

# VOTING & REPRESENTATION



The purpose of this report is to assess how well the political system is generally functioning in Oregon in equitably representing the diverse interests in the state. The ability of different voices to be heard in the political system is a central consideration in building a better Oregon because broad public participation is a fundamental component of democratic government. We focus specifically on the ability of the public to have meaningful input through the electoral process because elections provide the formal mechanism through which diverse voices are represented in government decision-making.

## VOTING BY THE NUMBERS: REGISTRATION AND TURNOUT

**Registration:** More than 82% of Oregon’s voting age population was registered to vote in 2018, high compared to the national average (around 75%). There is no obvious urban-rural divide in voter registration. There are important differences by race/ethnicity. Black and particularly Hispanic/Latino residents are registered at much lower rates, as shown in Figure 1.

**Turnout:** Oregon’s turnout rate among registered voters for the 2018 election was 69.7%. While this was among the highest turnout rates in the nation, it still means that more than 30% of Oregon’s registered voters did not participate. There do not appear to be profound difference between geographic regions (e.g. urban and rural) in voting. As in registration rates, the one racial and ethnic group that had disproportionately low turnout is the Hispanic/Latino community, identifying this as a priority community for increasing voting.

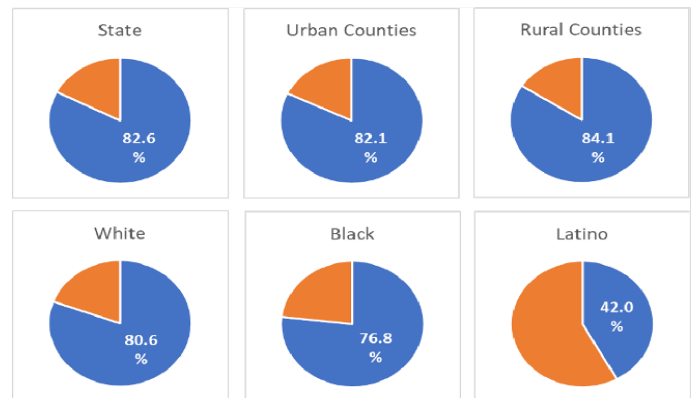


Figure 1: Turnout of registered voters, as a percentage of registered voters, 2018. Created using data from US Census Bureau, Current Population Survey (November 2018), Oregon Secretary of State, 2018 General Election Official Statistics.

A national study recently ranked Oregon as the easiest state in the nation in which to vote. Oregon has made an effort over the past two decades to expand the electorate by automatically registering Oregonians to vote through motor vehicle records and to make it easier to cast a ballot by conducting all elections through the mail.

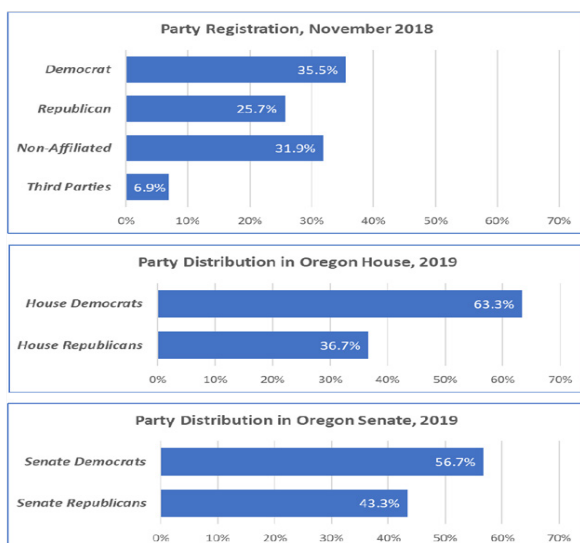


Figure 2: Partisan registration versus seat distribution.

## PARTISAN REPRESENTATION

The charts in Figure 2 show the party registration in Oregon in November 2018 and the partisan distribution of seats in the subsequent legislative session. One implication is that Oregon voters are not particularly enamored with the two major political parties. Overall, just over 61% of voters are registered with the two major parties, with 35.5% registered as Democrats and 25.7% as Republican. There are more non-affiliated voters in the state than there are Republicans, and almost as many as Democrats. The percentage of seats held by Republicans in the House (36.7%) and both parties in the Senate (Democrats 56.7%; Republicans 43.3%) is well above the percentages of partisan voters in the electorate. Combined, almost 40% of voters are registered as non-affiliated or with a third party. Despite the lack of enthusiasm for the two major political parties in the electorate, the two major parties control all the seats in the legislature.

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## ALTERNATIVE TYPES OF ELECTIONS

There are two types of systems used in legislative elections: majoritarian and proportional. Majoritarian systems emphasize winner-take-all, while proportional systems distribute seats proportionally to the votes received.

- **Single-Member Plurality:** Most common form of majoritarian system and used in Oregon. For the senate, for example, the state is divided into 30 separate areas, with each area electing one senator. Winners need a plurality (not majority) of votes.
- **Party List:** Most common proportional system. Each party puts together a ranked list of candidates. Legislative seats are distributed proportionally based on votes received by each party.
- **Single Transferable Vote:** Voters rank order their preferences. Candidates need a specific number of first placed votes to be elected. If they receive more than that, their extra votes are transferred.

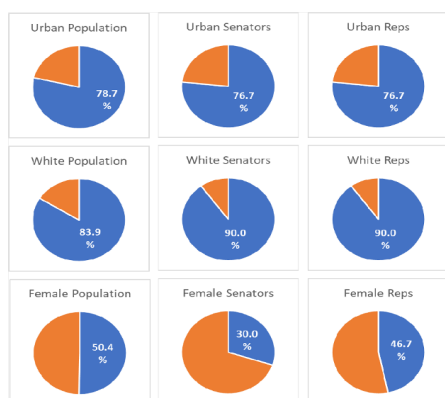


Figure 3: Demographics of Oregon state representatives and senators, 2018. Created using data from US Census Bureau, American Community Survey, legislative biographies, and news reports.

## DESCRIPTIVE REPRESENTATION

Descriptive representation refers to having elected officials who are of the same race, ethnicity, and gender of voters. It is thought to produce public policy that is more reflective of and responsive to the diversity among voters. Figure 3 shows the population of different groups within the state and the percentage of seats held in the legislature by representatives from those groups. Key take-aways are:

- Rural areas are receiving representation that is consistent with their population.
- People of Color are underrepresented within the legislature, though their representation has grown recently.
- The representation of women remains low, though it is considerably higher than it was in most of the 20th century.

What can be done to reimagine Oregon's electoral system? A variety of reform proposals have been circulating in Oregon over the past few decades including a top-two primary system, non-partisan elections, and fusion voting. None are ideal solutions. More recently, reformers have begun to look more seriously at the use of some form of proportional representation. Proportional representation systems have been found to do better at enabling diverse voices in legislative politics and in producing policy that better reflects citizen preferences.

## LOOKING TO 2050

In looking forward to a better state by 2050, reformers need to consider the possible introduction of some type of proportional systems. Oregon has become known for its policy innovation, including in making it easier to vote. But systems if it chooses. In 1908, Oregon voters approved an amendment to the state constitution (Measure 15; Article 2, Section 16) that allows the state legislature and local governments to adopt proportional representation.

Even though reformers should seriously consider the use of proportional representation, the political context may make it difficult for proportional representation to be adopted. One challenge is that the state has relied on single-member districts for years, which means most voters are unfamiliar with these proportional systems and may be deeply resistant to seeing them adopted. The second is that those who benefit from the current system, including elected officials and partisans in the elections, may be resistant to change, fearing that an alternative election system may harm their influence.