

# DAILY TED TALKS

## **Andrew Yang: Why US politics is broken and how to fix it**

It's great to be here. I'm Andrew Yang, I'm going to be talking about why American politics are not working and then how to fix them, all within ten minutes. What do you all think? Yes. I'm speaking here in Canada, and a friend in Canada described living here, or he compared it to living in the apartment above a meth lab. Where he's getting very nervous about what's happening below him, and it's starting to concern the entire neighborhood.

00:32

I'm going to suggest that what's going wrong with American politics is born of poor and perverse incentives that are related to a design flaw. Now, this design flaw can happily be addressed at only two percent of the cost of how much the two major parties are going to pour into this presidential cycle. This is, to me, the highest leverage opportunity in the world to start solving some of our biggest problems.

01:00

Now some of you may remember me as the “math guy” from four years ago. So there will be some math in this presentation. But I went around the US making the case that AI was going to come and change everything and that we needed to evolve our economy, adopting measures like universal basic income, to prepare for the future. I founded an organization, Humanity Forward, that is still working on these ideas today, but I came to realize that nothing profound and positive will come out of the American government unless we realign the incentives within the system.

01:32

So what do I mean by these incentives? What is the approval rating of US Congress as we're here together? And feel free to shout out a number even if you are not American. I'm anchoring you low so you know it's low. I'm hearing 30, I'm hearing 20. It is lower still, it is 15 percent. It's been declining a bit, it's been in the 20s. Now it's around 15 percent. What is the re-election rate for incumbent members of the House of Representatives? Anchoring you high. You know it's high. It's higher still, it's 94 percent. That's a higher win rate than the Michael Jordan-era Chicago Bulls, The Kevin Durant-era Golden State Warriors.

02:13

So how can these numbers be so disparate? It turns out that 90 percent of the congressional districts in the United States are drawn to be either blue or red. And the Americans here know what I'm talking about. You know which party is going to represent you before a single vote is cast. So what people imagine is that our leaders have to make 51 percent of us happy in order to stay in office. The truth is that only about 10 to 12 percent of voters participate in these primaries, and these voters tend to include some of the most ideological or extreme of the bases of these parties. I have met many base voters, and let me just say they have ... let's call them specific points of view. So how can you lose your job in this system if you essentially cannot lose the general election? You can expire. That's one possibility. But the other is that you get on the wrong side of these base voters. And there were 10 Republican House members who voted to impeach Donald Trump after January 6. How many of them made it back through their primaries? Two. In a system where you have a 94 percent incumbent reelection rate, only two out of 10 Republicans made it back to the primaries if they ran afoul of their base.

03:27

So the fiction that most Americans have been told is, look, our leaders have to make 51 percent of us happy. The reality is that they have to stay on the good side of approximately 10 percent of their party's base voters. So this tends to bring people a bit to the sides, it changes their incentives. This is one reason why America's political parties feel like they're not listening to a lot of the public. So you have the party primaries that are stretching us toward the extremes. Then you have our media organizations that are separating us into tribes and teams. You know which team's media you're watching at any moment. And then you have social media pouring gasoline on the whole thing. And if you had to put numbers on this, you can imagine the power of these forces. And they're getting stronger, not weaker. What do you all think? This is a reasonable summary?

04:18

So it's gotten to the point now where a US senator said this. He said, "A problem is now worth more to us unaddressed than addressed." What happens if some brave legislators lean across the aisle and try to compromise and find a solution to a big, hairy problem? They worked with the enemy, they're ideologically impure, their base turns on them, and their job security goes down. What happens if they let the problem linger and fester? Nothing. They can raise money, they can get votes, they can get you mad. And they have a 94 percent re-election rate. So you can put any major problem in this bucket. And this is why it feels like we're not making meaningful progress. You could put immigration in there, you could put climate change in there, you could put AI in there, you could put poverty in there.

05:02

So have I managed to depress you all in about five minutes? Believe it or not, I'm actually now going to get us all the way out of this in the next five. There is a real solution to this situation, and I want to give credit to Katherine Gehl and Michael Porter, who co-wrote the book "The Politics Industry" who make this case. So Alaska in 2020 changed its primary process to make it so that candidates run in one primary from any party, and then the winner is chosen via ranked choice voting. This is an Alaskan ballot, and you can choose up to four candidates, first, second, third, fourth choice. I'm going to take a couple of minutes just to review for the non-Americans, and maybe some Americans here, how the primary process ordinarily works. So the way it works is that you have people running in each party. You have nominees who are chosen, and then the nominees run against each other. And the party that is dominant in that district wins. And as we saw, in 90 percent of the districts, you know which party is going to win that general election. In this new system in Alaska, that was changed in 2020, now you have the top four candidates of any party get through to the general election, and then they are chosen via ranked choice voting, which we're going to go into an illustration of right now.

06:18

So this change was made in 2020, it applied in 2022. How many of you have heard of Sarah Palin? Somehow worldwide. How many of you have heard of Mary Peltola? Mary Peltola is the relatively anonymous state legislator who defeated Sarah Palin for a congressional seat in 2022. Now in a conventional system, Sarah Palin probably wins the Republican primary and then probably wins the general election because Alaska is a red-leaning state. But in this new system, via ranked choice voting, Mary Peltola ends up emerging as the winner in the second round, in part because a critical mass of Alaskan voters put her second. And in this same cycle, believe it or not, this is a very important race because if Sarah Palin had won, she'd be in DC right now. There would be a TV camera presented to her just about every day and asking her, "Say something crazy, Sarah, say something crazy." And then she would say, "Glad to. That's kind of why I'm here." She would say something crazy, and then that would be presented to the other side and say, "Did you see the crazy thing Sarah said? What do you think?" And that's what would pass for news. And we'd all be three IQ points dumber and sadder.

07:31

So this outcome was averted by this new system. But of even more importance was that in the same cycle, Senator Lisa Murkowski was up for re-election. And Senator Lisa Murkowski has the distinction of being the only Republican senator who voted to impeach Donald Trump, who was up for re-election. After her impeachment vote, her favorability rating was measured at six percent among Alaskan Republicans.

They did not like that impeachment vote. But there is no party primary in Alaska anymore, so she went through essentially to the general, and she ended up emerging as the winner because she was again the second choice of a critical number of voters.

08:12

So this change in Alaska had profound effects within two years, and it cost six million dollars to adopt this reform campaign. Six million dollars. You know how much the two parties are going to spend this presidential cycle? 10 billion dollars. I'm going to suggest that this six million dollars is the highest impact investment any of us has ever seen. And it's evergreen. It turns out that 25 states have ballot initiative measures where you could change the primaries into this new, nonpartisan primary and ranked choice voting combination that ends up realigning the incentives away from the extremes and toward the public. Nevada voted to approve the Alaska system in 2022. That campaign cost a little bit more, it cost 22 million dollars. But the advertisement that I thought put it over the top was a military veteran looking at the camera and saying, "I went overseas to defend our country for years. I came back and as an independent, I can't vote in our primaries. And I don't think that's right." 53 percent of Nevadans agreed with that veteran, even though both major parties came out against it. And in November, there are five more states that are considering a version of these reforms. I want you all to imagine six, eight, 10 US senators who are all of a sudden freed of their party primary and a similar number of members of Congress. Do you think that would meaningfully rationalize American politics and change them for the better?

09:39

That is the vision that is on the table right now. And the cost of this, if you were to adopt these reforms and try them in 10 states, not all of them would pass. Maybe half of them would pass, but the total cost would be about 200 million dollars, which is only two percent of the 10 billion dollars that are going to be spent turning Americans against each other, making us hate and fear each other over the next number of months. How much should be spent realigning our incentives so that government actually works?

10:06

So it's a political year. I know there's going to be a lot of energy in the air, but if you feel like you are forced to join one team or the other, I hope you'll consider joining team "overhaul the incentives." Because if enough of us join that team, then maybe America will start to feel a little bit more like one team again, and we can get to work solving the real problems of this era and build a future we can all be excited about. Thank you all.

**DAILY TED TALKS**  
**Join us, Click on the link**