



Time for an Addition:

Expanding the U.S. House of Representatives

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Introduction

This project examines the potential benefits and drawbacks of increasing the membership of the U.S. House of Representatives. At one point the size of the House grew alongside the country, but since 1910 it has been capped at 435 members. However, the nation has changed a lot since 1910. The population has grown from around 92,000,000 to around 330,000,000. Beyond the simple changes in population, many changes in society have occurred during this time. When this cap of 435 was put into place, having proper representation in Congress was not a great concern of those in power. Black people were still being disenfranchised by racist election laws, and women did not even have the right to vote yet when this amount was chosen. Based on these major changes, it is worth reevaluating this number of representatives.

Contemporary Arguments

There are many different reforms that could be enacted to create a House of Representatives that is more representative of the nation. However, many of these reforms would require a change to the constitution or an overhaul of the entire single-member district system. Adding members to the House is a relatively simple reform, as would only require a law to be enacted and not a constitutional amendment (U.S. Constitution, art 1, sec. 2).

When compared to representative bodies in other countries, the United States stands out as having districts with the largest populations. In a 1991 study it was found that among lower houses in representative governments, the U.S. has roughly 574,000 constituents per one representative and the closest country to this ratio was Japan at 238,600 people (Kromkowski and Kromkowski, 137). This study also displays that most countries had reconsidered the size of their legislature in the 1970s at the latest. Considering the age of this study, it is even more striking that over 30 years later the House is still sitting at 435 members with little discussion over this size. All the countries featured in this study had a smaller population than the United States, but many of them had larger legislative bodies.

This reform could be a great step toward having a more representative legislature, and it would not be a detriment to either political party's ability to win. As shown in Figure 2, neither party would receive a major boost from an expansion of the House of representatives (Cohen and Liebermann 2020, 22). This displays the potential for this to become a bipartisan issue, as neither party gains a real advantage in their ability to win the majority.

A survey by Pew Research Center (2023) found that 57% of Americans find having a political candidate that has lived in a community like theirs to be at least somewhat important. Due to the sheer size of many of the congressional districts in the United States, many of them are bound to group together communities that are very different from each other. By having more representatives and therefore more districts, it can increase the voting power of communities often underrepresented due to gerrymandering.

It is an expensive undertaking to run for office, and it is much more expensive to run in a larger district than it would be for a smaller one. With smaller districts, there would be less ground to cover, and a more focused electorate for a candidate to focus their funds on. It is important to note that incumbents still would likely have a major fundraising advantage, having been found to raise about four times as much money than their opponent (Zimmerman and Rule 1998, 6). While elections would still be inaccessible for many and incumbents would likely have an advantage,

it would open the door for smaller candidates to more easily run for Congress and potentially win. With more local candidates, they could better represent the area, and could potentially increase the number of women, people of color and third-party representatives there are in the house.

Historical Perspective

The size of the U.S. House of Representatives has undergone significant changes throughout the nation's history. Initially, the framers of the Constitution envisioned a House that would grow in proportion to the population of the country, ensuring fair representation for citizens across regions and demographics (Neubauer and Gartner 2011). As the United States expanded westward and its population increased, so did the size of the House.

During the 19th century, the number of representatives grew steadily, reflecting both population growth and the admission of new states into the Union, as shown in Figure 1. This expansion was seen as vital for maintaining a balance of power and ensuring that the House remained a true reflection of the nation's diverse regions. However, the process of apportionment became increasingly contentious as debates arose over the appropriate method for allocating seats among the states.

In 1911, Congress passed the Apportionment Act, which temporarily set the size of the House of Representatives at 435 members. This number would later be solidified in the 1929 Apportionment Act. This decision was motivated by concerns over the increasing size of the chamber and the logistical challenges it presented. Additionally, there were fears that a larger House would become hard to manage and less efficient in its legislative functions (Kromkowski and Kromkowski 1991, 134).

The only constitutional constraints on the number of members in the House is that every state gets at least one representative, and the lowest ratio allowed for voters to representative is 1:30,000, as outlined in Article I, Section 2. Besides this, it is fully up to Congress how many representatives there are in the House of Representatives.

Drawbacks of Expansion

One of the greatest roadblocks with a proposal to increase the size of the House of Representatives is that the American people generally do not support this change. One survey found that less than 20% of Americans would support an increase in the number of representatives, even if it increases the quality of representation (Frederick 2008). While this is of major concern, this issue is not something that is often discussed in media. If this issue was brought to the forefront of political discourse, it may change the way people think.

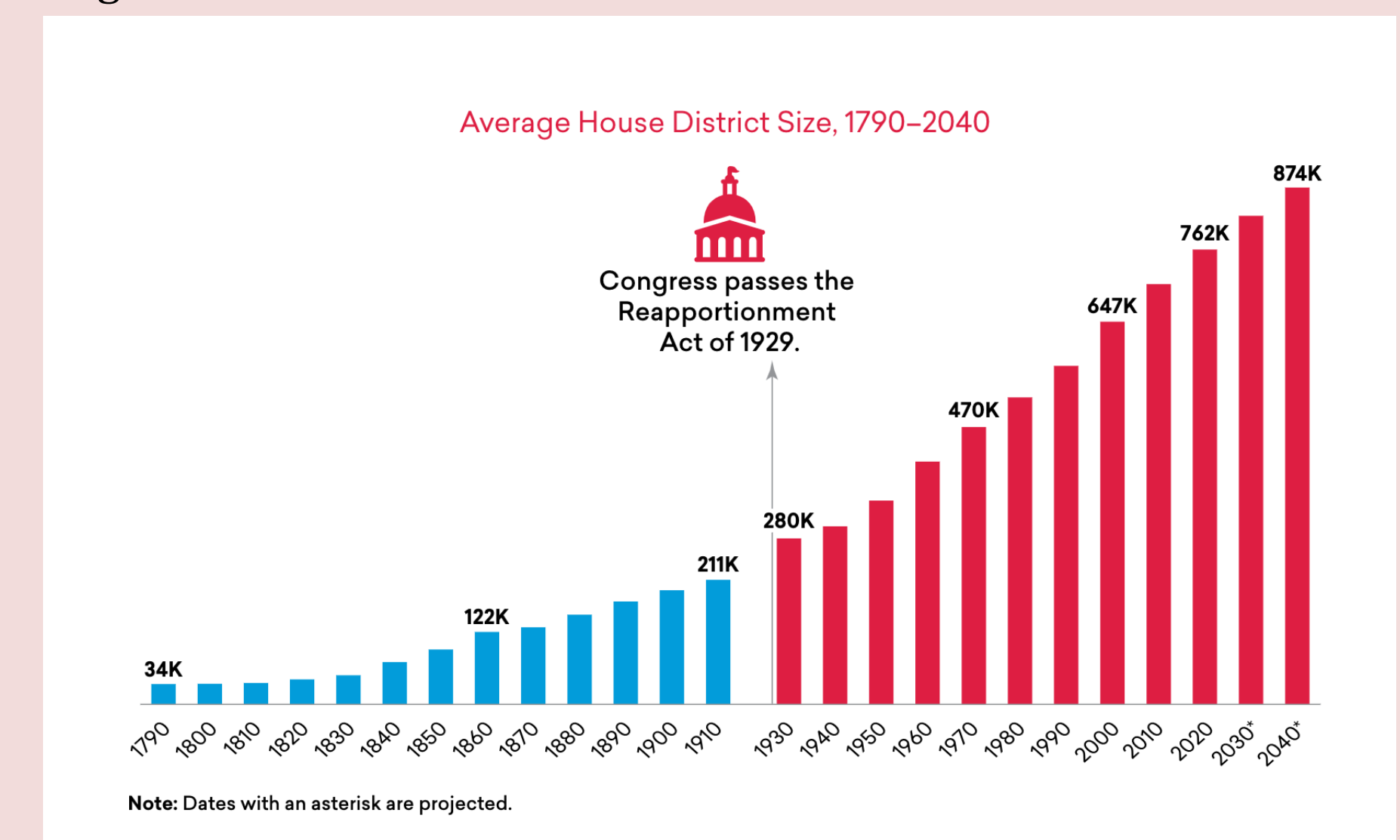
Another concern with this proposal is that it is going to be extremely expensive. Every member of the House makes \$174,000 dollars a year, and that is not even the beginning of how much it costs to have a staff, run a regional office (Brudnick 2023). This proposal's cost is yet another roadblock to obtaining support for this increase.

Conclusion

While there are major logistical concerns and this proposal is unlikely to gain popularity nationally, it is still worth discussing. Any kind of change that could make America a better, more representative democracy should at least be considered. For my paper on this topic, more arguments will be considered and solutions for the drawbacks will be discussed.

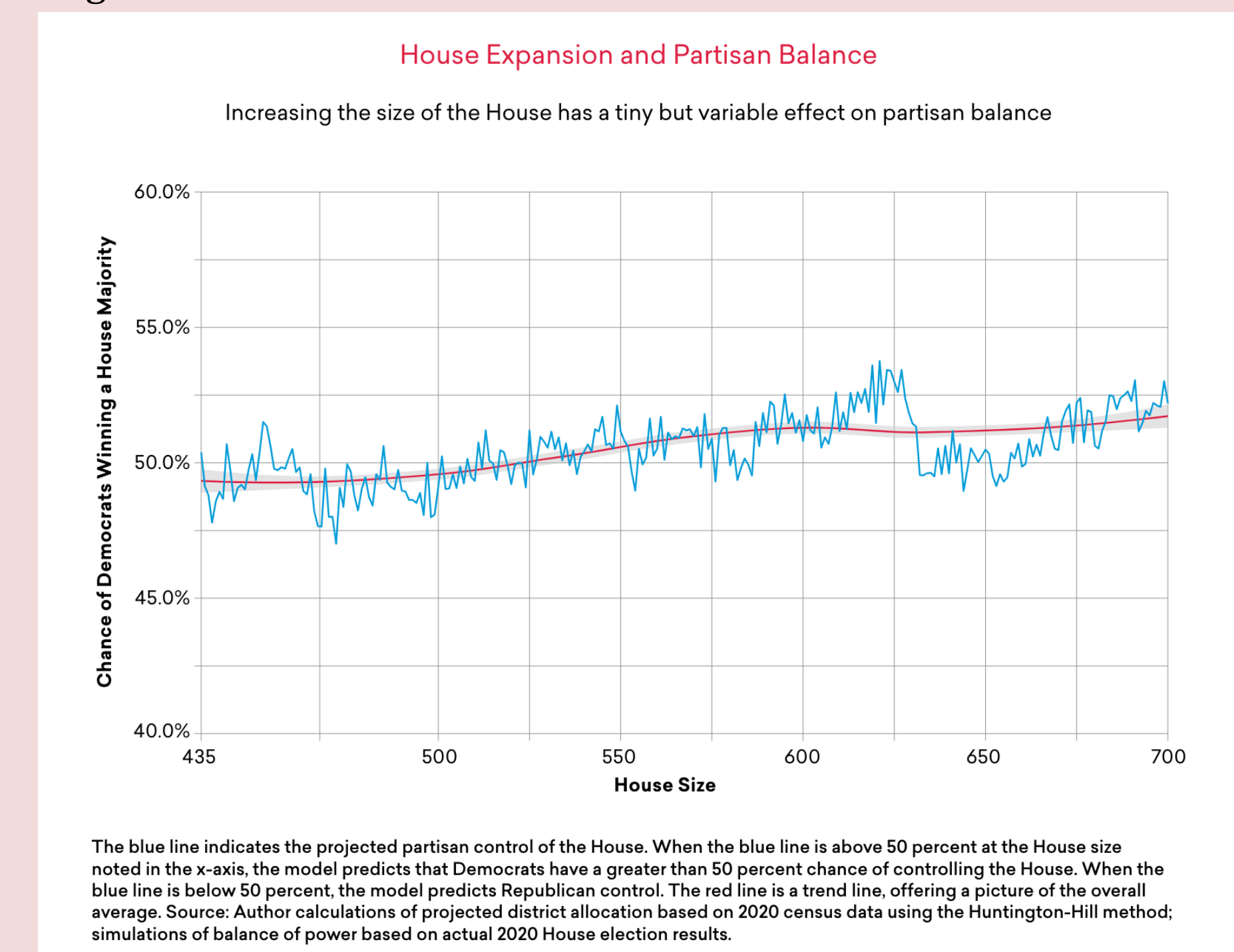
Figures

Figure 1



(Cohen and Liebermann 2020, 21)

Figure 2



(Cohen and Liebermann 2020, 22)

References

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