

# Proposed Electoral Reform in the US: Impact on Democratic Responsiveness and Cultural Pushback

Brylan Graber

## 1. ABSTRACT

Trust in the US Electoral System is likely at the lowest point in United States history, as voters across 'both sides of the aisle' have become disaffected with electoral politics, believing that elected officials do not accurately stand for or act on the interests of their constituents. Yet, despite a widespread appetite for electoral reform, electoral reform initiatives continue to fail when tested in statewide elections. Through this project, I aim to examine both whether proposed electoral reform measures would be effective in addressing voters' concerns about democratic responsiveness and why voters continue to reject electoral reform measures fail despite increasing public interest. I conclude that the implementation of proposed electoral reform measures would lead to short-run harm but long-term benefit in democratic responsiveness, but as the voting public at large distrusts the elites that are proposing and supporting electoral reform measures, such measures are unlikely to be tested at scale across the United States.

## 2. INTRODUCTION

### 2.1 *State of the Union*

The political climate surrounding electoral systems since the 2000 Presidential Election,<sup>1</sup> and catalyzing in the 2020 Presidential Election, has polarized the electorate to a point wherein governmental trust is incredibly low. As of 2024, 30% of Americans and 68% of Republicans believe the 2020 election outcome was fraudulent,<sup>2</sup> regardless of a lack of evidence to support that notion, and 80% of Gen Z voters disagree with the statement "The current political system works for my generation, and both Republican and Democratic politicians

want what's best for the country,"<sup>3</sup> even as Gen Z voters have only had a maximum of nine years to cast their respective votes in elections.

In response to increasing tension surrounding electoral systems across the US, proponents of electoral reform have increasingly submitted measures to their respective state ballots, primarily consisting of Ranked Choice Voting (RCV) and multi-candidate primary initiatives. These measures are common in Parliamentary systems across European nations in Proportional Representation (PR) electoral systems but are not common in Majoritarian (M) systems, in which every US

1 The 2000 presidential election between Al Gore and George W. Bush ended up being decided by 537 votes in the state of Florida. Bush won the election as Gore won the popular vote, which was the first inversion of the popular and electoral votes since 1888, leading to controversy (Michael Levy, "United States Presidential Election of 2000 | Bush vs. Gore, Electoral College, & Supreme Court," Encyclopedia Britannica, October 23, 2009, <https://www.britannica.com/event/United-States-presidential-election-of-2000#ref285282>.)

2 Monmouth University Polling Institute, "Most Say Fundamental Rights under Threat," Monmouth University Polling Institute, October 2, 2023, [https://www.monmouth.edu/polling-institute/reports/monmouthpoll\\_US\\_062023/](https://www.monmouth.edu/polling-institute/reports/monmouthpoll_US_062023/), Fig. 2.

3 Mark J. Scarp, "2 out of 3 Gen Z Voters in Arizona Say They Will Vote in November, ASU Survey Finds," Asu.edu, June 24, 2024, <https://news.asu.edu/20240624-law-journalism-and-politics-2-out-3-gen-z-voters-arizona-say-they-will-vote-november-asu>.

election would be classified. These proposed measures have been met at best with skepticism, and at worst with a widescale rejection since their original implementation: Four states have adopted all-candidate primaries since 2004, while the initiatives have failed five times.<sup>4</sup> During the Fall 2024 general elections, six states had qualifying election-related ballot initiatives,<sup>5</sup> but of those six, none of them passed.<sup>6</sup> RCV has been implemented within localities of fourteen different states, but only three have implemented them statewide. RCV initiative (both for and against) appeared on the ballot in six states during the Fall 2024 general elections, with only two measures passing, both repealing or prohibiting RCV.<sup>7</sup>

## 2.2 Proposed Electoral Reform

### 2.2.1 Multi-Candidate Primaries

A multi-candidate primary system would remove party primaries and combine them into a singular, “multi-candidate” primary, in which the electorate would vote for a singular candidate for office regardless of party affiliation, and the top candidates, such as a top four in Colorado proposed measures, would move on to general election.<sup>8</sup> In the current party primary, while specific party primary policies differ by state, registered voters for both majority and minority parties generally have no direct influence in the selection of candidates of any party besides their own.<sup>9</sup> As multi-candidate systems

remove party primaries, they would also remove the ability for prospective candidates to caucus for candidacy, meaning that the only way for candidates to secure a spot on the primary ballot post-fiat is through petition, with prospective candidates needing to garner a certain number of signatures to be placed on the ballot.<sup>10</sup> Precinct caucus systems have provided an alternate, closed-party path to the ballot that allowed delegates to elect candidates to the party county convention, where they could be nominated to the ballot.<sup>11</sup> While the electorate at large has long suggested that unaffiliated voters should have a say in the caucus system, such as in Colorado,<sup>12</sup> few have argued for the system’s elimination, as requiring candidates to petition is far more expensive and would likely restrict entrants for candidacy to socially or economically affluent individuals. Below is an example of such a measure.

**Figure 1**  
**Example of Voted Ballot Using Ranked Choice Voting**

(rank candidates)	1st	2nd	3rd	4th
<b>CANDIDATE A (Party 1)</b>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
<b>CANDIDATE B (Party 2)</b>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
<b>CANDIDATE C (Party 2)</b>	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
<b>CANDIDATE D (Unaffiliated)</b>	<input type="radio"/>	<input checked="" type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Figure 1: “Proposition 131, Summary and Analysis, Figure 1”, 2024 State Ballot Information Booklet, Colorado Secretary of State

4 Ballotpedia, “Colorado Proposition 131, Top-Four Ranked-Choice Voting Initiative (2024),” Ballotpedia, 2024, [https://ballotpedia.org/Colorado\\_Proposition\\_131\\_Top-Four\\_Ranked-Choice\\_Voting\\_Initiative\\_\(2024\)](https://ballotpedia.org/Colorado_Proposition_131_Top-Four_Ranked-Choice_Voting_Initiative_(2024)).

5 Ross Sherman, “History-Making Year for Open Primaries; Voters Send All Six Initiatives to November Ballot | Unite America,” Uniteamerica.org, 2024, <https://www.uniteamerica.org/articles/history-making-year-for-open-primaries-voters-send-all-six-initiatives-to-november-ballot>.

6 Ballotpedia, “Colorado Proposition 131,” 2024.

7 Ballotpedia, “Colorado Proposition 131,” 2024.

8 Colorado Secretary of State, “Proposition 131: Establishing All-Candidate Primary and Ranked Choice Voting General Elections,” 2024, [https://leg.colorado.gov/sites/default/files/images/2023-2024\\_310vbb.pdf](https://leg.colorado.gov/sites/default/files/images/2023-2024_310vbb.pdf).

9 Colorado Secretary of State, “Primary Elections FAQs,” State.co.us, 2024, <https://www.sos.state.co.us/pubs/elections/FAQs/primaryElectionsFAQ.html>.

10 Colorado Secretary of State, “How to Run for Federal and State Office a Candidate Information Guide,” 2023, <https://www.sos.state.co.us/pubs/elections/Candidates/files/HowToRunForOffice.pdf>.

11 Thomas E Cronin and Robert D Loevy, “Political Parties and Elections in Colorado”, in *Colorado Politics and Policy Governing a Purple State* (Unp - Nebraska Paperback, 2012), p. 125.

12 Cronin and Loevy, “Political Parties and Elections in Colorado”, p. 125.

**Figure 2**  
**Example Election Results Using Ranked Choice Voting**

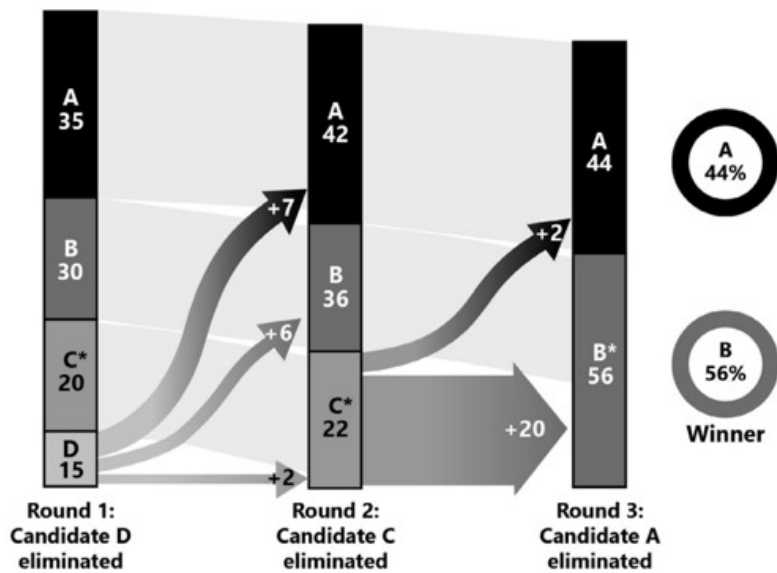


Figure 2: “Proposition 131, Summary and Analysis, Figure 2”, 2024 State Ballot Information Booklet, Colorado Secretary of State

### 2.2.2 Ranked Choice Voting (RCV)

In the status-quo electoral system for most states, if candidates receive a party nomination in the party primary, they move on to the general election, in which a plurality of votes is needed to win political office.<sup>13</sup> In Ranked Choice Voting (RCV) electoral reform initiatives, a simple plurality would not be sufficient to win political office; instead, RCV systems have voters rank candidates in order, such as from 1-4 in Colorado’s proposed measures. The candidate with the least first-place rankings is eliminated, and any voter who voted for that candidate as their first choice will have their second choice tabulated. The process goes on for candidates with the least amount of first-choice votes until a candidate reaches a majority of the votes, in which case the candidate wins political

office.<sup>14</sup> Voters have long complained that having two choices in the general election resulted in choosing ‘the greatest of two evils,’ due to their lack of influence in party primaries, however, when RCV is paired with multi-candidate primary measures, voters would be able to consider all candidates in both primary and general elections. Below is an example of that system:

### 3. METHODOLOGY

To determine how multi-candidate primaries and RCV will impact the overall electoral system’s democratic responsiveness, I will evaluate the proposed measures

against the general interests of electoral systems,<sup>15</sup> as measured by the following questions, in order of importance:

**Representativeness:** How would the proposed measures lead officeholders to represent the interests and values of their constituencies?

**Meaningfulness:** Will the electorate further believe that their vote carries weight, and matters for the outcome of an election? Does the electorate know how the voting system works?

**Accountability:** Can citizens keep politicians accountable for representing their interests, as they wish to be represented?

These are far from the only factors that determine the success of an electoral system. Other important factors that will not be covered throughout this project constitute a stable and effective government, a conciliatory nature that allows parties to work “across the aisle,” and opposing interests so that parties can compete

<sup>13</sup> Ballotpedia, “Electoral Systems in Colorado,” Ballotpedia, 2021, [https://ballotpedia.org/Electoral\\_systems\\_in\\_Colorado](https://ballotpedia.org/Electoral_systems_in_Colorado).

<sup>14</sup> Colorado Secretary of State, “Proposition 131, Summary and Analysis, Figure 1-2”, 2024

<sup>15</sup> To define this, I will use CU Boulder Prof. Jennifer Fitzgerald’s “7 shoulds of electoral systems” (Fitzgerald, Jennifer. “Electoral Systems Part 1.” Lecture, University of Colorado, Boulder, CO, Fall 2024.).

against one another to better represent the interests of their citizens. While these elements are important to the function of an electoral system, the four factors I will be considering in this paper substantially overlap in importance and quality with other elements, so they will be considered within other categories.

To evaluate these questions, I will examine RCV and multi-candidate primary initiatives that have passed within the US, analyzing the impacts of these initiatives on the states that have implemented them. I will then analyze how the proposed changes in 131 would fit into the existing electoral systems, and how democratic responsiveness will be impacted as a result. I will examine Colorado's Proposition 131 to determine the reasons behind its failure and finally come up with determinations on the proposed system as a whole.

A substantial challenge of this research will consist of analyzing the impacts of RCV and multi-candidate primary measures that have passed in the US, as the unique blend of existing majoritarian electoral systems with proportional representation alterations will make it difficult to accurately determine which factors have led these systems to success or failure. Traditionally, electoral systems either fall into a majoritarian or proportional representation system and rarely do elements of those systems mix to form an electoral system. A wealth of research is available on majoritarian and proportional representation systems individually, exposing their benefits and pitfalls, so to evaluate democratic responsiveness, I will need to investigate both systems and their combinations to come to a satisfactory conclusion.

## **4. DEMOCRATIC RESPONSIVENESS**

### **4.1 Overview**

In "The Quality of Democracy" (2004), G. Bingham Powell Jr. defines democratic responsiveness as "when the democratic process induces the government to form and implement policies that citizens want."<sup>16</sup> Powell notes that while responsiveness itself is not the only method to determine "democratic quality," I believe that responsiveness is most apt to suit the questions of the paper, as the purpose of representatives is to represent their constituencies, and responsiveness measures how well policy matches public interest. In Powell's model of responsiveness, citizen preference influences voting behavior, which in turn determines the selection of policymakers, who determine policy outcomes.<sup>17</sup> Within those steps exist a set of linkages, namely structuring choices, which Powell asserts "connects the preferences of citizens to their behavior in elections"<sup>18</sup> and institutional aggregation, which "indicates a bond between election outcomes and the selection of policymakers committed to doing what the citizens want."<sup>19</sup> This paper takes place in the context of those two linkages, as translating preference to behavior and behavior to officeholders is the role of a successful electoral system.

### **4.2 Proposed Changes on Democratic Responsiveness**

#### **4.2.1 Representativeness**

Representativeness within an electoral system is the single most crucial factor when considering whether an electoral system is democratically responsive. If an electoral system cannot accurately gauge and represent the needs and wants of its

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<sup>16</sup> G. Bingham Powell, "The Quality of Democracy: The Chain of Responsiveness," *Journal of Democracy* 15, no. 4 (October 2004): 91–105, <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2004.0070>, p. 91

<sup>17</sup> Powell, "The Quality of Democracy", p. 92

<sup>18</sup> Powell, "The Quality of Democracy", p. 93

<sup>19</sup> Powell, "The Quality of Democracy", p. 93

constituents, the system is bound to lead to a government that is not democratic in nature. Political scientists have largely split on how to accomplish a maximally representative system, separating themselves into “majoritarians” and “proportionalists.” Powell notes that “The majoritarian goal is directly to convert citizens’ expressed voting preferences into governments with exclusive policy-making power,”<sup>20</sup> while “Proportionalists, by contrast, favor institutions that first channel into the legislature the various major configurations of citizen preferences—weighted... according to the respective sizes of the groups holding those preferences. Then, the proportional vision seeks policy-making institutions shaped proportionally by the preferences of these representatives”<sup>21</sup>

Proposed RCV and multi-candidate primary initiatives are distinctly proportional electoral reform measures integrating themselves into a majoritarian system. Proponents of measures that integrate RCV and all-candidate primaries into electoral systems argue that the initiative will allow a wide spectrum of candidates, who may not be aligned with either major US political party, a chance to compete. Take Colorado as an example: 49% of Colorado voters are unaffiliated, signaling their disaffection with the current two-party status quo, allowing candidates who are not aligned with either party to come into the fray could potentially represent those voters better than the current electoral system can; majoritarian

electoral systems, which Coloradans currently utilize, fall prey to Duverger’s law, which states that “the simple majority, single ballot system favours the two-party system”.<sup>22</sup> By adding elements that favor proportional representation within current majoritarian systems, the possibility arises that the US electoral systems could reap the representation benefits of both a majoritarian and proportional representation electoral system.

However, potential representation benefits found in reform only serve to better substantive representation but may harm descriptive representation in the short-term future. Paxton and Hughes in “Introduction to Women in Politics” (2014) lay out three primary types of representation: formal, substantive, and descriptive, with formal being the legal right to participate in politics,<sup>23</sup> substantive as making sure that constituent’s interests are advocated for,<sup>24</sup> and descriptive as being a similarity in experiences and manifestations between representatives and constituents.<sup>25</sup> Paxton and Hughes note that “racial, ethnic, and gender groups are uniquely suited to represent themselves in democracies”<sup>26</sup> as they have increased legitimacy within their communities and have a better ability to make decisions for their identity groups. As racial, ethnic, and gender groups have been tied to socioeconomic status,<sup>27</sup> it logically follows that a representative electoral system would need to take officeholders from every class, so as to further the interests of different racial, ethnic, and gender groups. As multi-candidate primaries remove the

20 Powell, “The Quality of Democracy”, p. 94.

21 Powell, “The Quality of Democracy”, p. 94.

22 Oxford Reference, “Duverger’s Law,” Oxford Reference, 2024, <https://www.oxfordreference.com/display/10.1093/oi/authority.20110803095737871>.

23 Pamela Marie Paxton, Melanie M Hughes, and Tiffany Barnes, *Women, Politics, and Power: A Global Perspective* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2021), p. 8.

24 Paxton, Hughes, and Barnes, *Women, Politics, and Power*, p.10.

25 Paxton, Hughes, and Barnes, *Women, Politics, and Power*, p.8.

26 Paxton, Hughes, and Barnes, *Women, Politics, and Power*, p.9.

27 Lindsey Potter et al., “The Intersections of Race, Gender, Age, and Socioeconomic Status: Implications for Reporting Discrimination and Attributions to Discrimination.,” *Stigma and Health* 4, no. 3 (May 17, 2018): 264–81, <https://doi.org/10.1037/sah0000099>.

party caucus system, which is the least financially burdensome for candidates to enter election, candidates will likely come from a more affluent, likely white pool, which may decrease descriptive representation, and through it representation as a whole in the short-term future.

#### 4.2.2 Meaningfulness

For voters to be invested in the democratic system, it is imperative that they consider their vote meaningful to the election result. Many voters have become disaffected with democratic electoral systems, as they believe that their vote does not matter in the grand scheme of an election, and therefore they do not vote at all. In addition, false allegations of voter fraud<sup>28</sup> have fostered widespread voter distrust in the current election system. Introducing electoral system reform measures during this tumultuous time could lead to further distrust in electoral systems, making any change, regardless of its potential impact, less viable. Ultimately, the best predictor for perceived meaning in an electoral system is voter turnout, as more voters believe that their vote carries weight in an election. In “Unequal Participation” (1997), Arend Lijphart arrives at the conclusion that a low turnout systematically harms citizens of lower socio-economic status, as their interests are less interpretable in election results, leading to lower democratic responsiveness throughout a system.<sup>29</sup> Lijphart also argues that low turnout creates disparities in influence among different socioeconomic groups.<sup>30</sup> According to

Lijphart, democratic turnout has been consistently declining due to “institutional mechanisms” that dissuade voters.<sup>31</sup>

RCV and multi-candidate electoral reform measures tout themselves to be more meaningful than the current electoral system. In Colorado, Colorado Voters First notes that “Colorado’s... high General Election turnout is wasted because so many races are decided in low-turnout primaries”,<sup>32</sup> as only 13% of voters cast votes in competitive elections for CO State House races, as opposed to 58% in the Fall 2022 General Election.<sup>33</sup> CVF believes that, if RCV and multi-candidate primary election reforms are implemented, more elections will become competitive, and therefore constituents will have more chances to select candidates that best suit their interests and values. However, RCV and multi-candidate primaries within the US have run into problems of “ballot exhaustion” in the past,<sup>34</sup> as fewer voters participate in elections due to the increased levels of effort required to participate in RCV and multi-candidate elections. As voters adjust to new electoral methods, democratic responsiveness will likely sharply decrease due to low turnout, meaning that fewer interests are represented; in other words, they become an institutional mechanism that dissuades voters in the short term. In the long-term theoretical future, however, responsiveness should increase as voters have more opportunities and options to select in elections, making elections more meaningful to voters.

28 Eggers, Andrew C, Haritz Garro, and Justin Grimmer. “No Evidence for Systematic Voter Fraud: A Guide to Statistical Claims about the 2020 Election.” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 118, no. 45 (November 2, 2021). <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.2103619118>.

29 Arend Lijphart, “Unequal Participation: Democracy’s Unresolved Dilemma Presidential Address, American Political Science Association, 1996,” *American Political Science Review* 91, no. 01 (March 1997): p. 1, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2952255>.

30 Lijphart, “Unequal Participation”, p.1.

31 Lijphart, “Unequal Participation”, p. 7.

32 Colorado Voters First, “Colorado Voters First | Elections Belong to Voters — Not Political Parties,” Yeson131.com, 2022, <https://yeson131.com/>.

33 Colorado Voters First, “Yes on Prop 131”, 2024.

34 Craig M Burnett and Vladimir Kogan, “Ballot (and Voter) ‘Exhaustion’ under Instant Runoff Voting: An Examination of Four Ranked-Choice Elections,” Ssrn.com, November 5, 2014, [https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract\\_id=2519723](https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2519723).

### 4.2.3 Accountability

Accountability in electoral systems is a critical linkage to the “institutional aggregation” of a system, providing a bridge between voting behavior and the selection of policymakers. In plain terms, citizens can “renew the term of the incumbent government” or “throw the rascals out.”<sup>35</sup> In *The Quality of Democracy* (2012), Lijphart notes that majoritarians assert that “majority governments offer clearer responsibility for policymaking and hence better accountability of the government to the citizens.”<sup>36</sup> However, Lijphart notes that this assertion only holds true in a strict two-party system, and “rascals” may be re-elected without a clear consensus on responsibility.<sup>37</sup>

As RCV and multi-candidate primary initiatives institute proportional representation measures into majoritarian systems, Lijphart’s fear of third-party intervention reducing the accountability of public officials may become more true. However, as more candidates and opportunities to vote should offer a broader choice of representatives, rather than a majority of elections going relatively uncontested, (note the previously mentioned 13% of voters being able to vote in competitive Colorado elections),<sup>38</sup> the benefits of representative choice to individual representative accountability might outweigh the need to assign responsibility for failure or benefit. That being said, the prevalence of more interests may further divide the legislature, reducing overall system-wide accountability to constituents. In “Reaching Across the Aisle” (2016), Louwse et al. examines the divide between government and opposition in parliamentary vote, specifically

why oppositional parties are calibrated on some legislation and vehemently opposed on others. It examines three factors: “the majority status of cabinets..., cabinet ideology..., and cabinet formation”<sup>39</sup>, and finds “strong support for the effect of cabinet majority status, cabinet ideology and norms about cabinet formation on government-opposition voting”.<sup>40</sup> They note that “The difference between coalition/government and opposition is more pronounced in parliamentary voting under extreme cabinets than under centrist cabinets.”<sup>41</sup> That difference leads to “wholesale alternation” which creates “adversarial relations between coalition and opposition parties”.<sup>42</sup> In a system without a polarized legislature, a diverse set of interests would lead to individual officeholders being held accountable, but in our current political climate, the interests of constituents and officeholders are more polarized than they have been before (See Figure 3), leading to a legislature that would be further adversarial with an increased number of interests.

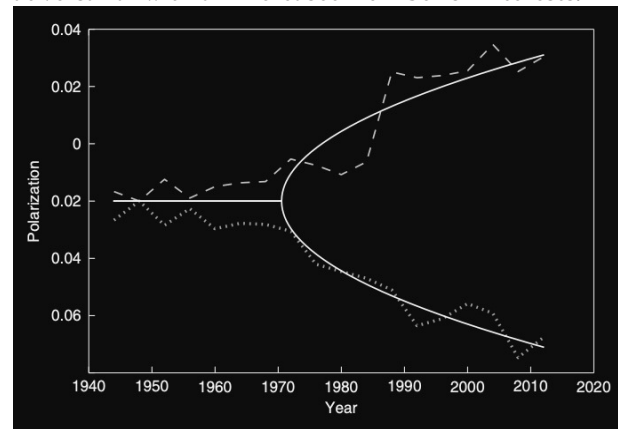


Figure 3: “Polarization in Presidential Elections in the United States, Figure 4”, “Negative representation and instability in democratic elections”, Siegenfeld and Bar-Yam.

35 Powell 1989, p. 119, in Arend Lijphart, *Patterns of Democracy* (Yale University Press, 2012), p. 279.

36 Lijphart, *Patterns of Democracy*, p. 279.

37 Lijphart, *Patterns of Democracy*, p. 279-280.

38 Colorado Voters First, “Yes on Prop 131”, 2024.

39 Tom Louwse et al., “Reaching across the Aisle,” *Party Politics* 23, no. 6 (January 12, 2016): 746–59, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354068815626000>, Abstract.

40 Louwse et al., “Reaching across the Aisle”, Abstract.

41 Louwse et al., “Reaching across the Aisle”, Theory.

42 Louwse et al., “Reaching across the Aisle”, Theory

Ultimately, RCV and multi-candidate primaries would likely benefit accountability, and through it democratic responsiveness in a theoretical, depolarized future. However, considering the inability of citizens to keep a divided legislature accountable in a polarized climate, these electoral reforms would likely cause harm to democratic responsiveness in the short run.

## 5. ELITE MAJORITY IMPOSITION: A CASE STUDY

### 5.1 Overview

Election reform measures over the past two decades have largely been initiated by elites, in what, who may attempt to reform the electoral system for personal gain. If voters feel that they have been slighted by this elite class, they are less likely to trust the measures they put forward. In *The Politics of Electoral Reform* (2011) Alan Renwick coins the term “elite majority imposition,” which asserts that a group of stakeholders, typically with elite socioeconomic or political status, usually are the ones to attempt to reform electoral systems for power “maximization”, creating a public perception of illegitimacy.<sup>43</sup> This creates two legitimacy constraints in reform: “first, certain actions or options are perceived as illegitimate; second, these perceptions exert constraining force upon politicians in power”<sup>44</sup>. However, while citizens take out their frustration against those in power, they seem to be fine with the outcome of electoral reform, provided that they are the ones who pass it through: there is little reform that is enacted but seen as illegitimate. Colorado’s recent Proposition 131 serves as a prime

example of an initiative failing from illegitimacy created from elite majority imposition, and elites being judged instead of policy in the process.

### 5.2 Case Study: Colorado Proposition 131

#### 5.2.1 Overview

During the Fall 2024 Colorado state elections, voters had the choice on Proposition 131, a citizen initiative that aims to bring all-candidate primaries and ranked choice voting to Colorado ballots. The initiative would have replaced the state’s current semi-closed primary system, which allows voters to vote in a singular party primary, regardless of their party registration. Colorado’s electoral system currently has a well-regarded reputation among Colorado voters that has led to higher turnout; 76% and 74% of CO voters turned out in the 2020<sup>45</sup> and 2024<sup>46</sup> Fall Elections, both second in the US only behind Minnesota.

#### 5.2.2 Stakeholders

Kent Thiry, the multi-millionaire CEO of DaVita, has been the prime benefactor of the electoral reform in CO over the last decade, using his power and influence to introduce and pass measures to let unaffiliated voters participate in party primaries, replace in-person presidential caucuses, and create an independent commission for legislative redistricting.<sup>47</sup> During the Fall 2024 elections, Thiry spearheaded Proposition 131; a measure to institute ranked choice voting and all-candidate primaries in Colorado elections. Colorado was one of six states to have RCV on the ballot during the Fall 2024 election, as the initiative has

43 Alan Renwick, *The Politics of Electoral Reform: Changing the Rules of Democracy* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), p. 7-10, 246-7.

44 Renwick, *The Politics of Electoral Reform*, p. 147.

45 Statista Research Department, “2020 Presidential Election: Voter Turnout Rate U.S. 2020 | Statista,” Statista, 2020, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1184621/presidential-election-voter-turnout-rate-state/>.

46 World Population Review. “Voter Turnout by State.” World Population Review, 2024. <https://worldpopulationreview.com/state-rankings/voter-turnout-by-state>.

47 Andrew Kenney, “This Multimillionaire Reshaped Colorado Politics. He Wants More Changes.” Colorado Public Radio, August 20, 2024, <https://www.cpr.org/2024/08/20/kent-thiry-reshaped-colorado-electoral-system-initiative-310/>.

increased in popularity across the nation.

Even in an election year with the polarizing issue of abortion rights on the Colorado ballot, Proposition 131 has been the highest-funded Colorado ballot of Fall 2024, raising \$14.7 million in support of the measure from the Thiry's committee Colorado Voters First,<sup>48</sup> while a meager \$500 thousand was raised in opposition, primarily from Voter Rights Colorado: a coalition of political elites organized by the labor union American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees Council 18.<sup>49</sup> The most prominent political parties within Colorado – the Republican, Democrat, and Green parties – have formally opposed the measure. Among high-ranking political office holders, the measure has also been split, with Gov. Jared Polis (D), Sen. John Hickenlooper (D), and former Rep. Ken Buck (R) supporting 131, while Sen. Michael Bennet (D), Rep. Lauren Boebert (R) and former Presidential Candidate Jill Stein (Green) opposed the measure.

### 5.2.3 Arguments

Colorado Voters First (CVF) claimed that 131 will make votes more meaningful in CO, make the legislature less polarized, and restore faith in democracy. CVF argues that “Colorado’s... high General Election turnout is wasted because so many races are decided in low-turnout primaries”,<sup>50</sup> as only 13% of voters cast votes in competitive elections

for CO State House races, as opposed to 58% in the Fall 2022 General Election.<sup>51</sup> By implementing 131, CVF argued that all voters will have say in the primary process, and the outcome will be more representative in the process. CVF also noted that CO Republicans have been shifting rightward in ideology as CO Democrats have been shifting leftward, leading to CO having the most polarized state legislature in the US.<sup>52</sup> CVF also cites ASU survey data of Arizona Generation Z voters<sup>53</sup> who broadly support equal access to primary voting regardless of party affiliation.<sup>54</sup>

In response, Voter Rights Colorado (VRC) opposed claims that 131 will lead to a decline in polarization or lead to more voters casting their ballot in primary elections, citing a 2023 University of Minnesota study.<sup>55</sup> VRC is also concerned with the cost of implementation for the new system, estimating that the initiative will cost \$21 million in the first few years of implementation.<sup>56</sup> VRC cites research showing that lower-income communities engage with RCV less, the error rate of ballots is higher under RCV, and RCV has little impact on politically polarized negative campaigning.<sup>57</sup>

However, these arguments have mattered less than the public perception of Kent Thiry himself. I had the opportunity to speak with Sen. Michael Bennet, who, when prompted about 131, turned the argument into an indictment of Thiry: “Don’t trust the elites. They don’t work for your interests;

48 Colorado Secretary of State, “TRACER - Colorado Voters First,” Colorado.gov, 2024, <https://tracer.sos.colorado.gov/PublicSite/SearchPages/CommitteeDetail.aspx?OrgID=46946>.

49 Colorado Secretary of State, “TRACER - Voter Rights Colorado,” Colorado.gov, 2024, <https://tracer.sos.colorado.gov/PublicSite/SearchPages/CommitteeDetail.aspx?OrgID=47446>.

50 Colorado Voters First, “Colorado Voters First | Elections Belong to Voters — Not Political Parties,” Yeson131.com, 2022, <https://yeson131.com/>.

51 Colorado Voters First, “Yes on Prop 131”, 2024.

52 Colorado Voters First, “Yes on Prop 131”, 2024, citing “Nolan McCarty (Princeton School of Public and International Affairs) and Boris Shor (University of Houston)”.

53 Generally defined by people born in the mid-to-late 1990s through the early 2010s.

54 Colorado Voters First, “Yes on Prop 131”, 2024, citing “Oct. 2023 Keating Research/GS Strategy Group poll of likely 2024 voters”

55 Voter Rights Colorado. “Voter Rights Colorado.” Voter Rights Colorado, 2023. <https://voterrightsco.org/>, citing Thomas, Penny, and Lawrence Jacobs. “Where’s the Evidence Supporting Ranked Choice Voting Claims?,” 2023. <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1iAsKwu0rivY1zNtnyxaiHKhGIVcOjSPA/view>. This study does not appear to be peer-reviewed.

56 Voter Rights Colorado, “Voter Rights Colorado.”, Home, 2023.

57 Voter Rights Colorado, “Voter Rights Colorado.”, Research, 2023.

they work for theirs.” Similarly, VRC proclaimed that 131’s defeat was “a win for democracy against an historic spending spree by wealthy individuals and special interests on a Colorado ballot measure.”<sup>58</sup> Illegitimacy created by elite majority imposition could likely be the reason the initiative lost, as voters considered Thiry rather than the measure, limiting options, and politicians who did support the measure, such as Gov. Jared Polis, only hesitantly supported the measure, as politicians did not want to be seen as supporting elites or special interests.

## 6. CONCLUSION

This project primary came to two conclusions: first, that RCV and multi-candidate primary systems are detrimental to democratic responsiveness in the US’ short-term future, as representativeness, meaningfulness, and accountability suffer, however those aspects would likely benefit and increase democratic responsiveness in the long-term future. Second, perceptions of illegitimacy from elite majority imposition constrain what actions and options are available for reform and constrain politicians support on those measures for fear of supporting special interests or the elite class. In this project, I was not able to analyze other important factors that impact democratic responsiveness in elections, such as transparency, conciliatory nature, a stable and effective legislator, and controlled opposition in an election system, and I would implore future researchers to examine those factors for the short-term and long-term future for electoral reform.

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<sup>58</sup> Voter Rights Colorado, “Voter Rights Colorado.”, Home, 2023.

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