Legislative elections count, and in a time of deep passions and close results it is worth thinking about how exactly their results should be counted. Experts in democracy debate what kind of voting system best reflects the opinions of the majority while properly counterbalancing everyone else’s point of view. The devil is always in the details, and in a time where democratic principles are under threat, we should consider how these systems work from the point of view of the voter. What is the best way to ensure that voters for winning parties have a chance to see their policies implemented, while voters for the other parties hold enough power to keep them honest?

Democracy’s earliest voting system, called first past the post, evolved from the British Parliament and from the monarch’s practice of sharing power with distinguished representatives from across the country. In this system a country is divided into legislative districts of equal population, candidates run on a local level, and the candidate with the highest number of votes wins. This system is based on the idea that a candidate’s party or policy ideas are secondary to their individual reputation among their voters. In theory.

But which voters? First past the post’s great flaw is that it requires regular redrawing of district maps to account for changes in population. Despite this system’s anti-partisan roots, today’s redistricting process is the most partisan exercise imaginable. Consumer profiling has given parties more information than ever on how and when different groups of people can be counted on to vote for and against them, to the extent that sometimes in the 2020s the secret ballot feels like a formality. Rather than setting the terms by which legislators are chosen, redistricting has made it the incumbent’s chance to sculpt our preconceived and partisan notions into the shape they

would like. For all the local factors at play, the stakes in redistricting usually come down to how many districts are safe for X party, how many are safe for Y party, and how many are real contests. And of those three numbers the last is usually the smallest.

First past the post’s other major flaw comes up in any race with three or more major candidates: the spoiler effect. Should we vote tactically for a candidate we dislike because we think they have a better chance than a candidate we can’t stand? What if we do so and are proved wrong? First past the post, then, starts to feel like a shell game where the voter’s true political intent can never be expressed. Ranked-choice voting, where the voter’s second choice preferences are taken into account, is designed to address this. But this takes us further into questions of partisanship, and if partisanship is the voter’s prime consideration then first past the post’s reliance on redistricting seems even more arbitrary.

Let’s look, then, at a system which takes partisanship for granted and tries to control it. Proportional representation is designed to produce outcomes which align with the party’s national vote totals; if, after adding up the votes for all of a party’s candidates nationwide, 40% of the public have voted for a certain party, said party wins 40% of the seats. This system gained prominence in Europe in the early twentieth century as a way to open legislatures to the new democratic movements of the time. Today it’s used by nine of the top ten democracies on the Freedom House democracy list. It encourages multiple parties to stake out different ground from each other in elections, and then compromise when in government.

In terms of close elections, proportional representation distinguishes itself by making essentially the outcome of every election close. Even a winning party will rarely win a majority of seats by itself, so to get things done leading parties will need to convince at least some of their opponents. For better or worse, proportional representation means constant negotiation.

It also means constant factionalism. From a voter’s perspective, the biggest drawback of proportional representation is the blurring of responsibility. Parties live and die by their reputations, and proportional representation has a habit of punishing smaller parties for compromising with larger ones. And when there is too much factionalization for the winning parties to deliver their promises, this system gives voters even less to hold on to. First past the post at least allows us to judge our representative’s local record, but proportional representation may not even give voters a local link to the person they elect. The fewer links there are between voter and candidate the more fragile the democracy becomes.

Proportional representation and first past the post are the two most common frameworks, but there are as many variants around the world as there are democracies. Scandinavian voters use open-list proportional representation, giving them a large choice of both party and candidate. Switzerland’s voters can cast ballots for multiple parties at the same time, which can blur responsibility even more. Ireland’s voters rank every candidate in their preferred order–which requires them to develop well-researched opinions of eight to ten candidates every election.

What kind of system is most user-friendly when considered from the voters’ point of view? It would present the voter with a broad, but not overwhelming, series of

choices, and let them give real value to their top choices and real punishments to their bottom choices. Equally as important, it would produce a legislature capable of carrying out its promises. An example result may be the 2022 Australian election, where the opposition party won a small majority of seats; the party which had ruled stably for nine years scored a distant second; and a record number of third party members and independents won seats as well. These results came from Australia’s ranked-choice voting version of first past the post, but it is also the kind of multiparty outcome that proportional representation is designed to produce. Framework is a fine start, but in a democratic system the devils are in the details, but so are the angels.