

REVIEW OF *THE POLITICS INDUSTRY*

| ...the dysfunction has been engineered...¹

1. Takeaways

- The Democrat and Republican parties have done more than I realized to **suppress competition** from other parties and independents, e.g.: passing [sore-loser laws](#); taking control of the presidential debates away from the original more-inclusive organizers; setting biased financing rules...

| ...duopoly-created fundraising rules allow a single donor to contribute \$855,000 annually to a national political party ... but only \$5,600 per election cycle—two years—to an independent candidate committee.²

- They've also done more to consolidate **control of the legislative process** than I realized. The book describes various changes starting in the 1970s that reduced the power and independence of **committees** and increased the power of the majority party.
- **Party primaries** seem more insidious than I had considered.

| Primary voters are typically more politically engaged, more partisan, and further to the left or right in their respective parties. ... In districts that reliably lean red or blue, because of either intentional gerrymandering or natural geographic sorting, the party primary is the only election that really matters.³

- If it feels like our political system is deteriorating, we may be able to find encouragement from **previous cycles** of deterioration and renewal: the book claims Americans faced very similar problems during the [Gilded Age](#) and successfully reformed the system to address them.

2. Me rambling

Every four years, there's a bitter debate among some subset of Americans about what to do when you're not satisfied with either party's presidential candidate.

- *Perspective 1*: We're going to keep facing bad choices like this every election unless we build a strong third party. To do that, we need to demonstrate voter support for a third party. To do *that*, we need to vote for third-party candidates even when they have no chance of actually winning.
- *Perspective 2*: We may not love either candidate, but there are still crucial differences between them. A lot is at stake in making sure the right one wins. If we deprive the best major-party candidate of our votes by voting for a hopeless third-party candidate, we increase the risk of the worse major-party candidate winning.

Stated in this way, the decision of whether to vote for the lesser of two evils or to vote third-party in protest sounds like a conflict between our short-term interests and our long-term interests. But at some point someone convinced me that Perspective 1 relies on a probably-false premise: it assumes that *if* a third party got sufficient support, *then* we'd have a three-party system. As long as we use [plurality voting with a single winner](#), a three-party system seems likely to be inherently unstable—the need to mitigate the spoiler effect will be a strong and perpetual incentive to coalesce around two parties.

This reasoning suggests we should vote for the lesser evil, but it also takes the sting out of that prescription, because it suggests a path toward improving our options in the future that *doesn't* depend on throwing away our votes in the present: we need to work on [changing the voting system itself](#).

3. Final-Five voting

What I'm saying is: I was already sold on the main thing this book is selling. It argues that the US's two major parties have rigged the system to prevent any new competitors from arising, and have thereby made it difficult for anyone to hold them accountable for poor governance. The key reform that the book suggests for addressing this is "Final-Five Voting", which has two components:

- Implement **open primaries**, sending the top five candidates to the general election.
- Use **ranked choice voting** for the general election.

I live in Washington, which currently has open primaries (using plurality vote), but only the top two candidates advance to the general election. This seems like a bad combination; it led to [a little drama in the most recent primary for Commissioner of Public Lands](#). 57% of voters chose Democrats, but there were 5 Democrat candidates and only 2 Republican candidates, so [the Republican votes were more concentrated](#). The top Republican did modestly better than the top Democrat—22.03% vs 20.82%—but the other Republican was also neck-and-neck with the top Democrat, ultimately coming in 3rd by only 49 votes. If not for those 49 votes, the general election would have consisted of just the two Republicans even though the majority of voters voted Democrat. Final-Five voting seems like a clearly better way of handling this sort of situation.

4. Concerns

[Another reviewer](#) mentioned that the book doesn't really discuss what's going on in other countries. Do other nations using plurality voting face the problems discussed in the book? Do nations that use other voting systems *avoid* those problems? If the answer to either of those questions is *no*, it would cast doubt on the book's diagnosis and prescription.

Trying to follow up a bit on the current state of ranked-choice voting initiatives in the US, I came across [this article](#) which lauds Maine's use of RCV—but also suggests the effect on who actually wins elections is fairly small. This should perhaps be a cautionary note against pinning too many hopes on RCV. On the other hand, that might also help assuage any worries that changing the voting system would cause some sort of catastrophe. Anyway, we only have data from a small number of states and a small number of elections at this point. I know I should resist the temptation to believe in panaceas, but I remain hopeful that American politics could be vastly improved by getting rid of the bad incentives created by plurality voting.

Against cynicism:

...people would ask me about my plans. After describing for them the contours of my political-innovation agenda, I'd often get a similar tongue-in-cheek response: "Good luck with that." And it was easy to laugh along with them; the water of resigned acceptance is warm for those of us with means.⁴

1. Katherine M. Gehl and Michael E. Porter, *The politics industry: how political innovation can break partisan gridlock and save our republic* (Boston, Massachusetts: Harvard Business Review Press, 2020), 173.

2. *Ibid.*, 35.

3. *Ibid.*, 24–25.

4. *Ibid.*, 172.

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