

How “Representative” is US Democracy?

American politicians love to boast of their nation’s status as the world’s premier “representative democracy,” and to lecture other, presumably less enlightened, countries on the importance of representative political institutions. Going by the numbers (which admittedly don’t tell the whole story), there’s good reason to question whether such preening is justified.

Among the world’s states, the United States ranks third in population, but 25th in the number of members comprising its national legislative bodies.

The US has more than a thousand times the population of Iceland, but our House and Senate combined have fewer than ten times as many members as its single-house legislature, the Althing. Icelanders get one representative for every 5,037 inhabitants. Americans get one US Representative or US Senator for every 596,060 inhabitants.

In terms of the ratio of legislators to population, only the European Union and India are “less representative.” Yes, that’s right. The US comes in behind such exemplars of “representative democracy” as China, North Korea, Russia, Syria, Cuba, and Egypt when it comes to representation.

Of course, it’s reasonable to question the “democracy” part of the “representative democracy” equation for some of those countries compared to the US. After all, the US would never use authoritarian measures like gerrymandering and restrictive ballot access laws to ensure that only two parties, or even one, have a shot at winning a seat, right? Oh, wait ...

The size of the US Senate is fixed in the Constitution at two Senators per state. But the US House of Representatives is constitutionally only limited to a maximum of one Representative per 30,000 inhabitants. A House based on that number would have 11,000 members.

Why, in its wisdom, has Congress fixed the number of US Representatives at 435 since 1929?

The supposed reason is that a larger legislature has a harder time getting things done. Yet the 24 countries besting the US on raw legislator numbers seem to manage. And even if the excuse was true, it might well be a feature, not a bug.

The real reason is, of course, greed for power. No member of Congress wants to dilute the weight of his or her own vote from one in 435 to one in, say, a thousand. On the other hand, no member of Congress wants to risk being downsized back to private life if that

number is reduced.

If we want to really do “representative democracy” instead of just posturing and play-acting, a good starting point would be for Congress to increase the size of the House to 1,000 members, and for the states to end the foul practices of gerrymandering and giving special ballot access privileges to two anointed “major” parties.

Or we could stop pretending our “democracy” is more “representative” than Zimbabwe’s or Nicaragua’s.