



FAIRVOTE

PRIMARY RUNOFF ELECTIONS AND DECLINE IN VOTER TURNOUT

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The following eight states hold a primary runoff election if no candidate wins a majority of the votes cast in a major party's primary: Alabama, Arkansas, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, Oklahoma, South Carolina, and Texas. North Carolina and South Dakota also have primary runoff provisions, but with different thresholds: The threshold for a runoff is 30% in North Carolina and 35% in South Dakota.

FairVote studied voter turnout in all congressional primary runoffs held since 1994. Below are our key findings.

Near-Universal Decline in Turnout. Turnout declined between the primary and the runoff in 266 of the 276 regularly scheduled primary runoffs in the U.S House and U.S. Senate from 1994 to 2022. In other words, in 96% of primary runoff elections, fewer people voted in the second round than in the first. The median decline in turnout was 40%.

Primary Runoff Timing a Key Factor. The longer the wait between the initial primary and the runoff, the higher the decrease in voter turnout between elections typically is. Runoffs held between 31 and 40 days after the initial primary have a median turnout decline over three times higher than that of runoffs held between 11 and 20 days after the initial primary.

Runoff Come-From-Behind Wins Are Common. Of the 276 runoffs in this time period, 89 (32%) resulted in a primary winner who trailed in the first round. These nominees likely had the broadest support in their states or districts, but would not have been nominated under plurality voting. Although runoffs aim to achieve the important goal of picking winners with broad support, the big declines in turnout often undermine that goal.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jeremy Rose wrote this report, building on previous work by Declan Alvidrez, Deb Otis, Austin Bartola, Corinne DeFrancisci, Rob Richie, Robert Fekete, Matt Bugajski, Katherine Sicienski, William Hix, Devin McCarthy, Andrea Levien, and Kelsey Kober.



▶ INTRODUCTION

A primary runoff election is held following the official results of an initial primary election if no candidate surpasses the necessary predetermined threshold for victory (typically 50% of votes, but standards may differ). The runoff is contested by the top two vote-getting candidates from the initial primary and the winner of this two-person race receives the party's nomination.

The runoff format attempts to understand the nuance of party opinion; voters have the opportunity to vote for the candidate they most strongly support in the first round without potentially wasting their vote. In the event that their candidate advances to the runoff, they have the opportunity to vote for them again. If their candidate does not advance to the runoff, voters can still vote for the runoff candidate who most closely aligns with their preferences. This format increases the likelihood that the winning candidate accurately represents the party and the party's voters.

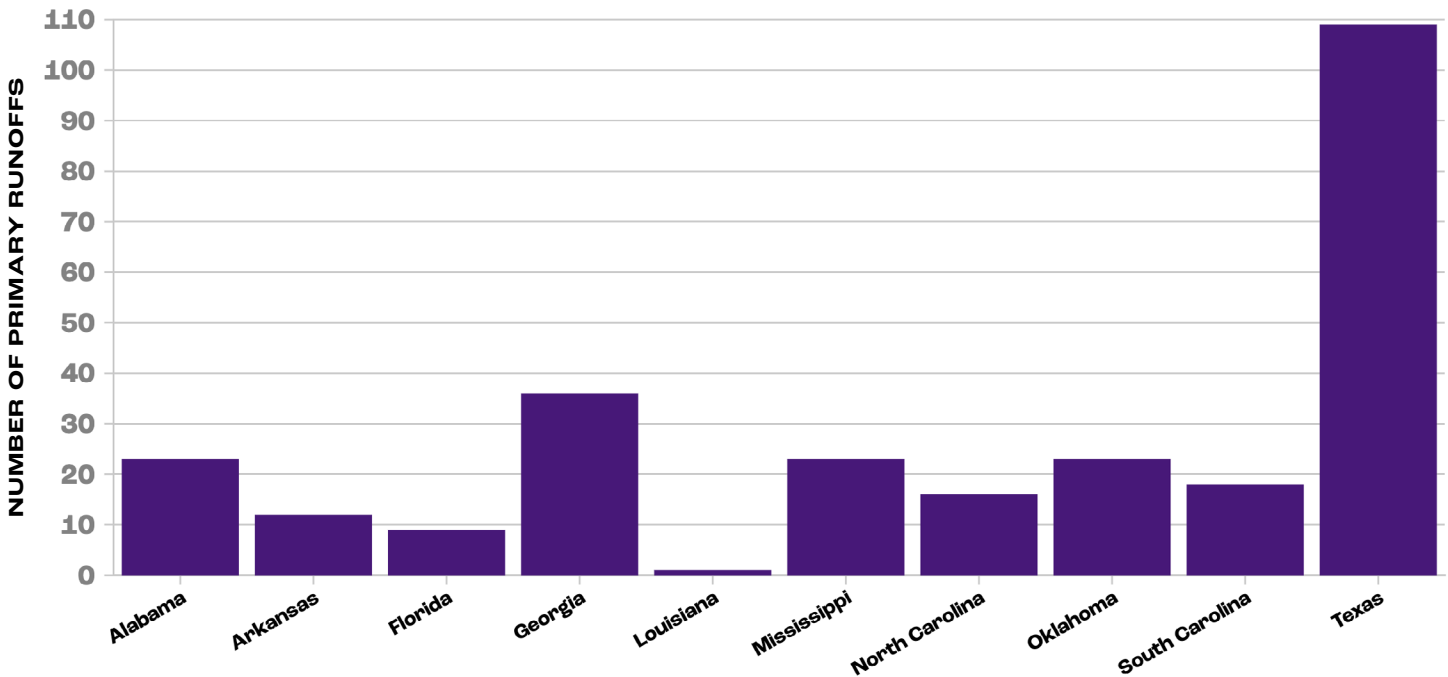
Despite the promise of primary runoffs, voter turnout is particularly problematic. A lack of voter awareness of the system, coupled with the dip in enthusiasm following the initial primary, has resulted in a trend of voter turnout dropping off in the runoff election. Low turnout in the runoff sullies the results of the election and largely defeats the purpose of holding a runoff election. Across the United States, voter turnout in runoff elections has frequently plunged so low that the legitimacy of the system and the elected officials has been called into question.

▶ BACKGROUND

The runoff electoral system is not anything new for the United States or the rest of the world. Currently, ten states use primary runoffs at the federal level, while others use the system at a state or municipal level. There is a good deal of variation across the country, as some states only use runoffs for certain elections; Vermont, for example, only uses the runoff format in the event of a tie, while South Dakota uses runoffs in federal and gubernatorial elections. California and Washington put a different spin on the traditional runoff format and conduct a "Top Two" runoff election, in which the top two vote-getters of the initial open primary run against each other for the general election, regardless of party. Georgia and Louisiana hold a second round of voting between the top two candidates if no candidate achieves a majority in the November election. In 2022, six states held a total of 28 primary runoff elections.

The past 14 election cycles have seen 276 U.S. House and Senate Democratic and Republican nominees who have competed in primary runoff elections. Of this group, 120 were ultimately elected to serve in Washington, and 43 of the 120 would not have won their party's nomination had the plurality voting system been used.

FIGURE 1: NUMBER OF PRIMARY RUNOFFS BY STATE, 1994-2022



Though runoffs are widely used, there are underlying costs, both monetary and political, that bring into question the viability of the traditional runoff format. The multiple rounds of manual voting drastically increase the administrative logistics and costs, while also necessitating an even higher degree of funding for a campaign to be successful. On top of the high cost, there is a significant decline in participation for the second election. To understand the effect of runoffs on voter turnout, we analyzed all federal primary runoff elections from 1994 to 2022. This study takes into account the voter participation of each election and the time gap between the initial and runoff elections. The time gap between elections has shown to be a major contributor to the sharp decline in voter participation.

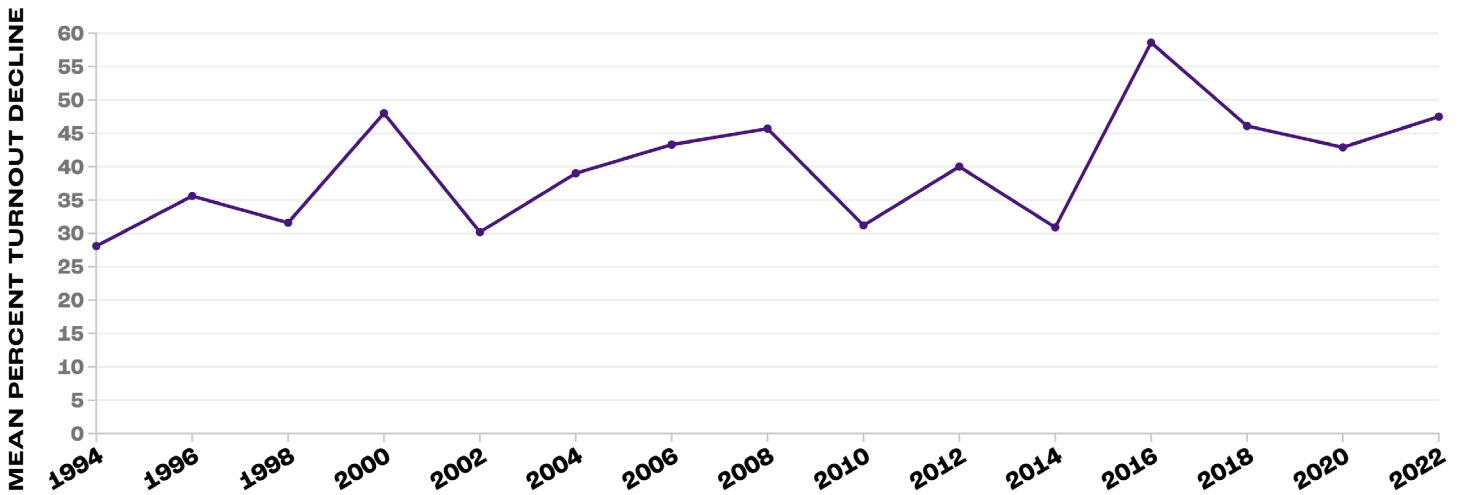
The purpose of runoff elections is to allow voters to select a candidate with whom they most closely align in the first round, while still advancing nominees who best represent the voters to the general election. In order to combat the turnout issue, however, changes must be made. Instead of completely throwing out the existing runoff format that is used among multiple states, we recommend shifting to an “instant runoff” election, also known as ranked choice voting. This gives voters the chance to express their true preferences, costs significantly less money for jurisdictions and candidates, and shrinks the multiple-round election to a single, more accessible election.

▶ **OVERALL TURNOUT DECLINE IN PRIMARY RUNOFFS**

All but 10 primary runoff elections from 1994 to 2022 have seen a dropoff in voter turnout from the initial primary election. Over this time period, the median turnout decline was 40.3%. The 2022 primary runoffs had a median turnout decline of 51.7%.

General elections are a national affair; election day in November is the same throughout the country, whereas primaries and especially primary runoffs are scattered across the calendar. Particularly in the case of states that hold their primary runoffs many weeks after the election, without the benefit of a nationwide election atmosphere and coverage, get-out-the-vote campaigns must be built in order to both notify voters of the runoff date and build motivation to return to the polls.

FIGURE 2: MEAN PERCENT TURNOUT DECLINE, 1994-2022



CASE STUDY

TURNOUT DECLINE IN GENERAL ELECTION RUNOFFS IN GEORGIA

While ten states use primary runoff elections, Georgia is one of only two states to hold runoffs for its general election. The other is Louisiana, whose runoff follows a jungle-primary in November.

Georgia has held 10 statewide general election runoffs in the last 30 years:

Year	Office	General Election Turnout	Runoff Turnout	Turnout Decline
2020	U.S. Senate	4,952,175	4,444,832	-10%
2020	U.S. Senate (special)	4,914,361	4,444,780	-10%
2020	Public Service Commission, District 4	4,839,413	4,435,651	-8%
2018	Secretary of State	3,883,594	1,473,904	-62%
2018	Public Service Commission, District 3	3,858,554	1,465,820	-62%
2008	U.S. Senate	3,752,485	2,137,956	-43%
2008	Public Service Commission, District 4	3,618,825	2,010,329	-44%
2006	Public Service Commission, District 3	2,036,114	215,092	-89%
2004	Court of Appeals Judge	2,656,755	243,967	-91%
1992	U.S. Senate	2,251,576	1,253,991	-44%

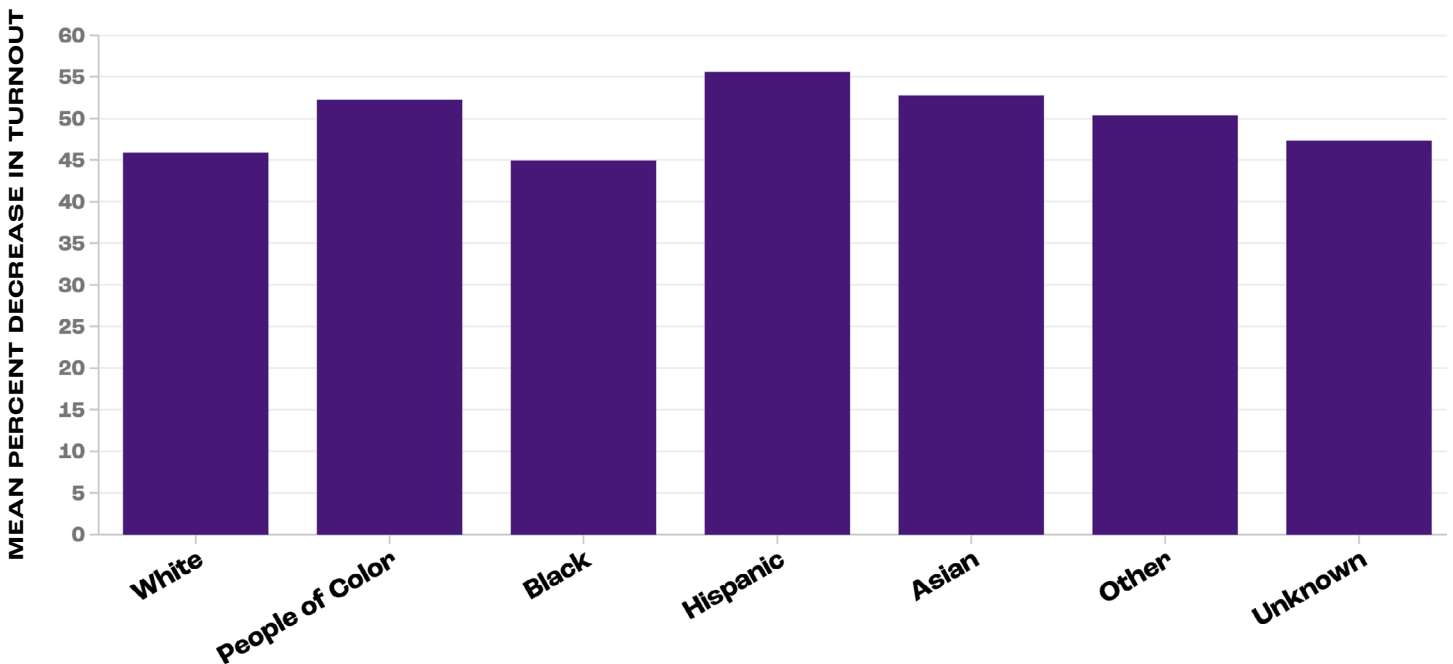
In 2020, Georgia held two Senate elections, including one as a special election to fill the vacancy created by former Senator Johnny Isakson’s resignation. This meant the runoff period included four Senate campaigns in the state, mobilizing as many voters as possible leading into the January runoffs. Additionally, these two Senate seats would determine control of the chamber for the next two years. The race shattered spending records, with the candidates and outside groups spending a total of about \$937 million over the course of the campaign.

From a turnout perspective, the high stakes and additional mobilization created by multiple high-profile races could be considered a “best-case scenario.” Even so, turnout declined by 10% for the January runoffs. A more typical turnout decline is 40% or more, on par with turnout decline for the primary runoff elections studied in this report. Just like in primary runoffs, when the decisive round occurs in a runoff, fewer voters participate and fewer voices are reflected in the outcome.

▶ TURNOUT DECLINE IN COMMUNITIES OF COLOR¹

Turnout for all voters nearly always declines from primary to runoff, but there is a more significant drop among people of color. Turnout among people of color decreased by an average of 52.2% in 2022, compared to a 46.0% decrease in white turnout. As a result, the percentage of the electorate made up of voters of color declined from 33.0% in primary elections to 31.0% in runoffs. The disparity in voter turnout may reflect burdens that more heavily affect people of color; as a result, the runoff election is a less accurate representation of the electorate.

FIGURE 3: MEAN PERCENT DECREASE IN TURNOUT BY ETHNICITY IN 2022 PRIMARY RUNOFFS



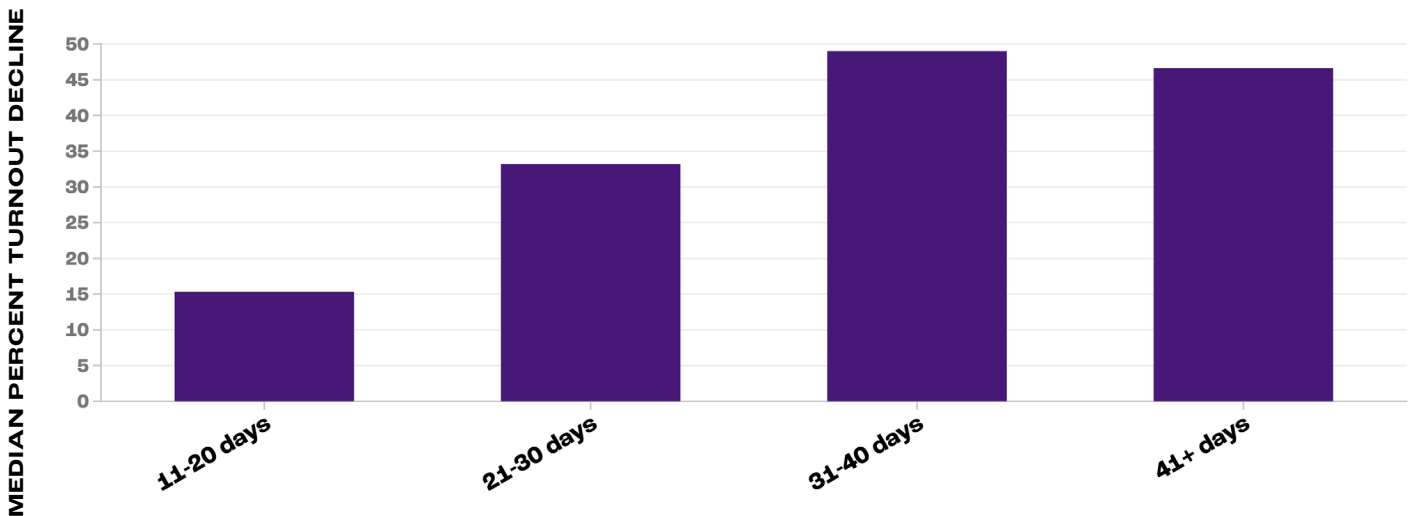
¹ Data on turnout by ethnicity were not available for three 2022 Mississippi primary runoffs.

▶ GAPS IN DAYS BETWEEN ELECTION ROUNDS

Seeking to uphold the voting rights of overseas and military voters, several states have opted to increase the number of days between primary elections and the subsequent runoffs. However, extending the gap between elections appears to lead to a drastic decline in voter turnout, particularly in-person voter turnout.

The longer the amount of time between elections, the greater the decline in turnout. Runoffs held between 31 and 40 days after the initial primary have a median turnout decline over three times higher (49.0%) than that of runoffs held between 11 and 20 days after the initial primary (15.3%).

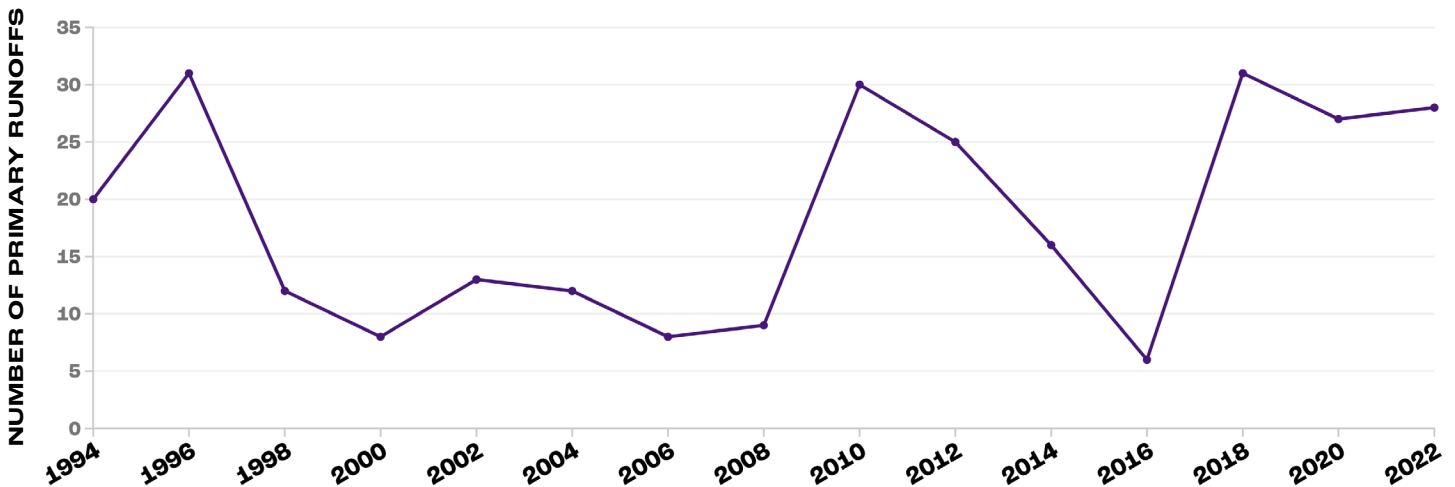
FIGURE 4: MEDIAN PERCENT TURNOUT DECLINE BY TIME GAP BETWEEN ELECTIONS



The clear trend is that as time between the initial election and the runoff goes on, voter turnout trends downwards. In election rounds held closer together, there is more sustained media coverage and it is easier for candidates to maintain momentum gained during the initial campaign.

▶ USE OF PRIMARY RUNOFFS OVER TIME

FIGURE 5: NUMBER OF PRIMARY RUNOFF ELECTIONS, 1994-2022



The number of primary runoff elections decreased steadily from 2010 to 2016, dropping from 30 runoff elections to 6 in the 6-year period. The number of runoffs spiked in 2018 and has remained close to that peak during the 2020 and 2022 primary election cycles.

What caused the uptick in the number of runoffs over the last three cycles? Both the 2018 and 2022 elections were midterm elections for first-term presidents; the Trump presidency in 2018 and the Biden presidency in 2022 incited a strong push from their opposition in hopes of regaining political momentum lost in the preceding presidential elections. As a result, many candidates ran for their party's nomination and more runoffs were held. In 2018, 21 of the 31 primary runoff elections were among Democrats. Likewise, in 2022, 17 of the 28 primary runoffs were in Republican Party contests. In addition to out-party challengers causing an uptick in primary runoffs, another key factor is the number of open seats.

Open-seat races tend to feature more runoffs, while it is rare for an incumbent to have to face a runoff. Out of the 276 primary runoff elections since 1994, only 12 primary runoffs featured incumbents. The incumbent won 7 out of these 12 contests.

The increase in runoffs during the 2018-2022 period is particularly noteworthy, because North Carolina only held one primary runoff during these three cycles. After the 2014 midterm elections, North Carolina state legislators reduced the vote threshold to trigger a runoff from 50% to 30%, in effect making the runoff almost obsolete. Legislators supporting the change cited the massive dropoff in turnout (54.6% between 1994-2014) between elections as well as the high cost to jurisdictions around the state. The state's issues with both the high cost and low turnout associated with runoffs points to the need for a different electoral system that can address these crucial issues.

► **RECOMMENDATIONS FOR POLICY MAKERS**

Despite the decline in turnout that usually accompanies primary runoff elections, runoffs have a clear intent: ensuring a majority winner. In the 2022 cycle, 36% of runoff elections nominated someone other than the person who received the most votes in the first round; in a plurality format, the voice of the majority would not have been represented 36% of the time. Plurality elections often do a poor job of representing the people and their interests.

This study demonstrates that though runoff elections are better at nominating majority-representative candidates than a traditional plurality system, turnout in primary runoff elections is consistently lower than the initial primary elections. Furthermore, the study demonstrates the detrimental effect of time on the representative capabilities of the two-round primary runoff format; as time between the primary and the runoff increases, voter turnout decreases. The link between runoff timing and turnout should demonstrate to lawmakers that change is necessary if elections are to be fair and representative of the electorate. Fortunately, there are alternative runoff election methods that have proven to be more effective in representation at a lower cost to jurisdictions.

▶ RANKED CHOICE VOTING FOR MILITARY AND OVERSEAS VOTERS IN PRIMARY RUNOFF ELECTIONS

For states that intend to maintain two election dates, FairVote recommends holding the elections as close together as possible. Methods for avoiding long gaps in election rounds and effectively accommodating overseas voters are outlined in FairVote's 2011 report [Legality of the Use of Ranked Choice Absentee Ballots for Military and Overseas Voters in Runoff Elections](#). In the recommended system, overseas voters are given the initial primary ballot and a ranked choice ballot in the event that a runoff takes place. If the runoff indeed takes place, the overseas voter's ranked choice ballot determines how their runoff vote is allocated. This practice has been used in Alabama, Arkansas, Louisiana, Mississippi, and South Carolina for several election cycles, and has been introduced in Georgia for the 2022 elections. It allows overseas voters to participate in the election process and allows election officials to keep the election dates closer together. This boosts voter turnout and ensures military and overseas voters are not denied the right to participate in elections, but there are still more effective methods of ensuring higher voter turnout and lower costs for jurisdictions.

▶ RANKED CHOICE VOTING / INSTANT RUNOFF VOTING

A far more effective method to ensure a majority winner is ranked choice voting, or instant runoff voting, for all voters both at home and abroad.

Ranked choice voting allows voters the option to rank the candidates in order of preference. If a candidate receives more than half of the first choice votes, they win the election. However, if there is no majority winner after counting first choices, the race is decided by an "instant runoff." The candidate with the fewest votes is eliminated, and voters who picked that candidate as 'number 1' will have their votes count for their next choice. This process continues until there's a majority winner.

This format holds the election to a single ballot, ensuring voters at home and abroad can be counted at the same time in the same manner. By holding the election on a single ballot, jurisdictions avoid high operational costs of holding separate elections, and voters are spared the burden of returning to the polls at a later arbitrary date. Most importantly in relation to the two-round primary runoff format, ranked choice voting prevents turnout decline between rounds. This system ensures that the candidates elected are broadly supported by their party and are not elected based on a low-turnout runoff.

▶ DATA SOURCES

The data used in this report was obtained from Ballotpedia and election results on Secretaries of State and Election Board websites.

The demographics and voter turnout statistics for each district are based on voter data from L2 VoterMapping. For estimated Citizen Voting Age Population (CVAP), L2 uses weighted census data. For voter turnout, L2 uses surname classifications. While this method is somewhat blunt, it does provide a workable estimate for voter turnout by ethnic group in prior elections.

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