

Opinion How big should the House be? Here's what readers suggested.



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In my Wednesday Opinion essay, “[Just how big should the House be? Let's do the math.](#),” I broke down competing ideas for enlarging the House of Representatives, which should be a core plank of any plan to renovate our democracy for a new era. But what we need most of all is conversation among citizens, so I invited readers to share their own ideas. Here is a sampling of responses, along with my thoughts on them.

3253isaprime: Why not simply weight the vote of each representative by “current represented population” divided by “a standard population.” That standard population could be the size of the least populated district (currently ~500,000). The “weighting” means that a representative with 760,000 citizens has 1.52 more voting power than one with 500,000 citizens (760,000/500,000). This varied voting power approach would balance out the current inequality without expanding the number of reps in the House.

Danielle Allen: This is a neat mathematical idea to try to achieve equal voting power for all citizens, so that my vote at the ballot box in a school gym in Massachusetts converts into the same amount of voting power in the House as my mother's ballot cast in a library foyer in Southern California. The trick, though, is that good representation depends on multiple design principles: the principle of equal power or popular sovereignty, yes, but also the principle of republican safety — that is, of being protected in our rights — and the principle of knowledge-sharing — that is, our representatives should serve as conduits through which local knowledge flows into our shared decision-making space.

The ever-growing districts threatens both principles — because it's harder for constituents to hold elected officials accountable in larger districts and because it's harder for representatives to have a fully inclusive, textured understanding of local conditions the bigger the district gets. Solving for voting power equality doesn't solve for everything that needs attention.

How to renovate American democracy

[Contributing columnist Danielle Allen](#), a political theorist at Harvard University, is calling for a democracy renovation. She says it's time to update the old house we all share to 21st-century standards. Her new series explains how to do it.



SteveVB: It's about time this was put on the agenda. Look at the House of Commons — they long ago outgrew their quarters. While you are at it, please consider adding 50 members to the U.S. Senate. That would allow everyone to vote on a senator every two years and increase representation.

Allen: This is a super interesting idea and one I've never heard mooted before. It maintains the equal representation of states. Many object to that principle, but I consider it still a necessary principle for maintaining our federation of distinct state governments. Some think state boundaries have become meaningless. I disagree, and I think we would soon find out they do still really matter to a lot of people if we got rid of this protection for smaller states. At the same time, as I'll write about in a later column, we are facing a problem right now of too much protection for smaller states because of how the capped House has led to a skewing of the electoral college in favor of small states. I'd want to really think through whether increasing the size of the Senate would in any way further increase the small-state advantage. Presuming it didn't, I think this might be interesting to explore.

GMan202: Three comments:

- The House chamber might need to be rebuilt to fit all of these members (that's not a reason not to do this).
- Can the House do this by itself (i.e., is the cap set by House rules and therefore discretionary for the House to change), or is there a more involved process where the Senate and president have to approve?
- Increasing the size of the House also increases the electoral college and makes the presidential election more democratic.

Allen: Ah, yes, the issue of space! I will have a lot more to say about that in an upcoming column. Stay tuned! And, of course, the question of whether the House can do this by itself is a second good question about feasibility.

The [1929 Reapportionment Act](#) states that “the President shall transmit to the Congress a statement showing the whole number of persons in each State, excluding Indians not taxed, as ascertained under the seventeenth and each subsequent decennial census of the population, and the number of Representatives to which each State would be entitled under *an apportionment of the then existing number of Representatives.*” (Emphasis added.)

Congress would need to rescind or repeal this element of the law. It could rescind just for the period of the next apportionment if the goal is to increase the House once. Then it could revert to moving forward in a steady state mode. Or it could repeal and replace it if the goal is to incorporate a principle of continuous growth.

So, yes, this would require not just a House majority but also a Senate supermajority and a presidential signature. I'll get back to the feasibility of all that in a later column as well as to the issue of implications for the electoral college.

Patchd: There is no reason, in my opinion, to think that increasing the number of members in the House would do anything except increase costs.

Allen: It would increase the costs in the basic sense of more salaries, not only for members but also for their staffs. We would need to be able to hold the representatives to account for their work. This means we need functional elections. They are our most important accountability mechanisms. And we all know many of the things that are wrong with our elections: [huge incumbency advantages](#), [way too much money in politics](#), most [decisions made in a primary](#) by the most activist base of our two major parties. As I'll argue later in this series, getting a bigger House and ensuring that it would function well at a larger scale would also require electoral reform in states so that we run better elections.

GazeboGolashes: Some issues should be expanded to a seat count of one seat per citizen — in other words, a referendum.

When wildly popular proposals like more background checks for gun purchasers can't pass Congress, it's time to let the people vote directly, as is done in many other democracies.

Allen: This is an especially radical idea. My original scholarly training was as a student of ancient Athenian democracy. Ancient Athens operated with a direct democracy, of course. It grew and thrived for about 100 years, took a huge hit when Sparta defeated it in the Peloponnesian War and then grew and thrived again for another 70 or so years, until it was gobbled up by Alexander the Great. The amazing achievement of modern democracy is to have figured out how to build and run a system of free self-government for free and equal citizens on a massive, continental scale, not the scale of a city-state of 200,000 people. Achieving continental scale was necessary to avoid having democracy be gobbled up by the Alexanders of the modern era. And preserving continental scale continues to be important for the same reason.

I think that preserving that continental scale continues to depend on our use of a federation. And use of popular referendums runs the risk of obliterating the voices of small states. It might be hard for them to break away initially, but over time, eventually, they would even at great economic cost. Just look at the United Kingdom.

Virginia state Del. Dan Helmer (D-Fairfax): My tiny House of Delegates district in Virginia is still about two times a federal district in 1790. I feel like it is the largest size in which everyone in my district feels they know me personally, and I've talked to nearly every family at least once over the course of the years. It does make a difference.

Allen: Bravo! This is what representation should feel like on both sides of the coin. This is only more important in an era in which digital technology is going to increase the use of fraud. Rep. George Santos (R-N.Y.) is just the beginning of a much bigger phenomenon. The best way to fight that will be for representatives to be directly known within their communities.