Perspectives on Democratic Change

Thinking Outside the Ballot Box: How Indonesian Democracy Can Inform American Electoral Reform

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This paper employs a political comparative analysis of two of the largest democracies in the world: Indonesia and the United States of America, and examines how the latter can take lessons from the former amid overwhelming calls for electoral reform. It critiques key aspects of the American system that undermine the principles of democracy, such as the Electoral College, 'faithless electors', gerrymandering and inconsistent voter identification laws.

In response, this study proposes a reformed model through comparative analysis of Indonesia's transition from indirect to direct vote, as well as other key players in the success of their democracy, such as proportional representation, open-list systems, efficient election day procedures and a centralized election committee. This study argues that, despite structural differences (such as the entrenched two-party system and unique constitutional considerations), Indonesia offers valuable insight in conversations around American electoral reform.

Although recognizing the downfalls of the American system, this paper does not advocate for a full system uphaul, but rather contributes to ongoing discussions around reform processes by identifying possible transferable practices from a comparable democracy.

Introduction

Electoral reform has long been debated in the United States of America, primarily due to an integral part of the process: the Electoral College. The Electoral College utilizes an intermediary ('electors') to vote on behalf of its citizens, with each state being designated a certain number of electors based on the number of senate and congressional members in the state (Wheeler, 2020). Rather than using the 'popular vote', which designates a winner entirely based on who obtains the majority (or plurality, in some jurisdictions), the United States' electoral method opens itself up to several criticisms. The structure of the Electoral College, coupled with unsatisfactory Congressional election methods, creates opportunity for corruption and unfairness thereby undermining the legitimacy of electoral results and the concept of democracy in the country (Wheeler, 2020). With 65% of the United States population believing in the move towards using the popular vote (Kiley, 2024), discussion around the reform of the Electoral College is not only increasingly relevant but also reflective of a broader social demand for a more representative and equitable democratic process.

One of the questions when discussing American electoral reform is what a reformed process would look like. The United States' system could stand to take lessons from the Indonesian process. Indonesia implements a variety of electoral policies that can inform possible election reform in the United States, particularly: (1) a direct voting approach, (2) presidential and legislative elections that utilize a multi-party, proportionally representative and open-list system, and (3) strong election process efficiency through universal voter identification, election day holidays, and implementing the oversight of a centralized general election commission.

Criticisms of the United States Electoral System

Electorally, the United States is a unique country. The U.S. presidential election process utilizes the Electoral College, a system in which citizens of every state vote for their preferred candidate, and, in turn, the state appoints "electors" who cast votes on behalf of the state's citizens. 48 out of 50 states use a "winner-takes-all" system, where all the electors vote for the majority candidate, entirely disregarding the people's votes of the minority candidate.

Due to inaccuracies of estimation in the decennial US Census (Jacobsen, 2023) and inability to change the Electoral College elector make-up every time there is an election, this system creates a disparity between the actual votes a candidate receives and the "elector votes' a candidate receives. This inconsistency was especially highlighted in the 2016 presidential election, in which candidate Hillary Clinton received three million more votes than her opposition candidate, Donald Trump, but the latter won the election with 77 more electoral votes. To put it simply, Clinton received 2% more votes than Trump from actual citizens (the popular vote), but Trump received 15% more electoral votes from the Electoral College, securing him the presidency (Jacobsen, 2023). This is not the only time this has occurred. The loss of the 'popular vote' for a candidate that won the presidency has happened four other times in the history of the United States. Katherine Shaw from the Michigan Law Review demonstrates how fragile the presidency is, drawing the example of the 2020 U.S. Presidential election:

> "...just forty-four thousand more Trump votes across Arizona, Georgia, and Wisconsin would have resulted in a 269–269 tie in the Electoral College. If that had happened, the House of Representatives, voting by state delegation, would likely have handed Donald Trump the presidency" (Shaw, 2022).

When former President Joe Biden won the 2020 election, he led the popular vote by a difference of seven million, and earned 306 electoral votes (Jacobsen, 2023). In a country of over three-hundred million persons, forty-four thousand votes comes out to roughly 0.15% of the United States population. This small percentage would have had the power to shift the electoral college vote to 269-269, which would have led to a close call between presidencies. The fact that 0.15% of the United States population has the power to shift the electoral college vote by 37 votes (6.8%) calls into question whether such a system is a legitimate electoral process for use in a democratic country (Jacobsen, 2023).

Delving further into the disparities of the Electoral College system, the regulation of electors (or lack thereof) is another point of contention. When electors are appointed to cast a ballot for their state's chosen candidate in a *seemingly* ceremonial role, they have the option to undemocratically vote for someone else without severe legal consequences (in most states). In 2020, there were three of these "faithless electors" from Washington, who were given $1000 fines. This was the extent of their punishment (Wheeler, 2020). It is one thing for the presidency to be fragile enough that a margin as small as 0.15% could alter it so drastically, but it is another entirely for an intermediary to vote against citizens' wishes without consequence. While Wheeler (2020) asserts that past elections have not been altered by faithless electors, the threat that this could one-day happen due to a lack of legal barriers is enough to reduce faith in the American process. This ability, and therefore threat, should not exist in a democracy. Citizens cannot have faith that their votes will matter, make a difference, or be accurately represented in the electoral college, which can affect rates of voter turnout, due to disbelief in the value of voting.

The legislative elections in the United States are not barred from the aforementioned criticisms. Every two years, a third of the senate seats and the entirety of the House of

Representatives are up for re-election (Pruitt, 2024). The House of Representatives hold initial 'primary' elections to select their candidate. As with most processes in the United States, each state has the authority to dictate how the primaries work. Some states partake in a closed election (meaning only party members can vote) while others allow any registered voters to vote (International Foundation for Electoral Systems, 2024b). This highlights a level of inconsistency amongst the voting process, as can also be seen in voter identification laws or accepted forms of voting varying amongst states. After the primaries, citizens are allowed to vote for their candidate of choice to take a seat in the House. The Senate is voted using the same method as the House of Representatives, however, they hold office for six year terms rather than two year ones. Each party returns one candidate, which only leaves two options on the ballot: a Republican or Democrat. While independents are welcome to run, they face the same issue as the presidential election independent candidates: gaining enough traction from voters (International Foundation for Electoral Systems, 2024b).

The most pressing problem in legislative elections is gerrymandering, defined as manipulating electoral districts to favour a certain party (Duignan, 2025). There are several forms of gerrymandering such as malapportionment, which allows legislative candidates to represent constituencies with largely different populations. Despite malapportionment being outlawed, 'partisan gerrymandering' still exists. This is where districts are drawn to favour certain parties, so long as the populations in these districts remain equal (Keena et. al, 2019). Certain types of voters are grouped into certain districts, allowing specific parties to acquire more seats through a complex process of strategic district drawing. This is one of a variety of gerrymandering tactics that work to dilute certain votes and empower others, leading to manipulated advantages for certain parties (Keena et. al, 2019). This can lead to an

unrepresentative house that is manipulated in a way to block legislation from moving through. Gerrymandering removes faith from elections and interferes with the democratic process through inaccurately electing individuals via a series of 'technicalities'. For these people to represent the American population in the legislature does not uphold the values of democracy.

Indonesia's Electoral System as a Lesson for the United States

Indonesia is the third largest democracy in the world, with valuable lessons that can be used to inform election reform in the United States. The Indonesian government is headed by a President, who is voted in through a direct simple majority vote (Asian Electoral Resource Center, 2025). A simple majority requires that the winner has 50% plus one of total votes, while direct means that no intermediary votes on behalf of citizens. In Indonesia, some years have had only two candidates (ex. 2014 & 2019), while some years have had 3 candidates (ex. 2009 & 2024). In the event that no party is able to secure the simple majority, a second round election (also known as a run-off election) is held between only the top two candidates. Whoever wins this majority, wins the presidency. This has only happened once in Indonesia, in 2004, where none of the four original candidates could secure the majority (Asian Electoral Resource Center, 2025).

There is a major distinction between Indonesia's presidential elections and the United States': the direct vs. indirect voting process. An indirect vote ultimately allows the few to decide for the many, which has affected the United States in the form of 'faithless electors' and disproportionate representation. Additionally, an indirect vote does not accurately reflect the population's candidate choice. The direct voting process used in Indonesia is superior in that it removes the middle man, effectively reducing the possibility of faithless electors to sway the

vote. It also removes the possibility that a disproportionate number of designated proxies (or electors) can minimize certain votes and sway the election further. In the Indonesian process, every vote is worth the same weight. To put simply, it would be the equivalent of using, exclusively, the popular vote in the United States. Such a change would more accurately reflect the wishes of the population and reduce opportunity for manipulation, faithless electors and discrepancies. If the United States used the Indonesian model, the 2016 presidential election would have resulted in a different president.

The second major distinction is the use of a simple majority, which is less important in the United States context. The United States suffers from a two-party system, where there are only Republican or Democratic candidates to choose from. While independents are welcome to run, they cannot gain the traction needed to secure the presidency. Having a two-party system negates the need for a simple majority rule, but does highlight a different issue: who can become president? In Indonesia, a multi-party system is used. Indonesia boasts many political parties, with 148 registered in the 1999 election year (Muliawan & Sumantri, 2020). However, a smaller number of parties than those who registered actually participate in the elections. Using 2024 as a case study, Indonesia had 74 parties who were eligible to register for the election, with only 24 actually applying (BPS-Statistics Indonesia, 2025). In the end, 18 total parties were approved to run for the legislative elections. However, only 3 candidates for president were provided. This is due to the fact that many parties in Indonesia work in coalitions or alliances (all supporting one candidate to be president) and that to run for president, a party must have 20% of seats in the legislature from the previous election (International Foundation for Electoral Systems, 2024a) .

Having multiple presidential candidates from varying parties each year simply offers citizens more choice. There is no opportunity to get strongly affiliated to one party, as can often

be seen in the American political sphere. While three options are not a significant step up from two, if other parties could make headway in America, a simple majority rule could be implemented. Compounded by having more than two candidates, such a process would yield a more 'conclusive' president, accurately voted in by the majority of the country.

Also required in Indonesia is a legislative election. Indonesia uses a bicameral system, meaning that two chambers make up the national legislature. The first chamber, the Dewan Perwakilan Rakyat Republik Indonesia (DPR) is made up of 575 Members of Parliament who are elected by proportional representation and an open-list system (International Foundation for Electoral Systems, 2024a). Proportional representation is an electoral style that allocates a proportional amount of seats in the House based on the percentage of nation-wide votes (Protect Democracy, 2023). In Indonesia, there are 77 (84 in 2024) constituencies, with varying numbers of Members of Parliament depending on population. To give an example, in a constituency that is meant to return 4 MP's, if one party wins 51% of votes, they would be given 2 seats in this district (International Foundation for Electoral Systems, 2024a). The United States, however, operates on a winner-takes-all principle, which, in this scenario, would mean that the party that won 51% of votes would be awarded all 4 seats (International Foundation for Electoral Systems, 2024b). The biggest advantage of a proportional representation system is that it does not 'waste votes' (Pin Communications, 2025). All individuals in Indonesia have a say when they vote in a legislative election, because their vote (whether part of the majority or not) directly decides the MP make-up.

In Indonesia, the average voter turnout is 76%, with the country routinely entering the 80% range (International Foundation for Electoral Systems, 2024a). Such a voter turnout is incredibly high in contrast to the United States, which consistently yields turnouts in the 50%

range (International Foundation for Electoral Systems, 2024b). While it cannot be certain, such a high turnout in Indonesia could be attributed to the fact that Indonesians can be confident their vote will translate to the final delegation of seats in Parliament.

Furthermore, Indonesia utilizes an open-list system, meaning that each person can vote for an overarching party, but is also permitted to vote for the candidate within said party that they would prefer to take the seat. An open-list proportional electoral system is superior in a number of ways. Firstly, open-list provides a level of transparency. Knowing the names of the candidates who would take up office, as well as being provided options from each party, gives more power to voters in that they can further partake in legislature makeup. It also mitigates manipulation by parties, because an individual must win (rather than the party as a whole) to take up a seat. This would successfully interfere with the opportunity for placing certain candidates in the House to sway legislative processes. While the United States does provide candidate names, they do not provide the option to choose from multiple candidates under the same party in each electoral district. Doing so would create more accountability, transparency, and agency for United States citizens.

There is an additional point beyond the fundamentals of the Indonesian electoral process to consider: they are incredibly efficient, resulting in high voter turnouts. In 2024, out of 270 million Indonesian residents, 204 million were registered to vote (BPS-Statistics Indonesia, 2025), which is 75% of the country. It is important to note here that this 75% does not exclude those underage or ineligible to vote, meaning that the percentage of eligible voters who registered would likely be a higher number. There are several aspects of the Indonesia process that likely contribute to this high turnout, including election day holidays, electronic identification, and a centralized election commission.

In Indonesia, all elections are held on one day, commonly referred to as the "Festival of Democracy" (Al-Jazeera, 2024). This day is a national holiday, meaning all Indonesians have the day off from work and can vote in their local constituency at any time of the day. This effectively mitigates practical reasons for not voting, including work or academic obligations, or the potential to miss voting due to polls closing by the time their obligations are over (Al-Jazeera, 2024).

A part of the process that helps election day go smoothly is a universal identification system. Each Indonesian over the age of 17 has an electronic biometric card (e-KTP) that identifies them, which is a compulsory piece of identification for Indonesians (Maria, 2025). This effectively aids in election day ease and reliability, as compared to the United States. Varying voter identification laws mean individuals can vote multiple times or vote in constituencies that they do not belong to, both of which can alter results. A universal identification means every individual is identified accurately when they vote, and is kept track of in the election system.

Lastly, with the use of a centralized election commission, the Komisi Pemilihan Umum (KPU), elections are regulated across the entire nation. Their purview includes deciding who can run in elections and enforcing policies (Asian Electoral Resource Center, 2025.). Such efficiency lends itself well to the democratic process. The United States could, additionally, take steps to implement such efficiency if choosing to operate under the electoral college system, to increase fairness and voter turnout, and reduce gerrymandering or manipulation. While talking about these implementations in depth is outside the scope of this paper, it is important to recognize that Indonesia's elections are strong outside of simply utilizing open-list proportional representation, and that these are useful considerations in generic electoral reform conversations.

Limitations of the Indonesian Electoral Model

While the aforementioned factors make Indonesia an incredibly strong case study for American reform, it is not a perfect system. Firstly, the Indonesian process is quite complicated. Voters are asked to vote for all levels of government (local, regional, national and presidential) on the same day. With an already stacked ballot to accommodate all these elective bodies, the use of open-list representation gives citizens even more choice within each election. While this objectively is an asset in a democracy, it assumes that voters are educated in all levels of government, have knowledge of eligible candidates, or, frankly, care about voting for every person in power. A complicated system is not friendly to the general public, and may deter people from voting in the American context through being unable to fully understand all in which they are voting for. Additionally, while corruption tactics such as gerrymandering can be mitigated by centralized election committees, it is not guaranteed that these committees would be nonpartisan (Firdaus & Idrus, 2024). In fact, the KPU in Indonesia has been accused of unfairness, fraud and manipulating the 2024 general election (Firdaus & Idrus, 2024). While centralization lowers the risk of inconsistencies, which can lead to a decrease in corruption tactics, these factors are not mutually exclusive.

Furthermore, proportional representation is a broad term that can be implemented in a variety of ways (Difford, 2021). To calculate the number of seats given to a certain party, different mathematical formulae are used. While Indonesia uses the *Sainte-Lague* method of seat allocation, who is to say this is superior to other forms such as the *D'Hondt* or *Hare* methods? Some sources cite that while the *Sainte-Lague* method is better than the *D'Hondt*, it is inferior to the *Hare* (Difford, 2021). Each jurisdiction may benefit more from different methods of seat

allocation, and Indonesia's model may not happen to apply well to the American system. While this is not an exhaustive list of all the possible drawbacks of the Indonesian system, they demonstrate that elections do not have a universal approach, and there are important factors for the United States to consider when choosing to implement proportional representation.

Similarities & Challenges

Informing electoral reform with examples from Indonesia cannot have merit unless they are comparable case studies. On the most basic level, the United States and Indonesia share logistical similarities. Firstly, they have similar populations. The United States has a population of 336,794,243 persons, and Indonesia has a population of 281,562,465 persons (United States Census Bureau, 2024). While there is a roughly 50 million difference between the two countries, they are close in ranking, as the United States ranks the third most populous country in the world and Indonesia follows behind at fourth (United States Census Bureau, 2024). Governing over a similar level of individuals in a democracy allows Indonesia's processes to be more logistically sound. For example, an earlier argument was, to increase voter turnout and election efficiency, the United States could have all elections and ballot casting on one day (which would be a national holiday, similar to Indonesia). Citizens would take off work, head to the ballot box and cast their vote for presidential and legislative elections, all in the same 8 hours across the entire country. If Indonesia had a population of, for example, 20 million, it would be easy to disregard this point as it is inherently easier to coordinate a significantly smaller population.

However, with a similar population, the United States could learn from Indonesia. An argument can be made that such a feat is actually *more* difficult in Indonesia, due to its archipelagic terrain. It may be more difficult to send out staff, coordinate with different islands,

receive the votes, etc. from a country with separate land masses. While the United States does have Hawaii and Alaska to consider, 48 out of 50 states are contiguous. Indonesia also operates under three different time zones while still managing to coordinate voting on the same day (BPS-Statistics Indonesia, 2025). However, Alaska and Hawaii cannot be removed from this point. Hawaii, particularly, would be difficult, as it operates three hours behind California, which operates three hours behind New York. Time zones would span 6 hours in time, whereas Indonesia only spans 3. This could make coordination more difficult, but not impossible in the United States.

Moving into political structure, Indonesia and the United States both operate on a presidential system, which sees the president as head of state and head of government. They separate their presidential and legislative elections, meaning that the legislature's makeup does not directly decide who is head of government (like the Canadian system does, for example). Such a framework makes Indonesia equipped to be a strong case study, because reform based on its model would not require changes to the outcomes of each election, or to combine them into one. However, Indonesia operates under a multi-party system, while the United States has worked under a two-party system since quite quickly after the country's independence and has had the two parties we see today since the 1850s (Pruitt, 2024). This is a fundamental difference that could make reform difficult to implement. For example, pushing a simple majority (like the Indonesians use) would be redundant, seeing as when only two parties are competing, someone is going to obtain the majority (or get quite close when factoring in votes for Independent candidates) (Pruitt, 2024). In 2020, Biden won the popular vote by 51.3%, securing a simple majority (Lindsay, 2020).

However, what decides the presidency is *not* the popular vote, which circles us back to the Electoral College. To implement a simple majority rule, the United States would need to have multiple parties, which can likely only occur under a reform of the Electoral College (Wheeler, 2020). Moreover, while Indonesia's process can suggest open-list systems with more candidate options, more parties to choose from, and simple majority voting, this is all also entirely contingent on if the United States will implement direct voting. To do so would require removing the Electoral College, a concept ingrained in the U.S. Constitution. Reforming the Electoral College based on the Indonesian electoral system poses a challenge not only due to the United States' two-party system and far larger population, but because the current system must be abolished rather than improved on.

Indonesia strengthens its use as a case study for the United States in that it has experience in moving from indirect to direct voting. After 30 years of political stability for Indonesia's 2nd president, Suharto, the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis worked as a catalyst for his demise. While the attitudes surrounding Suharto's rule were that it was a corrupt hold of power and undemocratic, Indonesians did not rise up until the financial crisis hit (Bjornlund & Cowan, 1999). It was at this point that Indonesians, who were struggling to make ends meet, demanded a new individual in power.

Indonesians took to the streets to protest this, resulting in violence and riots. Until 1998, the President was unilaterally appointed by the People's Consultative Assembly (Majelis Permusyawaratan Rakyat, or MPR). After pushback from the population and the move to a full democracy, the first presidential election took place in 1999, but was done via indirect vote by the members of Parliament. Members of the elected legislature voted for the candidate they wished to see as president, with Abdurrahman Wahid winning (Bjornlund & Cowan, 1999). In

2004, the MPR added new amendments to the 1945 constitution, which reformed the election process to a direct vote, leading to what we see in Indonesia today. While the legislature in the United States is, indeed, made up of elected candidates, electors are not voted by the population and are, instead, appointed. This is an experience Indonesia knows well and has taken grand steps to fully reform.

The United States has already seen similar precursors to election reform as Indonesia. With most of the middle class plagued by economic crisis and the nation facing increasing political unrest, as highlighted by the 2021 United States Capitol mob attack and the 2024 assassination attempt of Donald Trump, the United States may be on the precipice of its own reform era (Kiley, 2024). While it would be a significant challenge to combat constraints such as the two-party system and the dependence on the electoral college, Indonesia's similar experiences can educate the United States, who may need it very soon.

Conclusion

Electoral reform is a formidable undertaking for any nation, especially for one as complex and constitutionally entrenched as the United States. With an outdated system that they remain the only users of, coupled with the social pressure for reform, the Electoral College and the entire United States election system needs edits. This paper has highlighted how Indonesia's positioning as a large-scale, comparable democracy presents a strong case for potential transferable practices that could reform the American system. Indonesia's transition from indirect to direct voting, its use of proportional representation, open-list systems, and centralized election procedures offer insightful lessons that can guide American reform. While no electoral system is without flaws, Indonesia's model demonstrates that large-scale reform is possible and can be

both democratic and functional. Drawing these comparative insights does not require the United States to administer an entire system overhaul or replication of Indonesia, but rather invites necessary discussion as to not just reforming the American process, but how to do so. Moving forward, the U.S. must analyze whether its electoral system truly reflects democratic ideals and if not, what steps they are willing to take to get there.

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