion voting is successful at encouraging new partisan options, it might give voters who care about democracy a meaningful way to use their vote to protect democracy instead of having to weigh policy and partisan concerns versus democratic values.

“At a time when democracy is on the ballot, fusion voting could help bring about much-needed coalitions that stand up for democracy and revitalize electoral competition.”

Affective polarization—the degree to which members of a party dislike members of the other party while liking those of their own—may be more directly linked to electoral institutions. The winner-take-all nature of single-member districts forces binary choices that lead to zero-sum dynamics and encourages an “us-vs-them” approach to politics. While there is much debate about whether the mass public is ideologically polarized, there is a lot of evidence that the public is affectively polarized.⁵⁸ Behind the rise of affective polarization is the increasing importance of partisanship to social identity.⁵⁹

For fusion voting to reduce affective polarization, it would have to disrupt this link between partisanship and identity. Proportional systems do this by giving voters more choices on the ballot. In one election, voters can vote for one party, and in another, they may change their minds and vote for a different party, making partisanship less relevant to identity. The existence of multiple parties also makes coalitions more likely, meaning that politicians from different parties are forced to govern together, which helps dispel the idea that members from competing parties are mortal enemies.⁶⁰ To the extent that fusion voting gives people the choice to vote for different parties—allowing voters to think of themselves as something other than just Democrats or just Republicans—and creates opportunities for coalitional government, then it might have a chance at mitigating affective polarization. This argument assumes that voters actually use the ballot lines of minor parties and that fusion voting leads to the continued existence of several minor parties.

We are not aware of research that quantitatively links fusion voting with changes in affective polarization, but we see this as a promising and feasible avenue for research using survey experiments. Experimentally varying whether survey respondents use fusion ballots or providing them with minor party alternatives can provide credible ways of measuring whether fusion voting has an impact on affective polarization, albeit in a controlled environment.

Possible Pathway Toward Proportional Representation

Fusion voting has the potential to galvanize efforts toward proportional representation in the United States by empowering parties other than the Democratic and Republican parties. Stronger minor parties may demand reforms to the electoral system to solidify their power, or major parties may promote reforms to safeguard their positions. But fusion voting may also hamper efforts toward a genuine multiparty democracy if major parties co-opt minor parties or if it strengthens the major parties by discouraging the creation of strong alternatives.

Historically, countries have transitioned to proportional representation because of the emergence of credible electoral threats⁶¹ or as a way to accommodate and break opposition parties in authoritarian regimes.⁶² For there to be a willingness to reform the system, the existing parties must feel threatened, which means that minor parties must spoil elections by running their own candidates, as argued by Matthew Shugart.⁶³ Fusion voting discourages the spoiling of elections by allowing minor parties to receive votes on their lines, having those votes count toward a major party candidate, and encouraging parties to function without their own candidates. For fusion voting to lead to proportional representation, minor parties would have to flex their electoral strength and spoil elections or run their own candidates to pose a credible threat to the two major parties. They could also use their leverage to advocate for specific policies on electoral reforms.

The path to a multiparty system and proportional representation could be different in the United States. Electoral reform in various states and cities has happened thanks to citizens and civil society organizing, ballot initiatives, and the fortuitous alignment of interests. These efforts may gain momentum and eventually be able to secure more widespread reforms that make the electoral system more permissive. Or maybe some exogenous event catalyzes electoral reform and leads to a more permissive system.

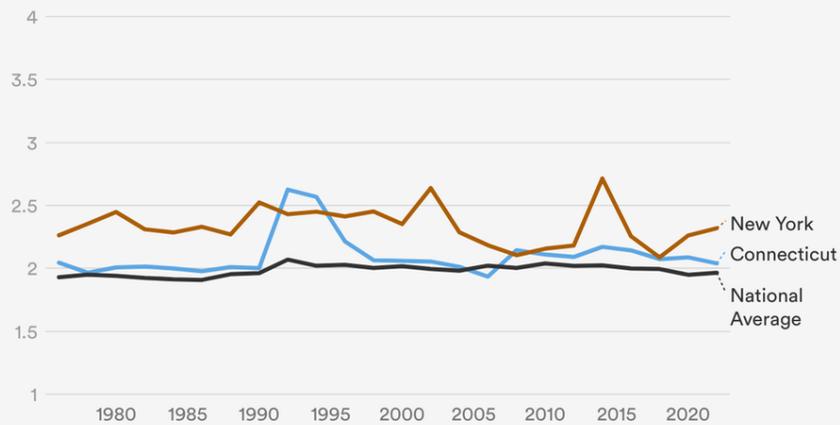
“Fusion voting can provide the training wheels for minor political parties and voters to participate actively in a proportional electoral system when the time arrives.”

If that happens, minor parties that have emerged through fusion voting and have already developed a brand and a party infrastructure can take full advantage of

the more permissive electoral system and start competing independently. At the same time, fusion voting can help voters get used to voting for different parties and encourage the creation of new partisan identities and constituencies for electoral reforms that lead to proportional representation. In this sense, fusion voting can provide the training wheels for minor political parties and voters to participate actively in a proportional electoral system when the time arrives. As Joe Dinkin argued, “Having fusion has...been helpful at generating the voter habits and infrastructure relevance to be able to make occasional plays for more traditional third-party wins.”

Figure 15 | Effective Number of Parties at the Congressional Level

The plot shows the effective number of parties in New York and Connecticut and the national average for comparison.



The national average excludes New York and Connecticut. The effective number of parties is calculated as 1 over the sum of the squared vote share of each party at the state level.

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Looking at the effective number of parties in states with and without fusion, we see that there have been time periods when New York and Connecticut have sustained an effective number of parties greater than the national average. The effective number of parties is a weighted average of the number of parties based on their electoral performance.⁶⁴ In New York, from 1976 to the early 2000s, the effective number of parties hovered below 2.5 and peaked at 2.7 in 2014, thanks to the votes garnered by parties like the Conservative Party, the Liberal Party, the Right to Life Party, and eventually, the WFP. In Connecticut, the effective number of parties has mostly remained close to the national average of basically two, except in 1992 and 1994 when the A Connecticut Party had a strong showing. The experience of New York, in particular, shows that fusion voting can contribute to more parties in a system of winner-take-all elections.

Questions remain about how to sustain a greater number of parties and how to push that number to three, four, or even more. Without putting forward their own candidates that can win elections and without increasing the district magnitude, it is challenging for minor parties to grow significantly. Minor parties face a tough predicament in a system of single-member districts and fusion voting: If they run their own candidates in a winner-take-all system, they risk not having a seat on the table, but if they fuse, they gain access, but they often, but not always, forego having their own candidates and ability to grow the party, remaining tethered to a major party.

The experience of the Green Party in New York illustrates this dilemma. As WFP co-founder Bob Master said, “[The Green Party] lost its ballot line, and we basically haven’t heard from the Green Party since.” At a time when climate change and environmental concerns are a top issue among certain groups of voters, the Green Party could be an influential party. But because they do not cross-endorse, they lose access, explains Master: “If they were cross-endorsing and requiring candidates to make commitments on a range of climate-related issues, they would be the center of progressive politics in the state. But because they’re running candidates who will only lose, they’re irrelevant.” Fusion provides a lifeline to minor parties in the American electoral system by giving them a way to remain relevant without spoiling a race, but it can also limit their ability to grow as they remain tied to major parties to remain electorally viable. The growing dissatisfaction with the two major parties and surging interest in partisan alternatives could strengthen the position of minor parties in fusion systems and give them more opportunities to run their own candidates.

By giving minor parties a way to participate in politics and incentivizing them to develop their party infrastructure and brand, fusion voting can be a starting step toward a multiparty system and, eventually, to proportional representation. However, deeper reforms are needed to strengthen minor parties and allow them to grow independently from a major party.

Open Questions and Directions for Further Research

This report aims to provide a comprehensive overview of the theory and evidence of how fusion could improve various aspects of electoral politics and democracy in the United States. Fusion voting has great potential as a reform that supports parties and provides voters with more choices. However, more research is needed to understand how fusion voting would play out in contemporary politics and across different contexts throughout the country. While history provides useful guides, the current moment presents unique challenges that raise many questions about how fusion voting would fare. We conclude this report by highlighting some of these pressing questions and identifying ways to advance the research agenda.

Micro-Level Questions:

- Are partisan voters willing to vote for an opposing party candidate on a different party line? Is the different party line created by a fusion ballot enough to convince voters?
- Are endorsements on the ballot line useful for voters, and how?
- What are effective ways to communicate and educate about fusion to increase public understanding and support? How can fusion education neutralize opposition and build consensus among different stakeholders?
- Does fusion voting affect partisan identity? Does it affect feelings toward other parties? Can it disrupt affective polarization?

Party-Level Questions:

- Beyond case studies, what effects does fusion voting have on policymaking? How does it impact the influence of minor parties? How can this impact be measured?
- What are the explanations for strong and effective parties? What other reforms could accompany fusion voting to strengthen parties?
- What mechanisms need to be in place to ensure accountability within parties and prevent abuse or corruption in fusion politics?
- Where and how does fusion voting moderate politicians? Where is fusion a centripetal force or a centrifugal force for politics?

System-Level Questions:

- How does fusion voting fit in with other electoral reforms like single transferable voting, ranked choice voting, and runoff with two or more candidates?
- What are the implications of fusion voting for money in politics? Does it affect small donor financing? Does it have implications for campaign finance reform?
- What backlash could fusion voting engender, and from where? What are effective ways to combat this backlash?
- What would it take for fusion voting to serve as a gateway for further electoral reforms? What policy changes could enhance fusion voting and galvanize efforts toward a multiparty democracy?

We see several fruitful ways to answer some of these questions.

More Systematic Historical Research: Many of the arguments in favor of fusion voting are based on nineteenth-century examples of how minor parties built coalitions in support of particular issues when fusion was still allowed in most states. But what role did fusion voting play exactly? A more careful and systematic look at these cases is needed to understand if fusion voting played an instrumental role. Researchers of fusion voting can draw inspiration from empirical historical work that incorporates credible research designs to identify the effects of voting systems. For instance, Daniel Moskowitz and Jon Rogowski use a differences-in-difference design to isolate the effects of the introduction of the Australian ballot at the turn of the twentieth century and find that the new ballot design had little impact on legislator behavior and political representation.⁶⁵ A similar research design could be implemented for fusion voting, taking advantage of the staggered phase-out of fusion ballots across American states.

Survey Experiments to Understand Micro-Foundations: Arguments connecting fusion voting to political outcomes like a reduction in polarization, the emergence of moderate parties, or higher political participation make assumptions about voter behavior that have not been tested. Survey experiments can provide evidence about the micro-foundations of fusion voting—how voters behave when presented with fusion ballots. They can provide answers to questions about how often voters will choose an opposing party if given a moderate party line, what type of voter is most likely to take advantage of fusion lines, what voters infer from fusion endorsements, whether voting through a fusion line has any effect on affective polarization or satisfaction with democracy, and the utility of the vote, among many others. Moreover, surveys can help

identify any confusing aspects of fusion ballots and point to possible improvements in ballot design.

More Descriptive Analysis: Further systematic descriptive work is needed on the performance of minor parties in contemporary times. We have provided some of that analysis in this report, but many areas have not been properly explored. Where do third parties obtain the most votes nationwide? How does the performance of minor parties on their fusion line interact with demographic variables? What issues are third parties emphasizing, and how do they differ from the established parties?

More Qualitative Research: Our interviews with minor party members clarified various questions about how fusion voting is used and how they perceive this electoral practice. Expanding qualitative research on fusion voting to a broader subject pool can enrich our understanding of fusion voting in practice. In particular, there is a need to include the perspectives of minor parties that do not fuse even if they are allowed to do so, minor parties on the conservative side, and major party members.

Fusion voting will give citizens more choices on the ballot and the ability to cast a more nuanced vote and political parties the opportunity to fully exercise their rights and nominate the candidates of their choosing. This alone can be reason enough to relegalize fusion voting. Whether fusion voting will have a significant impact on political outcomes, like turnout, the strength and influence of minor parties, the existence of dynamic coalitions, or polarization, is yet to be fully understood. It will take experimenting with fusion voting at the state level to know if fusion will have these effects, just as research on ranked choice voting was made possible once it was adopted in various cities and states.

Appendix

Thanks to the many experts who participated in interviews for this report. Those who agreed to be identified are listed below. All views expressed are their own.

Joe Dinkin - National Campaigns Director, Working Families Party

Barbara Dudley - Senior Policy Advisor, Oregon Working Families Party

Lindsay Farrell - Senior Political Strategist, Working Families Party

Steve Hughes - Senior Strategist, Working Families Party

Julie Kushner - State Senator, Connecticut's 24th District

Bill Lipton - Former New York State Director, Working Families Party

Bob Master - Former Legislative and Political Director, Communications Workers of America Union

Karen Scharff - Former Executive Director, Citizen Action of New York

David Zuckerman - Lieutenant Governor of Vermont

Notes

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senate candidacy in 2010 and for 10 candidates for the state legislature in 2008 and 2010.

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