



2022 Primary Turnout: Trends and Lessons for Boosting Participation

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Introduction

At the core of the American democratic experiment is the idea that our government derives its power and legitimacy from the consent of the governed. That consent is expressed in its fullest when voters elect their representatives. Yet, as this report shows, every four years, about 80% of eligible voters do not participate in some of the most determinative contests in our democracy: midterm primary elections.

This report examines turnout trends during the 2022 primary elections, conducted in 49 states and the District of Columbia, compared with turnout during the 2010, 2014, and 2018 midterm election cycles (Louisiana holds its primary on Election Day.) The paper also analyzes whether certain policy changes—such as unifying primary dates or adopting open primary or “top-two” or “top-four” formats—can boost voter participation.

Each midterm, 435 representatives and one-third of the 100-member U.S. Senate—most of our federal constitutional officers—are elected. Nearly 75% of states hold their gubernatorial elections in midterm years. State legislative and other state, county, and local contests also take place during these cycles. Before appearing on the general election ballot, candidates for these offices first have to navigate a primary.

Primaries have taken on great importance in American elections and hold significant implications for governing and bipartisanship. In the electoral context, primaries have in many cases superseded general elections as the consequential contest for determining the ultimate winner, especially in congressional and state legislative elections where one party typically dominates.¹ Due to a combination of natural geographic self-sorting and partisan gerrymandering, the number of competitive seats for Congress and state legislatures has declined since the 1970s.^{2,3} Most are “safe” seats—reliably Republican or Democratic. As a result, primaries—when voter participation is typically lowest—are increasingly determinative of the general election outcome.

BPC’s Commission on Political Reform recognized the troubling intersection of these two trends in 2014 when it identified the need to significantly increase primary turnout in addition to implementing redistricting reforms meant to limit gerrymandering. As the commission stated in its report [Governing in a Polarized America](#), “Increasing participation in party primaries is good for the parties as well as the country, and setting higher turnout goals for primaries should be a national priority.”⁴

The commission found that low-turnout midterm primaries erode the credibility of U.S. democracy and may allow more-extreme candidates to reach general elections and attain office. Higher participation means that the primary electorate would more likely match that of the general electorate and the population at large. BPC set a national target of 30% turnout of the voting-eligible population by 2020 and 35% by 2026.⁵

The specter of primaries and primary challengers looms large in how incumbent officeholders approach their duties. When members of Congress anticipate a primary challenge, they “believe that they can reduce their vulnerability by focusing on the issues about which their primary constituency cares,” find Elaine Kamarck and James Wallner in a 2018 Brookings Institution study, and “are especially attentive to their primary constituencies when controversial issues are on the congressional agenda.”⁶ This has downstream effects as well. Party leaders in Congress, sensitive to the concerns of their fellow partisans, seek to avoid causing problems for them by structuring the legislative agenda in a way that increases the appearance of differences between the parties. The threat of a primary challenge can also discourage compromise. Lawmakers will avoid compromise because they believe primary voters will punish them for it.⁷

Focusing on midterm cycles gives researchers a unique view of electoral participation absent the outsized attention and turnout boost garnered during presidential elections. Studying midterm nominating contests, however, presents difficulties. First, who and what appears on the ballot varies greatly from year to year. Staggered six-year Senate terms means that states will typically not have a U.S. Senate race during a midterm at least once every 12 years. Although gubernatorial contests tend to be more regular, about one-third of states do not have statewide gubernatorial elections that coincide with midterm federal contests. Additionally, top-ticket races are not always contested. We found that the lack of statewide races depresses turnout; this tendency should be considered when taking a national view of turnout during the nomination process.

Second, primaries’ timing varies by state and cycle. Unlike general elections, which take place on the same day in November throughout the nation, primary elections are held anywhere from March to September. This variability may prove a barrier to voter participation, because it makes it less likely that voters will know when to show up at the polls. We found that when states in the same region hold their primary on the same day, participation rises.

Third, some states use party conventions to shape which candidates appear on the primary ballot. In some cases, these conventions can replace an election for certain races, although no state eliminates primary elections altogether. Using nominating conventions depresses voter turnout, we found.

Finally, who is allowed to participate in primary elections varies greatly. Some states have “closed” primaries, where only those voters who have declared a party affiliation can vote in the primary for that party. Others have “open” primaries, where eligible voters can cast ballots for any party. In “top-two” and “top-four” systems, candidates from all parties are pooled into the same contest and compete for space on the general election ballot. We found that opening up primaries to all voters boosts participation.

This paper is a follow-up to BPC’s 2018 *Primary Turnout and Reform Recommendations [report](#)*, which found persistently low participation rates across states and over time.

Low primary turnout should be an ongoing concern for political parties, policymakers, and the public, given primaries’ outsized influence in our representative government. As these trends have intensified and turnout has yet to reach reasonable benchmarks, bold steps should be taken to increase participation in primary contests. Our analysis sheds light on the ability of various proposals to boost turnout.

Summary of Findings

- Turnout of all eligible voters in 2022 primaries was 21.3%. That compares with 19.9% in 2018, 14.3% in 2014, and 18.3% in 2010.
- In the 2022 primaries, 24.4 million voters cast ballots for Republican candidates, exceeding the 21.3 million votes that were cast for Democrats.
- Kansas led the nation in 2022 with a primary turnout rate of 48%. The ballot included a hotly contested referendum on abortion rights. Wyoming was second with 42% turnout and Alaska third with 37% turnout. Wyoming featured a high-profile House Republican primary, whereas Alaska featured multiple closely contested races, a special election to fill a U.S. House vacancy, and a new top-four voting system. Washington and Oregon rounded out the top five.
- The bottom five states for turnout in 2022 were Virginia, New York, Connecticut, Delaware, and Mississippi. Each had 12% participation or less.
- Seven states met BPC's target of 30% primary turnout by 2020: Alaska, Hawaii, Kansas, Montana, Oregon, Washington, and Wyoming. Two states, Missouri and Oklahoma, met this target in 2018 but fell short in 2022.
- States with more open-primary formats, recommended by BPC in 2014, continue to have higher turnout than other states. This includes top-two and top-four primaries. Our analysis shows that states that switch to top-four and top-two primary systems, such as Alaska and California, enjoy an average boost to turnout of more than 3 percentage points.
- Consolidating primary dates, recommended by BPC in 2014, also leads to higher primary voter participation. Our analysis concludes that states that hold their primaries at the same time as neighboring states increase turnout by about 1.4 percentage points.
- Other policy reforms that might increase primary participation include 1) holding primaries for state offices at the same time as federal offices, 2) allowing voters to cast ballots in uncontested races, and 3) eliminating nominating conventions.
- Factors that might affect turnout but remain at least partially outside the direct control of policymakers include 1) the presence of high-interest statewide contests or referenda on the ballot in a given year, and 2) the opportunity for every eligible voter in each state to participate in a primary.

Primary Turnout in 2022 and Recent Midterm Cycles

Voter turnout in the 2022 midterm primaries was higher than 2018, 2014, and 2010. This was the first midterm cycle in at least 15 years in which more than 20% of eligible voters cast ballots. Although turnout in primary elections continues to be low compared with general midterm and presidential elections, it remains on an upward trajectory after 2018's high-water mark. This is the third cycle in a row that primary turnout has increased.

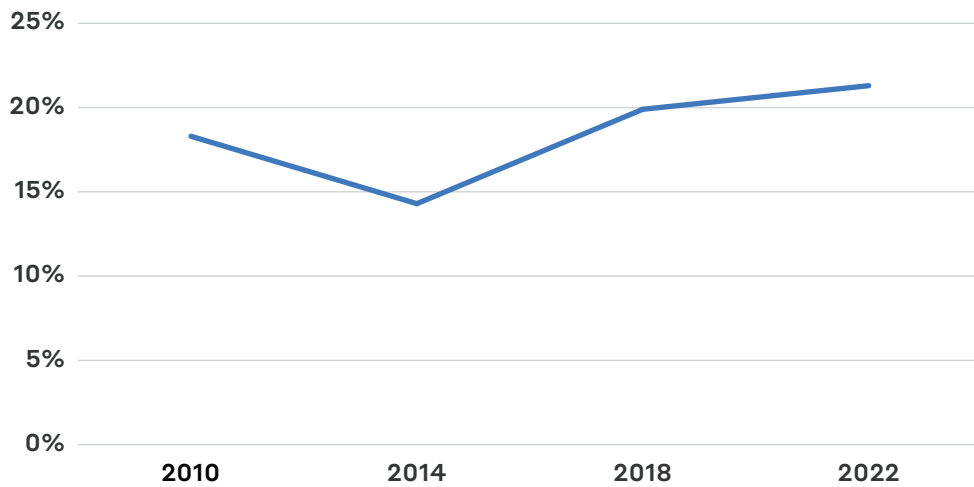
NATIONWIDE, THE TOTAL BALLOTS CAST AS A PERCENTAGE OF THE OVERALL ELIGIBLE ELECTORATE WAS 21.3%, UP FROM 19.9% FOUR YEARS AGO, 14.3% IN 2014, AND 18.3% IN 2010

The nearly 50 million ballots cast in 2022 is also the high-water mark of the past four midterm primaries and is likely the most ballots ever cast during the nominating process for congressional elections. This total compares with 46 million total ballots cast in 2018, 32 million ballots cast in 2014, and 40 million in 2010 (excluding runoff elections).

In this paper, turnout is calculated a few different ways, which are fully explained in Appendix B.

Nationwide, the total ballots cast as a percentage of the overall eligible electorate was 21.3%, up from 19.9% four years ago, 14.3% in 2014, and 18.3% in 2010 (Figure 1). Still, despite the upward trend in turnout, nearly four out of five eligible voters did not participate in choosing nominees for the midterm elections this year.

Figure 1. National Midterm Primary Turnout, 2010–2022



Source: BPC analysis of state election data.

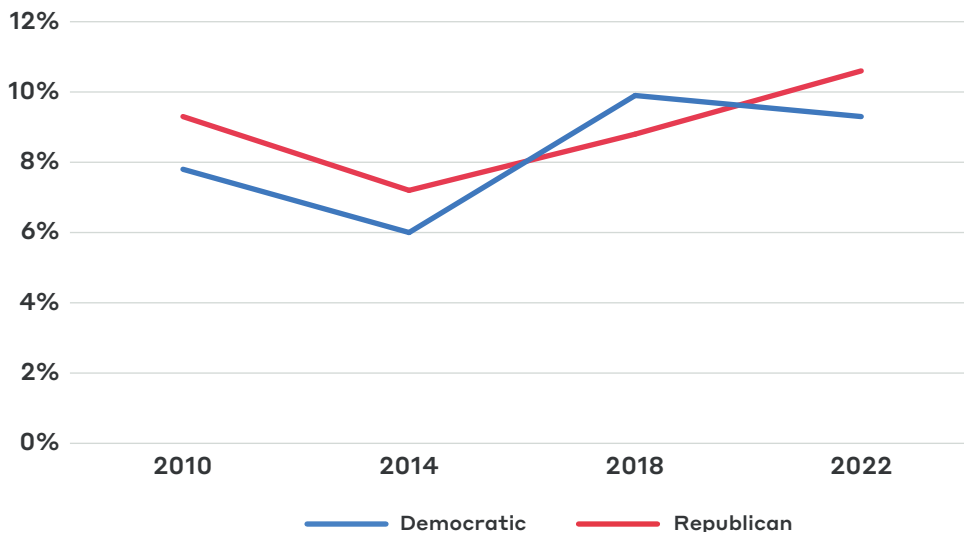
Another way to calculate and compare turnout in primary elections is to average the state eligible-voter turnout rates. In this method, average state turnout among 2022 primary contests was 22.4%. This was up from the 2018 primaries, when average state turnout was 21%, and substantially up from the 2014 average of 16.1% and the 2010 average of 19.4%. When calculating turnout, the authors excluded runoff election contests that occur as part of the nominating primary contest unless otherwise specified.

Enthusiasm among Republicans drove the increase in voter participation. As shown in Figure 2, turnout of eligible voters casting ballots for Republicans was 10.6% in 2022, the highest it has been in at least 15 years. It was 8.8% in 2018, 7.2% in 2014, and 9.3% in 2010.

On the other hand, fewer voters participated in Democratic primary contests than four years ago: 9.3% of voters cast ballots for Democratic candidates in 2022, compared with 9.9% in 2018, 6% in 2014, and 7.8% in 2010. In all four cycles, the vast majority of voters cast no ballots at all and did not participate in selecting the Democratic and Republican candidates who would appear on the general election ballot.

The 2018 midterm primaries were the first in at least a decade in which more voters cast ballots for Democratic candidates than Republicans. This year marked a return to the previous trend: 24.4 million votes were cast for Republicans, compared with 21.3 million votes for Democrats. Voters from the president's party typically face an enthusiasm gap compared with voters affiliated with the out-of-power party.

Figure 2. Midterm Primary Turnout for Each Party as a Percentage of All Eligible Voters



Source: BPC analysis of state election data.

Several factors may be contributing to Americans' increased involvement in the democratic process.⁸ Historically strong partisanship and polarization have raised the stakes in primary elections⁹ and, in conjunction with increasingly nationalized politics, have eroded the incumbency advantage.¹⁰ A weaker incumbency advantage has led to more candidates, more contested primaries, and therefore more choices at the ballot box.¹¹ Additionally, control of the House and the Senate were up in the air this year, further increasing the importance of the primaries. Finally, some states have expanded convenience voting options, such as allowing more absentee and early in-person voting.¹² The increase in primary turnout mirrors an increase in general election participation over the past few years.¹³

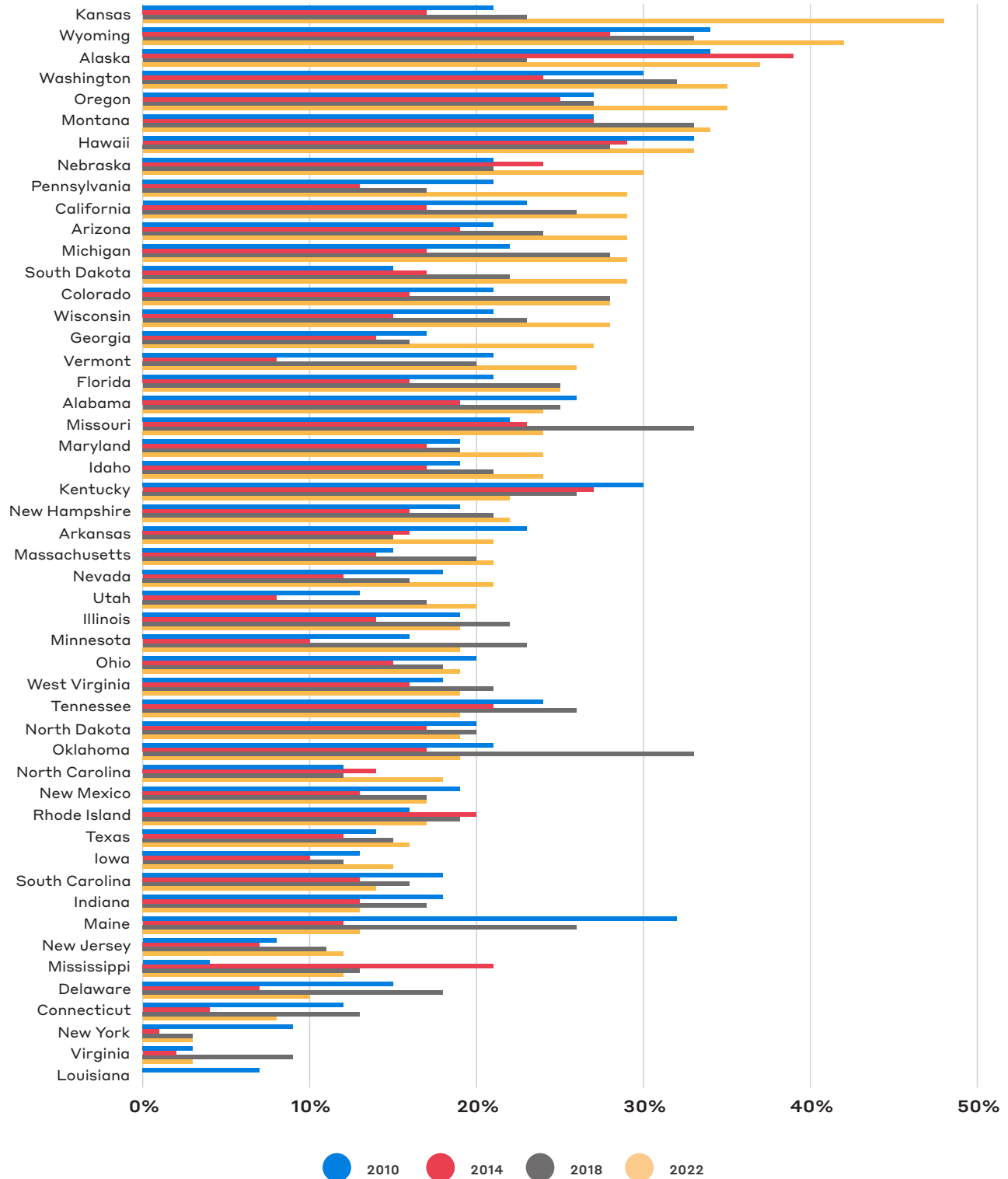
Figure 3, which displays the turnout rates of every state in the past four nonpresidential primary elections, shows the variations both within and between states. Two points are worth emphasizing. In most states, primary turnout in 2022 was at or near that state's high point in turnout over the past four cycles.

ONLY 11 STATES HAVE ATTAINED 30% TURNOUT AT LEAST ONCE IN THE PAST FOUR NONPRESIDENTIAL PRIMARY ELECTIONS

Additionally, this graph illustrates how widespread low-turnout primaries are. Only 11 states have attained 30% turnout at least once in the past four nonpresidential primary elections: Alaska, Hawaii, Kansas, Kentucky, Maine, Missouri, Montana, Oklahoma, Oregon, Washington, and Wyoming. Only Alaska, Kansas, Washington, and Wyoming have reached 35% turnout. On the

other hand, five states have never attained 15% turnout—just half of BPC’s 2020 goalpost—in midterm primaries over the past decade: Connecticut, Louisiana, New Jersey, New York, and Virginia.

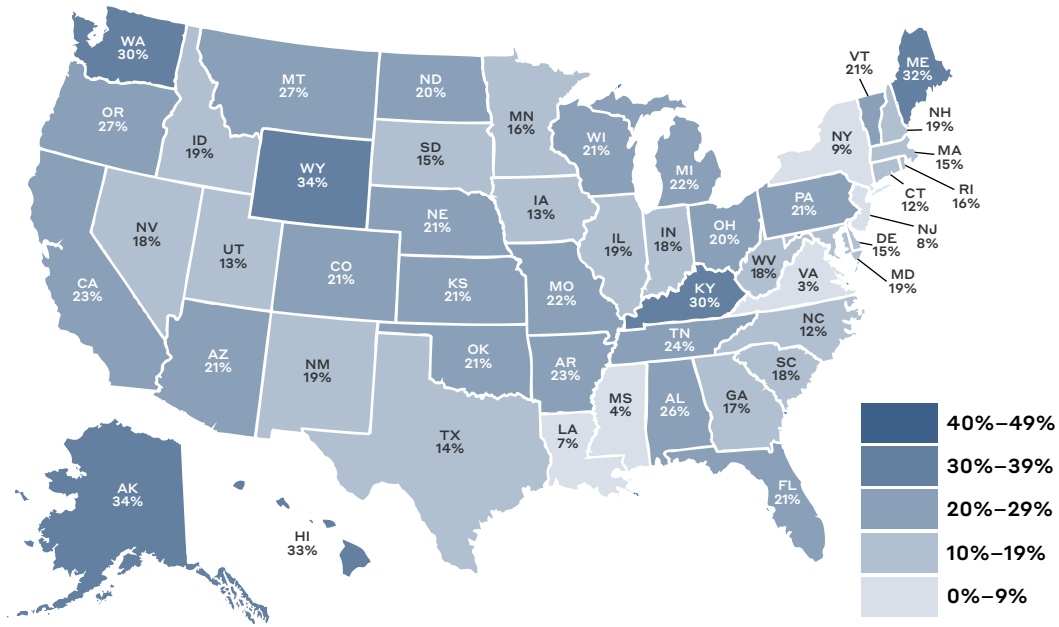
Figure 3. Midterm Primary Turnout by State



Source: BPC analysis of state election data.

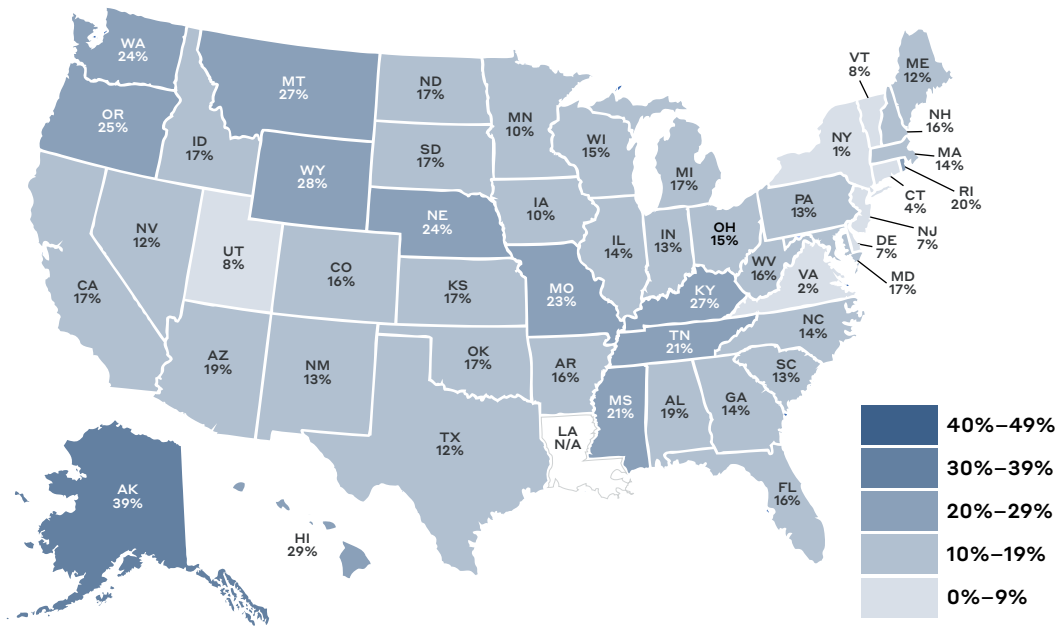
National primary turnout maps by year are also illuminating (Figures 4-7). Western states have generally had the highest turnout rates, followed by Midwestern states. Southern and Northeastern states typically have lower primary turnout. View complete primary turnout rates for the past four midterm primary cycles in Appendix A.

Figure 4. 2010 Midterm Primary Turnout



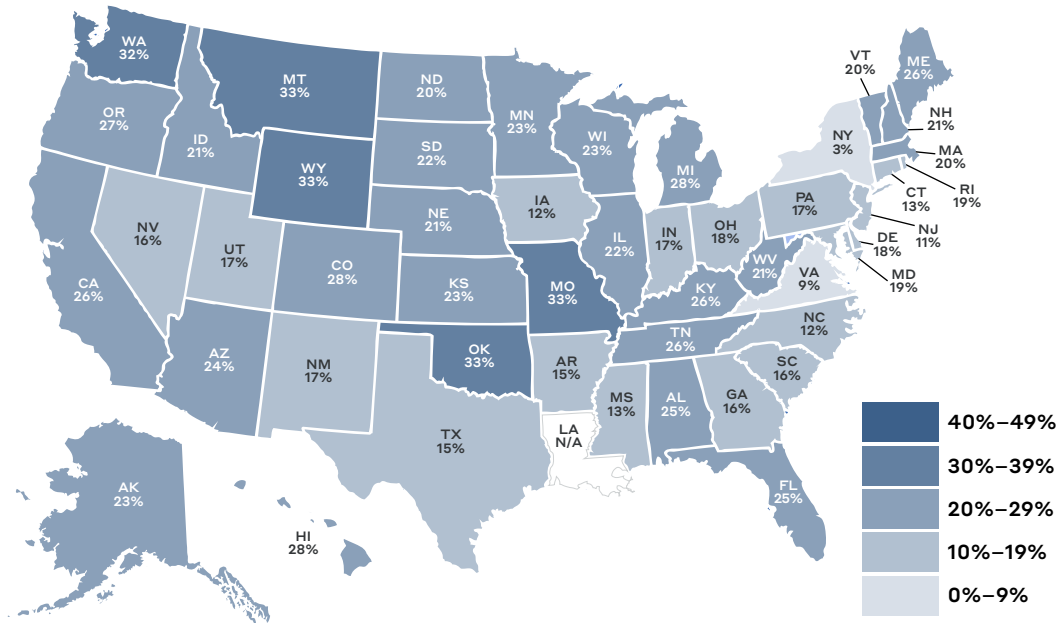
Source: BPC analysis of state election data.

Figure 5. 2014 Midterm Primary Turnout



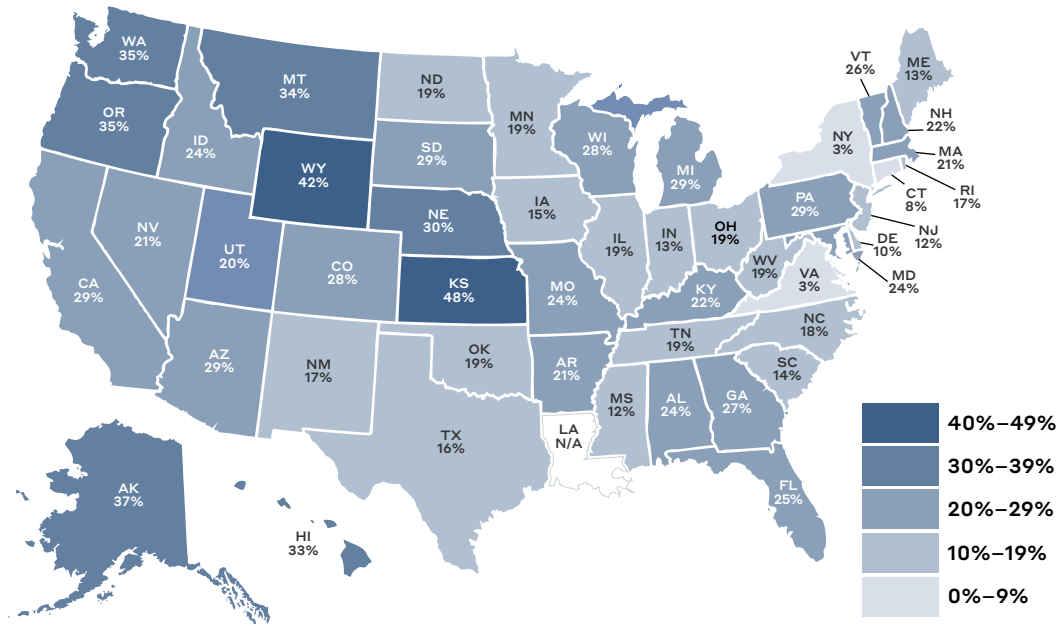
Source: BPC analysis of state election data.

Figure 6. 2018 Midterm Primary Turnout



Source: BPC analysis of state election data.

Figure 7. 2022 Midterm Primary Turnout



Source: BPC analysis of state election data.

This year, Kansas led the nation with a primary turnout rate of 48%. The ballot included a hotly contested referendum over abortion rights. Kansas was followed by Wyoming with 42% turnout, Alaska with 37% turnout, and Washington and Oregon with 35% turnout each. Wyoming featured a high-profile House Republican primary, whereas Alaska featured multiple closely contested races, a special election to fill a U.S. House vacancy, and a new top-four voting system.

Table 1. 2022 Primary Election Turnout

Highest Turnout States	Turnout	Lowest Turnout States	Turnout
Kansas	48%	Virginia	3%
Wyoming	42%	New York	3%
Alaska	37%	Connecticut	8%
Washington	35%	Delaware	10%
Oregon	35%	Mississippi	12%

Biggest Gains (from 2018)	Change in Turnout (percentage points)	Biggest Drops (from 2018)	Change in Turnout (percentage points)
Kansas	24%	Oklahoma	-14%
Alaska	14%	Maine	-14%
Pennsylvania	12%	Missouri	-9%
Georgia	11%	Delaware	-8%
Wyoming	9%	Tennessee	-8%

*Virginia, New York, Delaware, and Mississippi did not hold statewide primary elections for both major parties.

Source: BPC analysis of state election data.

Virginia and New York’s federal primaries had the lowest participation percentages, with only 3% of eligible voters casting ballots in each. Virginia featured only federal contests, while New York had U.S. congressional and state Senate races. Neither primary had a statewide race on the ballot. Connecticut’s primary garnered 8% participation, followed by Delaware with 10% and Mississippi with 12%.

Competitive, high-profile contests are also a factor in state turnout. Table 2 lists the turnout rate and Democratic and Republican vote totals for the 10 states that featured the most competitive Senate races in the 2022 general midterm election, according to final election results.

Table 2. 2022 Primary Turnout Comparison - Battleground States

		2022	2018	2014	2010
Alaska	Turnout	36.6%	22.9%	38.8%	33.7%
	Dem Votes	13.4%	8.5%	14.4%	10.1%
	Rep Votes	32.1%	14.4%	22.8%	22.7%
Arizona	Turnout	28.6%	24.2%	18.8%	21.2%
	Dem Votes	12.0%	10.6%	6.9%	7.4%
	Rep Votes	16.5%	13.5%	11.8%	13.7%
Colorado	Turnout	28.1%	27.5%	16.1%	21.4%
	Dem Votes	12.1%	15.1%	5.4%	9.4%
	Rep Votes	14.6%	11.9%	9.8%	11.3%
Georgia	Turnout	27.2%	15.8%	14.2%	17.2%
	Dem Votes	9.6%	7.5%	5.1%	5.9%
	Rep Votes	15.9%	8.3%	8.9%	10.2%
Nevada	Turnout	21.1%	15.5%	11.8%	18.4%
	Dem Votes	7.9%	6.9%	3.8%	6.7%
	Rep Votes	10.3%	6.7%	6.2%	10.1%
New Hampshire	Turnout	21.9%	20.7%	15.6%	19.2%
	Dem Votes	8.6%	11.5%	4.1%	5.8%
	Rep Votes	13.2%	9.1%	11.4%	13.4%
North Carolina	Turnout	18.3%	12.4%	14.3%	12.4%
	Dem Votes	7.9%	4.9%	6.7%	6.2%
	Rep Votes	9.8%	3.2%	6.8%	5.4%
Ohio	Turnout	18.8%	18.4%	14.5%	20.3%
	Dem Votes	6.1%	7.9%	5.7%	8.5%
	Rep Votes	12.4%	9.5%	7.3%	9.7%
Pennsylvania	Turnout	28.9%	16.6%	13.2%	20.9%
	Dem Votes	13.2%	7.8%	8.4%	10.8%
	Rep Votes	13.8%	7.7%	4.0%	8.8%
Wisconsin	Turnout	27.9%	23.4%	14.6%	21.3%
	Dem Votes	11.4%	11.8%	7.2%	5.5%
	Rep Votes	15.7%	10.0%	5.5%	14.4%

*Note: For Alaska and other top-two and top-four primary states, Dem and Rep vote totals when summed may exceed overall turnout because individual voters can vote for both Republican and Democratic candidates on the same ballot.

Source: BPC analysis of state election data.

Most of these states had above-average primary turnout, no doubt in part due to a competitive primary for these high-leverage Senate races. But nonparticipation dwarfs the partisan vote totals in every case, putting into perspective how few Americans participate in nominating Democratic and Republican congressional candidates.

BPC Recommendations for Increasing Primary Election Turnout

Although turnout rates rose in 2022, they remained significantly below goals for stand-alone congressional primary turnout set by BPC's Commission on Political Reform in its *Governing in a Polarized America* report. The commission recommended that congressional primary turnout increase to 30% of eligible voters by 2020 and 35% by 2026. Midterm primary turnout rates have substantially improved since the report was published in 2014, but its 2020 goal has not been met and it is unlikely its 2026 goal can be met without further policy changes.

Two of the commission's recommendations, in particular, continue to yield promise for policymakers seeking to increase turnout: open primaries up to all voters, and consolidate primaries on a few dates.

OPENING UP PRIMARIES

The Commission on Political Reform recommended states adopt more open primary formats to allow all eligible voters to participate in the candidate selection process. This analysis shows that states with open primaries do have higher turnout (Figure 8).

According to the National Conference of State Legislatures, nine states have completely closed primary systems in which only registered party members are allowed to vote;¹⁴ 15 states have either closed or partially closed primary rules, meaning individual parties within each state can restrict participation to previously registered party members; and an additional nine states only allow unaffiliated voters to participate in the primary of their choice.

In the 2022 primary election cycle, only 17 states held fully open primary elections. Fourteen states use open primaries in which all voters can vote in either party's primary. Two states, California and Washington, use a top-two system where all candidates are listed on the same ballot and the top two vote-getters in each race advance to the general election (Nebraska also uses this system for its state legislative races and some statewide executive contests). One state, Alaska, has a top-four format in which all candidates are listed on the same ballot regardless of party affiliation, voters choose one candidate, and the top four vote-getters advance to the general election.

The commission recommends states adopt open or semi-open primaries, partly because opening primaries up to independents can increase primary turnout and partly because their presence might help moderate candidates¹⁵ and lead to more representative primary electorates.^{16,17} Here we investigate whether opening primaries up has led to increased participation.

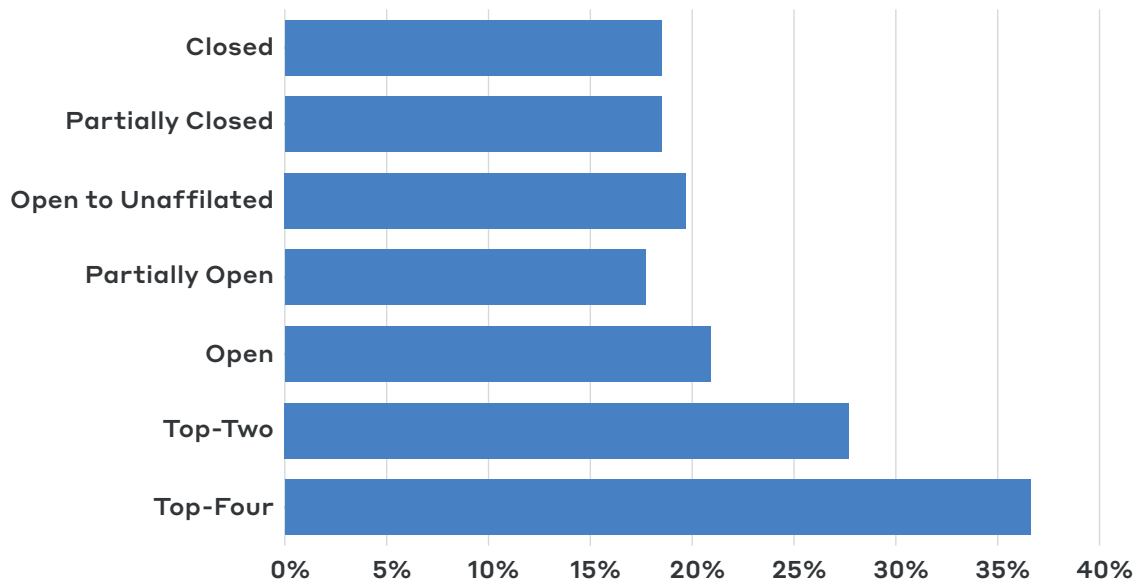
In the 2022 primary cycle, states with fully open, top-two, or top-four primaries had an average turnout of 24.5%, compared with 21.5% for states with semi-open primaries and 20.7% for states with closed primaries. Over the past four midterm cycles, states with fully open primaries have averaged turnout of 21.9%, versus 18.8% for semi-open states and 18.5% for closed states.

Primary type failed to attain statistical significance in simple OLS regressions, but it approached significance in more causally credible difference-in-difference regressions that make comparisons to changes in turnout within states that switch between primary types (see Appendix B for a fuller explanation of this method). A state's switch from closed to open primaries boosts voter turnout by nearly 2 percentage points on average. Additionally, switching to a top-two or top-four primary system leads to an average participation boost of around 3 percentage points, equating to 16% higher turnout.

**A STATE'S SWITCH FROM CLOSED TO OPEN
PRIMARIES BOOSTS VOTER TURNOUT BY NEARLY 2
PERCENTAGE POINTS ON AVERAGE. ADDITIONALLY,
SWITCHING TO A TOP-TWO OR TOP-FOUR PRIMARY
SYSTEM LEADS TO AN AVERAGE PARTICIPATION
BOOST OF AROUND 3 PERCENTAGE POINTS,
EQUATING TO 16% HIGHER TURNOUT.**

Although some party purists argue that only party members should be able to vote in a primary to select their nominees, the reality is that many unaffiliated voters lean strongly toward one side.¹⁸ If a party wants to broaden its reach for the general election, allowing independents to cast ballots in primaries could help with both party building and boosting turnout.

Figure 8. Midterm Primary Turnout by Election Type

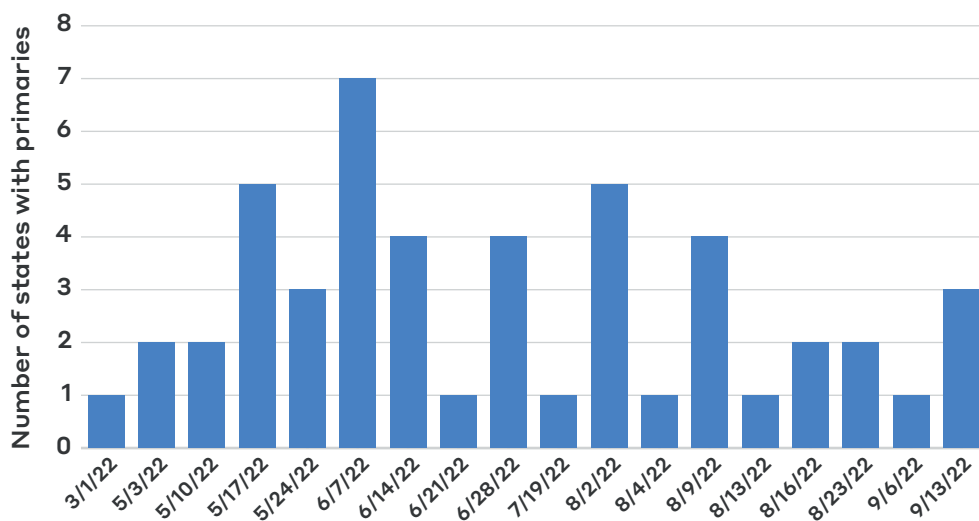


Source: BPC analysis of state election data.

CONSOLIDATING PRIMARY DATES

The commission recommended that states agree to a single, national primary day. Figure 9 shows how scattered the nonpresidential federal primary calendar currently is. In 2022, states held their primary elections anywhere between March and September. No more than seven states held their (general) primary election on the same day, and no more than three held their election at the same time in the same region. Including runoff races, voters cast primary ballots on 19 different days. Because the election calendar is scattered, most primaries receive scant media attention. If states hold their primaries simultaneously, media attention would likely increase, leading to greater public awareness and participation. This would especially be true for states in the same region, as shared media markets would be saturated by election coverage.

Figure 9. 2022 Primary Calendar



Source: BPC analysis of state election data.

BPC’s Commission on Political Reform recommends holding all congressional primaries on the same day in nonpresidential election cycles: “As the process works now, many casual voters are unaware of the timing of primary elections and thus do not participate. A common or national primary day (applicable to nonpresidential elections) will increase media attention and awareness, potentially leading to more participation.”¹⁹

BPC’s 2018 report provided the first evidence substantiating the commission’s recommendations concerning grouping primaries and the effect on turnout. Including 2022 primary turnout data validates those initial findings. States that hold their primary on the same day as a state in the same geographic region see a nearly 2-percentage-point boost in participation, all else equal. States that switch to holding primaries at the same time as others in their region enjoy a 1.5-percentage-point boost in turnout, compared with states that continue to hold primary elections on a unique date. This effect could scale if more states consolidated primary election dates—meaning a very sizable boost if one common primary date were achieved.

STATES THAT HOLD THEIR PRIMARY ON THE SAME DAY AS A STATE IN THE SAME GEOGRAPHIC REGION SEE A NEARLY 2-PERCENTAGE-POINT BOOST IN PARTICIPATION, ALL ELSE EQUAL.

Other Policies that Could Boost Turnout

In addition to BPC's recommendations for improving primary turnout, this analysis examines several other policy choices that might impact turnout by shaping what contests appear on the ballot and to what degree voters can participate in winnowing candidates.

COMBINE STATE AND FEDERAL PRIMARIES

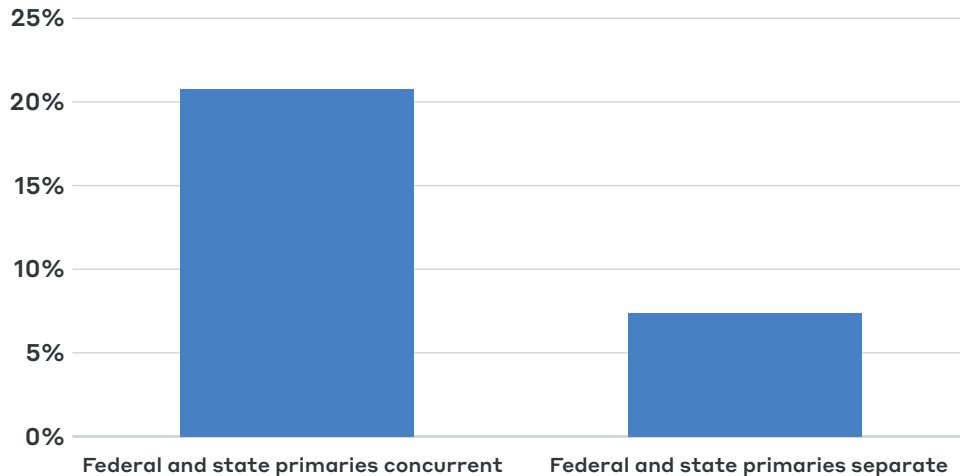
Most states hold primaries for state offices at the same time as primaries for federal offices. Mississippi, New Jersey, New York, and Virginia, however, currently hold primaries for state legislative and executive offices at a different time from primaries for federal office. New York holds federal and state primaries in the same calendar year but in different months, while the other three states hold their state primary and general elections on odd years. Over the past four midterm primary cycles, states that held concurrent federal and state elections averaged turnout of 20.8%. States that held separate federal and state primaries averaged only 7.4% turnout (Figure 10).

These states had turnout that was on average about 2 percentage points lower than states that held their legislative and federal primary elections simultaneously, all else being equal, equating to 11% less participation. The difference doubles to more than 4 percentage points when runoff elections are excluded from the analysis. Holding state and federal primaries concurrently could boost turnout by focusing voters' attention on one set of consequential primaries. It would also provide voters with more reason to head to the polls, greater convenience, and more opportunity to have their voices heard, possibly producing nominees whose views more accurately reflect the general electorate.

HOLDING STATE AND FEDERAL PRIMARIES CONCURRENTLY COULD BOOST TURNOUT BY FOCUSING VOTERS' ATTENTION ON ONE SET OF CONSEQUENTIAL PRIMARIES.

This reform would require state constitutional changes in Mississippi, New Jersey, and Virginia with respect to when state legislative and gubernatorial elections are conducted. New York had initially planned to consolidate its state and federal primaries this cycle, but a court-mandated redrawing of its congressional and state Senate maps led the state to schedule two separate dates once again.²⁰

Figure 10. Midterm Primary Turnout by Federal and State Election Concurrence



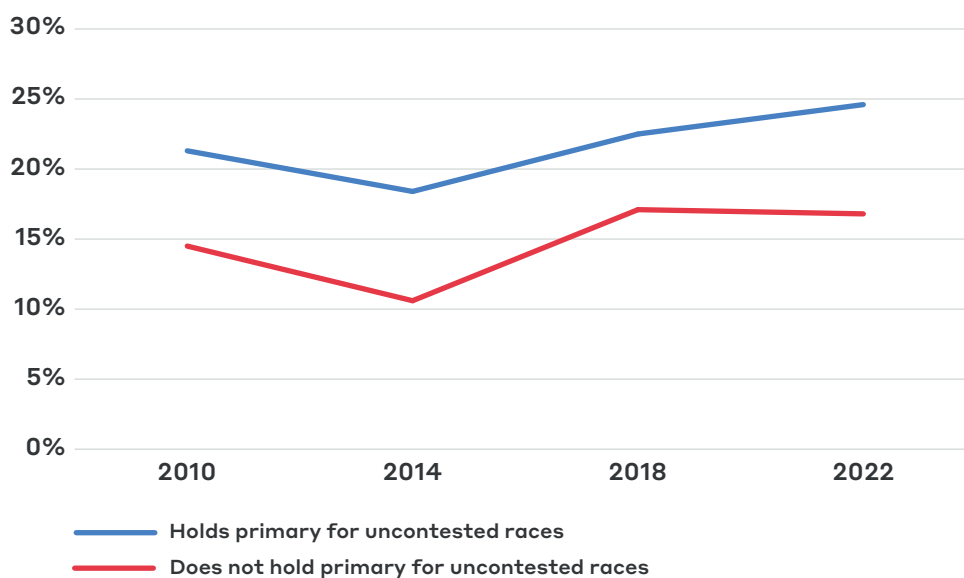
Source: BPC analysis of state election data.

ALLOW VOTES IN UNCONTESTED RACES

States could allow voters to register their approval or disapproval of candidates by casting ballots in uncontested primary elections. Currently, 16 states do not allow voters to register their opinion in races where only one candidate has filed. In the 2022 primary election cycle, states that allowed voters to cast ballots in all contests averaged 24.6% turnout. States that only allowed voters to vote in contested primaries averaged a turnout rate of 18.3% (Figure 12).

When accounting for other variables, states that allow voters to cast ballots in uncontested contests see turnout increase by 1.4 percentage points, although a null of no effect cannot be confidently rejected. Although no state has changed their uncontested election policies in the past 15 years, this reform could prove a simple way to ensure every voice is heard and would expand voters' ability to weigh in on all candidates.

Figure 11. Midterm Primary Turnout by Treatment of Uncontested Races



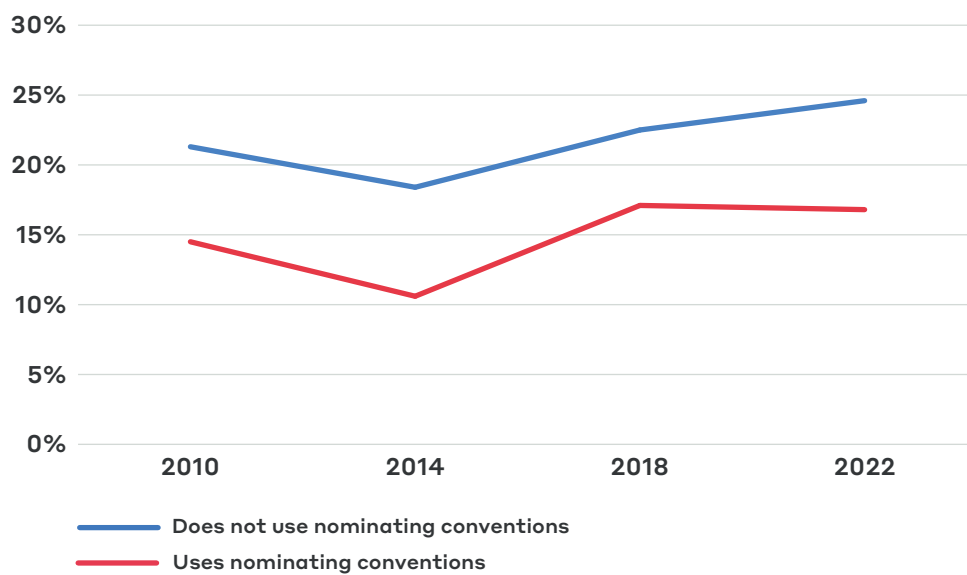
Source: BPC analysis of state election data.

ELIMINATE NOMINATING CONVENTIONS

States could move away from selecting candidates via nominating conventions. Although no state completely replaces primaries with nominating conventions, several states hold party conventions for midterm elections that either can replace certain primary races or limit which candidates can appear on the ballot. For instance, in Utah parties hold small caucuses throughout the state in which party members elect delegates to represent them at the state party conventions. At the statewide conventions, candidates must receive a certain amount of support from delegates to be placed on the primary ballot and may be nominated outright (replacing a primary election) if they receive at least 60% support. In the 2022 primary cycle, 14 states held nominating conventions that reduced voters' ability to select candidates via primaries.

Limiting the general public's choice of primary candidates significantly lowers primary turnout rates. As shown in Figure 13, states that did not use nominating conventions in 2022 averaged primary turnout of 24.6%, while those that did averaged 16.8% turnout. Once accounting for the effects of other factors, states that use nominating conventions have turnout 4.4 percentage points lower than states that do not, equating to 24% less participation.

Figure 12. Midterm Primary Turnout by Use of Nominating Conventions



Source: BPC analysis of state election data.

Nominating conventions present a trade-off between party influence and public participation. They give party members more control over the nominee who represents their party in the general election, at the expense of allowing more people to weigh in on that decision. One potential solution is for parties to hold conventions where delegates vote to endorse candidates, without that endorsement affecting ballot access.

Additional Factors that Impact Turnout

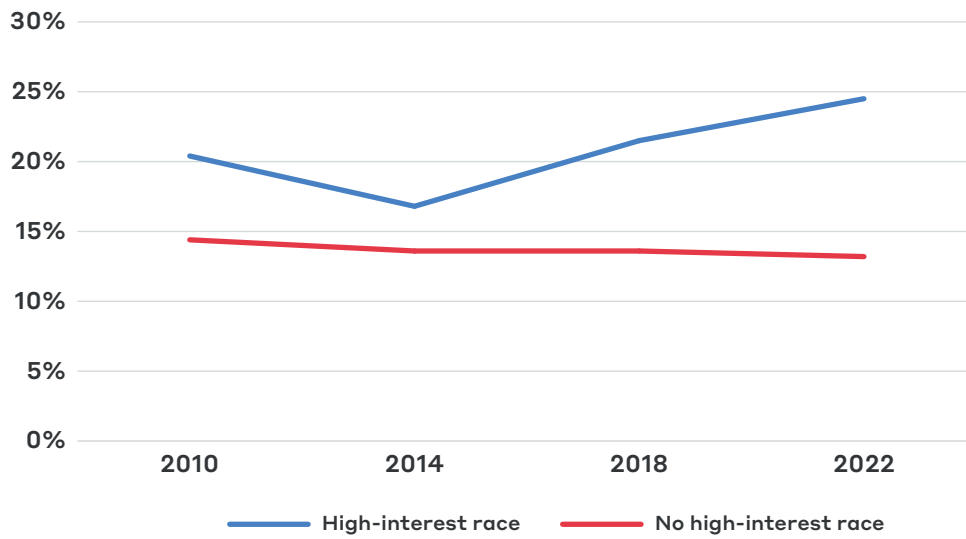
Several factors significantly affect turnout but are at least partially outside the direct control of policymakers. The national political environment changes yearly, increasing or diminishing turnout across the board. Additionally, certain regions seem to have stronger cultures of electoral participation. Western states enjoy higher participation, with an average turnout rate over 5 percentage points higher than the Midwest and over 6 percentage points higher than the South and the Northeast, all else equal. This report focuses on two additional factors: the presence of statewide contests and referenda, and the opportunity for every eligible voter to participate.

STATEWIDE CONTESTS AND REFERENDA

The overall turnout percentages in this report include nonfederal statewide races, nonpartisan races, and referenda conducted on the same ballot as federal midterm contests. In each cycle, about two-thirds of states also have statewide U.S. Senate primaries. Primary elections that include statewide contests are associated with higher turnout than stand-alone congressional primaries.

This BPC analysis includes all voters in the state eligible to participate in the general election. Therefore, in states without a “top-of-the-ticket race,” turnout appears more depressed than it is because many voters may only have uncontested or weakly contested congressional or local races to participate in. Over the past four midterm primary cycles, states without a referendum or contested Senate or gubernatorial contest—in other words, states without a high-interest statewide contest—averaged a turnout rate of only 13.7% (Figure 13).

Figure 13. Midterm Primary Turnout by Presence of a High-Interest Statewide Contest



Source: BPC analysis of state election data.

On the flip side, primaries that feature contested and competitive top-ticket races, such as Senate or gubernatorial contests, generally attract higher turnout. In 2022, states that featured at least one contested top-ticket race averaged primary turnout of 24.5%, compared with 13.2% in states without a contested top-ticket contest. Contests featuring high-interest races enjoyed substantially higher turnout, even when accounting for other factors and only when comparing changes to turnout within states that switch between featuring and not featuring these races.

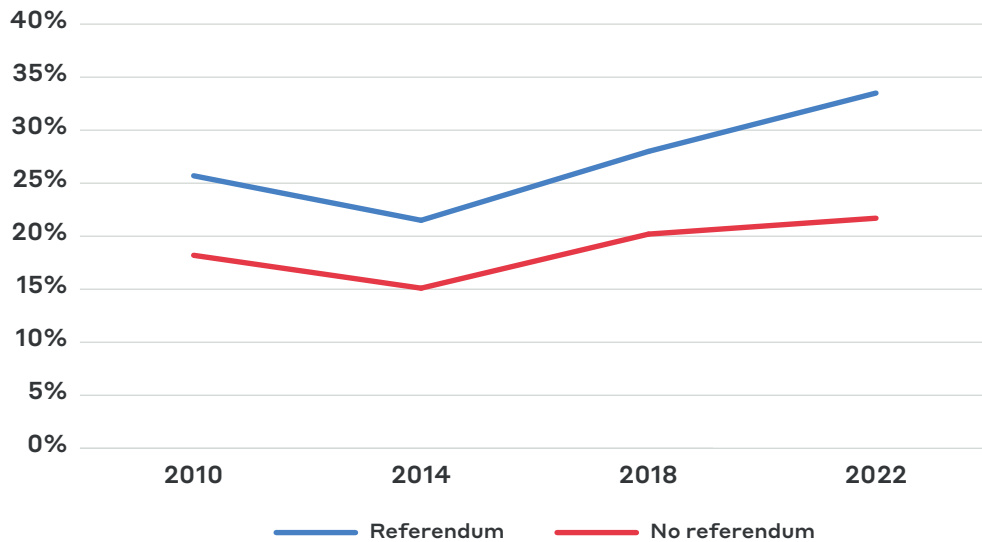
Although states cannot require more candidates to run for high-profile races, they can implement policies to increase the chances that more candidates will run and that virtually guarantee primaries will feature top-ticket races on the ballot. Such policies include conducting federal and state primaries at the same time, allowing voters to cast ballots in uncontested races, and lowering barriers to candidate participation (such as eliminating nominating conventions and reducing signature requirements on candidates' qualifying petitions).

Referenda, ballot questions, and constitutional amendments attract significantly more voters to primary elections as well (Figure 14). For instance, Kansas's inclusion of an abortion-related constitutional amendment on its 2022 primary ballot drew nearly half of all eligible voters to the polls—more than double the average state's primary turnout.

Primary turnout in states that held a referendum in 2022 was 33.5%, compared with 21.7% in states that did not hold a referendum. As with top-ticket races, the finding that referenda boost primary turnout holds when controlling for the effects of other variables and when comparing changes in turnout within states that switch between holding and not holding referenda with their primary

election. When a state schedules a binding referendum at the same time as primary contests, turnout increases by more than 5 percentage points—a 27% boost. Moving referenda to primaries has implications beyond turnout, however; generally, fewer voters will weigh in on the policy question than if it is asked in the general election. It may be that issues worthy of a referendum should be decided by the greatest number of eligible voters possible. In that case, such questions should be placed in higher-turnout general elections.

Figure 14. Midterm Primary Turnout by Presence of a Referendum



Source: BPC analysis of state election data.

A significant percentage of voters who do participate in primaries only vote on statewide referenda, ballot questions, or for third-party candidates who are not competitive in general elections. The percentage of the voting-eligible electorate who cast ballots in Democratic and Republican primaries is thus a truer measure of the primary participation that affects the general election race. Major party primary participation is incredibly low across the board, as shown in Figure 2.

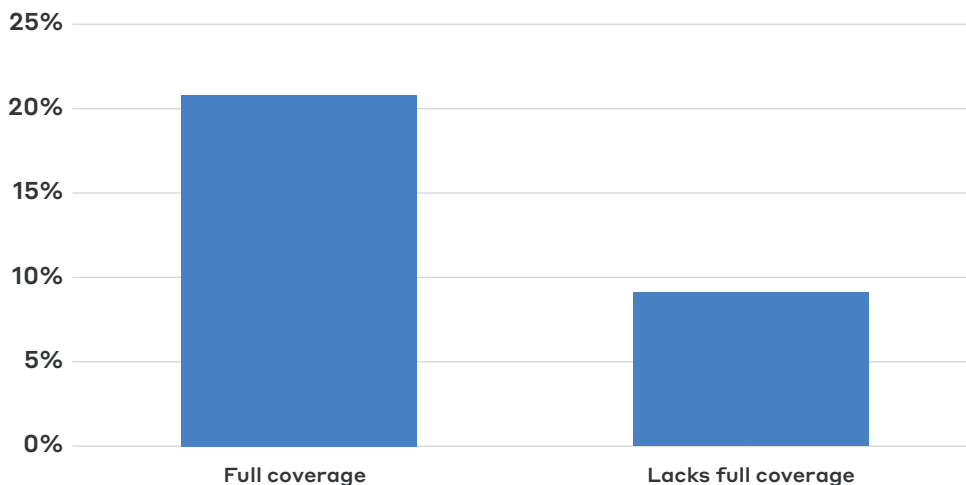
A SIGNIFICANT PERCENTAGE OF VOTERS WHO DO PARTICIPATE IN PRIMARIES ONLY VOTE ON STATEWIDE REFERENDA, BALLOT QUESTIONS, OR FOR THIRD-PARTY CANDIDATES WHO ARE NOT COMPETITIVE IN GENERAL ELECTIONS.

ELECTIONS FOR ALL ELIGIBLE VOTERS

Closely related to top-ticket races and referenda is whether states allow every eligible voter to participate in primaries. Several states routinely do not grant all voters that opportunity, meaning that some voters are excluded altogether from the primary process. This is usually due to a combination of other policy and nonpolicy factors: the lack of contested statewide primary contests for both major parties, a reduction in the number of candidates on the ballot through nominating conventions, and rules that do not allow voters to cast ballots in uncontested races.

The difference in turnout is stark. Figure 15 illustrates that over the past four midterm primary cycles, states with primaries that covered all voters in both major parties averaged 20.8% turnout, while those that failed to do so averaged only 9.1%. Nine states have not granted the opportunity for all eligible voters to participate in primaries over the past four midterm elections. This has been the case in Utah and Virginia all four times, while in New York it was the case the past three cycles.

Figure 15. Midterm Primary Turnout by Election Coverage



Source: BPC analysis of state election data.

Conclusion

The findings of this analysis are clear: Despite recent positive trends, nonpresidential primary turnout remains inadequately low. It is critical that policymakers take steps to improve turnout. As stated by the Commission on Political Reform in its report, *Governing in a Polarized America*:

Encouraging a broader view of participation benefits the parties and the public. Making primary elections more visible to the general public will necessitate a new breed of candidates willing to seek broad support within his or her party ... and the electorate as a whole during the general election.²¹

This follow-up to BPC's 2018 report provides strong evidence that states can better design their primary election policies to increase turnout. States should open primaries up to all eligible voters and hold their elections on a single, national primary date or at least on regionally aligned dates. This report also provides evidence that additional policies would likely increase participation: combining primaries for state offices with federal offices, allowing voters to cast ballots for uncontested races, and eliminating nominating conventions that reduce candidate ballot access. Finally, featuring a high-interest race or referendum also brings more voters to the polls.

These steps will lead to a more engaged and involved public and will help strengthen America's democracy in the years to come.

Appendices

APPENDIX A: DATA TABLES

Table 3. 2010 State Primary Turnout Rates

State	Runoff Election?	Turnout Rates					Eligible Voters	Votes Cast				
		Total Ballots Counted (TBC)	Highest Office (HO)	Total Votes	Democratic Party	Republican Party	Voting-Eligible Population (VEP)	Total Ballots Counted (TBC)	Highest Office (HO)	Total Votes	Democratic Votes	Republican Votes
United States		18.0%	16.9%	17.6%	7.3%	9.7%	217,447,836	43,430,911	40,745,972	42,423,094	17,998,238	22,686,481
Alabama		25.7%	24.1%	24.1%	9.4%	14.6%	3,369,751	867,542	811,227	811,227	318,330	492,897
Alabama	X	18.5%	17.3%	17.3%	3.5%	13.8%	3,369,751	623,327	582,865	582,865	117,129	465,736
Alaska		33.7%	33.1%	33.7%	10.1%	22.7%	486,992	164,047	161,005	164,047	48,945	110,688
Arizona		21.2%	20.2%	21.2%	7.4%	13.7%	4,401,298	933,650	888,069	933,650	326,830	600,998
Arkansas		22.7%	22.3%	22.7%	15.9%	6.8%	2,117,261	480,539	471,615	480,539	335,720	144,819
Arkansas	X	14.1%	13.9%	14.1%	12.4%	1.7%	2,117,261	297,784	294,575	297,784	262,199	35,585
California		23.3%	22.1%	23.3%	10.8%	10.2%	24,254,979	5,654,993	5,354,258	5,654,993	2,619,668	2,476,923
Colorado		21.4%	20.7%	21.4%	9.4%	11.3%	3,616,994	774,071	750,463	774,071	341,133	409,330
Connecticut		11.9%	11.7%	11.9%	7.1%	4.8%	2,593,617	307,729	303,247	307,729	182,975	124,754
Delaware		14.9%	14.0%	14.0%	5.4%	8.9%	647,344	96,590	90,320	90,320	34,721	57,584
Florida		20.5%	18.5%	20.5%	7.7%	10.8%	11,933,198	2,449,807	2,212,711	2,449,807	918,273	1,294,438
Georgia		17.2%	16.1%	16.1%	5.9%	10.2%	6,697,481	1,150,660	1,075,966	1,075,966	395,467	680,499
Georgia	X	10.9%	10.2%	10.2%	1.5%	8.7%	6,697,481	727,982	680,726	680,726	101,175	579,551
Hawaii		32.8%	31.6%	32.8%	26.9%	5.1%	893,570	292,992	282,412	292,992	240,120	45,733
Idaho		18.5%	17.4%	18.5%	2.5%	14.9%	1,097,829	203,015	190,523	203,015	27,412	163,111
Illinois		18.9%	18.2%	18.9%	9.9%	8.3%	9,286,387	1,758,489	1,688,372	1,758,489	915,726	767,485
Indiana		18.4%	16.6%	18.4%	5.2%	11.3%	4,854,776	892,403	804,017	892,403	253,648	550,369
Iowa		13.1%	12.8%	13.1%	3.2%	10.0%	2,306,078	302,950	295,502	302,950	73,218	229,329
Kansas		21.2%	20.3%	21.2%	4.1%	16.2%	2,023,293	429,344	410,909	429,344	82,190	328,719
Kentucky		30.0%	28.1%	30.0%	16.8%	11.3%	3,114,078	935,736	873,934	935,736	521,659	352,275
Louisiana		6.5%	6.3%	6.5%	3.2%	3.0%	3,320,230	215,136	209,964	215,136	106,071	97,967
Louisiana	X	21.1%	19.7%	19.7%	7.1%	12.6%	3,320,230	700,915	655,416	655,416	236,257	419,159
Maine		32.1%	30.0%	30.0%	11.6%	12.4%	1,063,908	341,025	318,888	318,888	122,936	131,407
Maryland		19.4%	18.4%	19.4%	12.2%	6.9%	4,131,873	802,981	759,315	802,981	505,392	283,133
Massachusetts		14.6%	12.4%	14.6%	9.7%	4.8%	5,006,230	729,017	622,398	729,017	487,817	241,070
Michigan		21.8%	20.6%	21.8%	6.9%	13.7%	7,637,970	1,668,805	1,577,206	1,668,805	528,822	1,048,384
Minnesota		15.5%	15.1%	15.5%	11.3%	3.3%	3,917,658	606,394	590,259	606,394	442,137	130,408
Mississippi		4.3%	4.0%	4.0%	0.4%	3.7%	1,985,726	85,515	79,964	79,964	7,271	72,693
Mississippi	X	0.3%	0.3%	0.3%	0.0%	0.3%	1,985,726	5,728	5,356	5,356	-	5,356
Missouri		22.1%	20.7%	20.7%	7.0%	12.7%	4,560,515	1,008,003	942,570	942,570	317,591	579,348
Montana		26.6%	24.7%	26.6%	8.1%	16.7%	776,286	206,791	192,100	206,791	62,499	129,601
Nebraska		20.9%	17.6%	20.9%	6.1%	13.2%	1,328,410	278,238	233,657	278,238	81,480	175,960
Nevada		18.4%	16.8%	18.4%	6.7%	10.1%	1,738,314	320,648	291,733	320,648	116,027	175,706
New Hampshire		19.2%	17.6%	19.2%	5.8%	13.4%	1,053,630	202,070	185,649	202,070	60,898	141,172
New Jersey		7.8%	6.7%	7.8%	3.4%	4.3%	6,169,293	478,513	413,138	478,513	211,806	266,707
New Mexico		18.5%	17.7%	18.5%	9.7%	8.8%	1,401,112	258,614	248,448	258,614	135,965	122,649
New York		9.0%	8.4%	8.4%	4.8%	3.5%	13,751,227	1,240,560	1,160,031	1,160,031	661,296	479,684
North Carolina		12.4%	11.6%	11.6%	6.2%	5.4%	6,898,748	852,660	797,311	797,311	425,343	371,968
North Carolina	X	3.1%	2.7%	3.1%	2.3%	0.9%	6,898,748	213,692	183,533	213,692	159,081	64,777
North Dakota		20.4%	18.4%	20.4%	5.7%	13.0%	500,511	102,066	92,106	102,066	28,404	65,205
Ohio		20.3%	19.0%	20.3%	8.5%	9.7%	8,935,275	1,814,194	1,701,279	1,814,194	759,765	868,000
Oklahoma		20.5%	19.2%	19.2%	9.9%	9.3%	2,672,950	548,353	512,757	512,757	263,688	249,069
Oklahoma	X	5.4%	5.1%	5.1%	0.6%	4.5%	2,672,950	145,413	135,974	135,974	16,106	119,868
Oregon		27.1%	23.7%	27.1%	13.5%	11.4%	2,903,721	787,847	688,491	787,847	391,929	331,718
Pennsylvania		20.9%	19.6%	19.6%	10.8%	8.8%	9,783,173	2,045,717	1,912,922	1,912,922	1,055,780	857,142
Rhode Island		16.3%	14.6%	16.3%	13.7%	2.5%	785,113	127,621	114,659	127,621	107,582	19,758
South Carolina		18.1%	17.7%	18.1%	5.7%	12.3%	3,446,141	623,418	611,599	623,418	197,593	425,449
South Carolina	X	11.5%	11.0%	11.5%	1.4%	10.4%	3,446,141	394,747	379,838	394,747	48,975	359,334
South Dakota		15.2%	14.5%	15.2%	0.8%	13.7%	611,467	92,822	88,645	92,822	4,828	83,817
Tennessee		24.2%	22.6%	22.6%	6.4%	16.3%	4,463,544	1,080,437	1,010,302	1,010,302	284,894	725,408
Texas		14.4%	13.5%	13.5%	4.2%	9.2%	16,094,902	2,315,391	2,165,090	2,165,090	680,548	1,484,542
Texas	X	3.2%	2.9%	2.9%	0.9%	2.1%	16,094,902	507,502	474,558	474,558	138,891	335,667
Utah		12.6%	11.8%	12.6%	1.8%	10.1%	1,914,322	240,551	226,711	240,551	34,294	192,417
Vermont		20.8%	20.4%	20.8%	14.8%	5.9%	505,005	105,164	102,813	105,164	74,598	30,015
Virginia		2.9%	2.9%	2.9%	0.0%	2.9%	5,329,101	155,045	154,393	155,045	-	154,393
Washington		29.9%	29.5%	29.9%	14.3%	14.7%	4,915,707	1,471,791	1,450,126	1,471,791	703,890	723,316
West Virginia		18.2%	17.0%	17.0%	11.0%	6.0%	1,459,559	265,664	248,419	248,419	160,763	87,190
Wisconsin		21.3%	19.9%	19.9%	5.5%	14.4%	4,298,018	916,522	857,027	857,027	235,762	618,828
Wyoming		33.5%	32.7%	33.5%	6.3%	27.2%	393,271	131,691	128,611	131,691	24,721	106,970

Source: BPC analysis of state election data.

Note: U.S. turnout rates reflect average state turnout. Unofficial data is used in Alabama's primary for Macon and Wilcox counties, and for TBC numbers in Alabama's runoff primary. The following primaries lack full coverage: New York, North Carolina, Utah, and Virginia. The following runoff primaries lack full coverage: Alabama, Mississippi, North Carolina, and Texas. TBC is estimated from HO in states where HO and Total Votes numbers are equal. HO turnout is estimated from TBC turnout for Kentucky and North Carolina's primaries.

Table 4. 2014 State Primary Turnout Rates

Turnout Rates							Eligible Voters	Votes Cast				
State	Runoff Election?	Total Ballots Counted (TBC)	Highest Office (HO)	Total Votes	Democratic Party	Republican Party	Voting-Eligible Population (VEP)	Total Ballots Counted (TBC)	Highest Office (HO)	Total Votes	Democratic Votes	Republican Votes
United States		15.2%	14.1%	14.9%	5.9%	8.6%	223,758,730	34,884,798	32,516,416	34,276,161	13,986,347	18,302,590
Alabama		19.0%	17.7%	17.7%	5.1%	12.6%	3,453,869	654,681	612,183	612,183	177,658	434,525
Alabama	X	7.3%	6.8%	6.8%	0.7%	5.9%	3,453,869	252,470	236,081	236,081	24,547	204,617
Alaska		38.8%	38.0%	38.8%	14.4%	22.8%	498,159	193,097	189,463	193,097	71,923	113,752
Arizona		18.8%	17.9%	18.8%	6.9%	11.8%	4,661,903	877,270	835,972	877,270	320,239	549,423
Arkansas		15.8%	15.2%	15.8%	7.0%	8.2%	2,186,909	346,318	332,568	346,318	153,343	179,225
Arkansas	X	4.2%	3.5%	4.2%	0.1%	4.1%	2,186,909	92,941	76,689	92,941	2,789	90,152
California		17.2%	16.7%	17.2%	9.2%	6.7%	25,986,932	4,461,346	4,333,028	4,461,346	2,391,810	1,729,985
Colorado		16.1%	15.2%	16.1%	5.4%	9.7%	3,946,419	634,181	599,152	634,181	214,403	384,749
Connecticut		3.8%	3.6%	3.6%	0.6%	2.9%	2,694,056	103,378	96,667	96,667	17,241	79,426
Delaware		7.3%	6.9%	6.9%	3.2%	3.7%	684,792	50,292	47,027	47,027	21,987	25,040
Florida		16.1%	13.9%	16.1%	6.5%	7.4%	12,899,644	2,079,354	1,786,940	2,079,354	837,796	949,144
Georgia		14.2%	13.7%	14.2%	5.1%	8.9%	6,946,449	987,618	951,737	987,618	353,049	617,391
Georgia	X	9.1%	8.9%	9.1%	2.1%	7.0%	6,946,449	630,804	619,021	630,804	142,775	488,029
Hawaii		29.0%	28.0%	29.0%	23.8%	4.4%	999,207	289,398	280,264	289,398	237,915	44,142
Idaho		16.9%	15.5%	16.9%	2.2%	13.3%	1,167,054	196,982	180,948	196,982	25,638	155,310
Illinois		14.3%	13.3%	14.3%	4.7%	8.6%	9,509,454	1,357,807	1,267,028	1,357,807	448,025	819,710
Indiana		12.6%	10.7%	12.6%	3.1%	7.2%	4,898,621	617,156	524,586	617,156	151,217	352,619
Iowa		10.0%	9.5%	10.0%	3.1%	6.8%	2,327,214	233,090	220,893	233,090	72,065	159,409
Kansas		16.6%	15.6%	16.6%	3.1%	12.5%	2,109,869	350,699	330,159	350,699	66,357	264,340
Kentucky		26.8%	24.2%	26.8%	12.8%	11.3%	3,133,672	840,724	757,640	840,724	402,524	355,116
Maine		12.1%	10.3%	12.1%	6.1%	5.8%	1,073,873	130,067	110,317	130,067	65,085	62,313
Maryland		17.0%	16.1%	17.0%	11.3%	5.2%	4,357,716	739,678	700,028	739,678	494,016	225,917
Massachusetts		14.3%	13.9%	14.3%	11.1%	3.2%	5,016,596	716,028	697,313	716,028	556,092	159,936
Michigan		17.4%	16.2%	17.4%	6.7%	8.0%	7,687,030	1,339,681	1,246,229	1,339,681	513,263	617,720
Minnesota		9.8%	9.3%	9.8%	4.7%	4.5%	4,095,317	401,878	381,191	401,878	193,347	184,110
Mississippi		20.9%	19.6%	19.6%	4.2%	15.4%	2,068,310	418,793	404,768	404,768	85,866	318,902
Mississippi	X	20.2%	18.9%	18.9%	0.5%	18.5%	2,068,310	420,066	391,608	391,608	9,387	382,221
Missouri		23.0%	21.5%	21.5%	6.7%	9.3%	4,660,337	1,069,655	1,000,220	1,000,220	312,493	431,778
Montana		27.4%	26.1%	27.4%	9.5%	16.6%	799,002	218,882	208,616	218,882	75,991	132,625
Nebraska		23.7%	21.3%	23.7%	5.6%	16.4%	1,370,549	324,227	292,336	324,227	77,044	225,212
Nevada		11.8%	10.1%	11.8%	3.8%	6.2%	1,885,677	222,240	190,301	222,240	72,521	117,780
New Hampshire		15.6%	14.6%	15.6%	4.1%	11.4%	1,063,406	165,459	155,580	165,459	43,359	121,454
New Jersey		6.5%	5.5%	6.5%	3.8%	2.8%	6,364,947	416,065	347,436	416,065	240,749	175,316
New Mexico		13.0%	12.3%	13.0%	7.3%	4.2%	1,560,773	202,327	191,350	202,327	113,502	65,979
New York		1.4%	1.3%	1.3%	0.7%	0.7%	14,233,621	204,908	191,607	191,607	94,518	94,630
North Carolina		14.3%	13.5%	14.3%	6.7%	6.8%	7,193,886	1,028,600	972,944	1,028,600	482,369	488,555
North Dakota		16.8%	14.7%	16.8%	5.4%	9.1%	555,640	93,624	81,919	93,624	30,154	50,446
Ohio		14.5%	13.5%	14.5%	5.7%	7.3%	9,043,596	1,307,351	1,224,480	1,307,351	512,453	659,995
Oklahoma		17.0%	15.9%	15.9%	6.1%	9.7%	2,738,063	464,899	434,721	434,721	167,863	266,858
Oklahoma	X	6.6%	6.2%	6.2%	3.5%	2.7%	2,738,063	180,945	169,199	169,199	95,991	73,208
Oregon		25.2%	18.9%	25.2%	10.9%	21.5%	3,015,611	758,604	570,523	758,604	329,569	649,136
Pennsylvania		13.2%	12.3%	12.3%	8.4%	4.0%	10,111,850	1,332,242	1,245,761	1,245,761	845,009	400,752
Rhode Island		20.4%	19.7%	20.4%	16.4%	4.0%	811,204	165,690	160,024	165,690	133,063	32,582
South Carolina		12.5%	12.2%	12.5%	3.5%	8.8%	3,618,138	452,990	443,122	452,990	126,133	316,989
South Carolina	X	5.0%	4.8%	5.0%	1.1%	3.7%	3,618,138	179,218	173,974	179,218	39,810	134,164
South Dakota		16.7%	16.1%	16.7%	4.8%	11.9%	635,326	105,863	102,092	105,863	30,366	75,497
Tennessee		21.2%	19.8%	19.8%	5.3%	14.6%	4,587,722	972,090	908,988	908,988	240,949	668,039
Texas		11.6%	10.9%	10.9%	3.2%	7.7%	17,666,878	2,051,262	1,918,107	1,918,107	560,033	1,358,074
Texas	X	5.8%	5.4%	5.4%	1.1%	4.3%	17,666,878	1,020,294	954,063	954,063	201,283	752,780
Utah		7.5%	6.9%	7.5%			1,987,619	148,691	138,125	148,691		
Vermont		7.7%	7.1%	7.7%	4.3%	3.3%	508,880	39,356	36,288	39,356	21,763	17,043
Virginia		2.3%	2.2%	2.2%	0.8%	1.5%	5,639,529	129,766	121,342	121,342	43,376	82,474
Washington		24.3%	23.6%	24.3%	11.5%	10.7%	5,034,615	1,222,710	1,188,256	1,222,710	581,029	539,265
West Virginia		15.8%	14.8%	14.8%	9.1%	5.8%	1,481,570	234,748	219,510	219,510	134,188	85,322
Wisconsin		14.6%	12.7%	14.6%	7.2%	5.5%	4,364,245	638,677	552,349	638,677	312,106	240,102
Wyoming		28.0%	27.0%	28.0%	4.0%	23.0%	422,983	117,618	113,683	117,618	18,306	99,312

Source: BPC analysis of state election data.

Note: U.S. turnout rates reflect average state turnout. The following primaries lack full coverage: Connecticut, New York, Utah, and Virginia. The following runoff primaries lack full coverage: Arkansas, Mississippi, and Oklahoma. TBC is estimated from HO in states where HO and Total Votes numbers are equal.

Table 5. 2018 State Primary Turnout Rates

State	Runoff Election?	Turnout Rates					Eligible Voters	Votes Cast				
		Total Ballots Counted (TBC)	Highest Office (HO)	Total Votes	Democratic Party	Republican Party	Voting-Eligible Population (VEP)	Total Ballots Counted (TBC)	Highest Office (HO)	Total Votes	Democratic Votes	Republican Votes
United States		19.4%	18.3%	19.0%	8.9%	9.3%	232,227,179	49,268,075	46,560,255	48,403,910	23,886,737	22,416,585
Alabama		25.4%	24.8%	25.4%	8.5%	16.9%	3,534,300	898,662	874,904	898,662	299,158	597,171
Alabama	X	12.2%	11.0%	12.2%	1.2%	9.7%	3,534,300	431,328	387,466	431,328	43,902	343,564
Alaska		22.9%	22.1%	22.9%	8.5%	14.4%	504,642	115,727	111,727	115,727	43,011	72,716
Arizona		24.2%	23.4%	24.2%	10.6%	13.5%	4,989,820	1,208,113	1,168,156	1,208,113	526,574	672,452
Arkansas		14.8%	14.1%	14.8%	4.8%	9.3%	2,220,411	327,629	312,324	327,629	105,919	206,405
Arkansas	X	0.3%	0.3%	0.3%	0.0%	0.3%	2,220,411	6,963	6,781	6,963	-	6,963
California		26.1%	25.4%	26.1%	15.9%	9.2%	27,354,773	7,141,987	6,961,254	7,141,987	4,350,513	2,519,136
Colorado		27.5%	27.0%	27.5%	15.1%	11.9%	4,216,791	1,161,575	1,139,814	1,161,115	637,002	503,205
Connecticut		13.3%	13.0%	13.3%	8.1%	5.3%	2,741,566	365,922	355,401	365,922	220,697	145,225
Delaware		18.1%	16.9%	16.9%	11.6%	5.3%	714,917	129,306	120,912	120,912	83,042	37,870
Florida		25.2%	22.3%	25.2%	10.7%	11.6%	14,187,220	3,574,032	3,162,888	3,574,032	1,519,492	1,643,396
Georgia		15.8%	15.5%	15.8%	7.5%	8.3%	7,478,745	1,183,156	1,162,530	1,183,156	563,445	619,711
Georgia	X	10.0%	9.8%	10.0%	2.1%	7.9%	7,478,745	751,310	736,315	751,310	159,925	591,385
Hawaii		28.2%	27.1%	28.2%	24.4%	3.2%	1,016,459	286,180	275,274	286,180	247,932	32,610
Idaho		21.0%	20.6%	21.0%	5.2%	15.4%	1,261,366	264,320	260,418	264,320	65,882	194,536
Illinois		22.4%	21.8%	22.4%	14.4%	7.9%	9,389,014	2,103,634	2,046,710	2,103,634	1,348,157	739,834
Indiana		17.4%	15.9%	17.4%	5.8%	10.1%	5,015,710	870,336	799,579	870,336	292,879	506,700
Iowa		12.1%	11.6%	12.1%	7.6%	4.4%	2,390,109	289,852	276,387	289,852	182,736	105,183
Kansas		23.4%	21.9%	21.9%	7.2%	14.7%	2,164,804	506,304	473,438	473,438	156,273	317,165
Kentucky		25.7%	24.1%	25.7%	14.5%	10.8%	3,135,939	806,248	754,208	806,248	453,832	339,791
Maine		26.4%	26.0%	26.4%	12.4%	9.5%	1,068,353	281,521	278,191	281,521	132,795	101,585
Maryland		19.3%	18.1%	18.1%	13.3%	4.7%	4,455,027	861,554	805,627	805,625	594,692	210,935
Massachusetts		19.5%	17.9%	19.5%	14.0%	5.4%	5,156,227	1,004,605	923,684	1,004,605	721,089	280,697
Michigan		28.1%	26.9%	28.1%	14.4%	12.6%	7,865,081	2,206,977	2,117,998	2,206,977	1,131,447	989,576
Minnesota		22.7%	22.2%	22.7%	14.3%	7.9%	4,079,635	925,554	904,649	925,554	583,735	320,914
Mississippi		12.6%	11.8%	11.8%	4.2%	7.5%	2,084,779	262,116	245,101	245,101	87,931	157,170
Mississippi	X	3.2%	3.0%	3.0%	1.9%	1.2%	2,084,779	132,423	123,827	123,827	75,305	48,522
Missouri		33.1%	31.0%	31.0%	13.5%	14.8%	4,497,661	1,489,976	1,393,256	1,393,256	607,577	664,889
Montana		33.2%	31.7%	33.2%	13.5%	18.0%	851,251	282,704	269,880	282,704	114,948	153,346
Nebraska		21.1%	18.7%	21.1%	6.6%	12.1%	1,403,033	296,000	263,056	296,000	92,760	169,094
Nevada		15.5%	13.6%	15.5%	6.9%	6.7%	2,121,679	329,863	287,604	329,863	145,420	142,184
New Hampshire		20.7%	19.7%	20.7%	11.5%	9.1%	1,104,174	228,262	217,401	228,262	126,474	100,590
New Jersey		11.1%	10.2%	11.1%	7.2%	4.0%	6,307,067	703,103	645,151	703,103	455,052	250,572
New Mexico		17.1%	16.4%	17.1%	11.5%	4.9%	1,535,945	262,357	251,683	262,357	175,898	75,162
New York		2.8%	2.6%	2.6%	2.4%	0.2%	14,105,785	391,439	366,029	366,029	343,322	21,472
North Carolina		12.4%	11.6%	12.4%	4.9%	3.2%	7,748,962	957,627	895,816	957,627	376,557	245,461
North Dakota		20.2%	18.8%	20.2%	12.3%	6.5%	569,205	115,226	107,283	115,226	70,133	36,883
Ohio		18.4%	17.3%	18.4%	7.9%	9.5%	9,089,472	1,673,162	1,573,556	1,673,162	721,070	865,662
Oklahoma		32.5%	30.4%	30.4%	13.5%	15.4%	2,936,255	954,733	892,758	892,758	395,494	452,606
Oklahoma	X	16.0%	14.9%	14.9%	4.6%	10.3%	2,936,255	468,371	437,967	437,967	134,833	302,208
Oregon		27.2%	22.0%	27.2%	12.6%	9.9%	3,335,063	908,166	733,699	908,166	418,605	329,969
Pennsylvania		16.6%	15.5%	15.5%	7.8%	7.7%	9,906,948	1,645,908	1,539,066	1,539,066	775,660	763,406
Rhode Island		19.2%	18.0%	18.0%	14.0%	3.9%	840,475	161,442	150,962	150,962	117,875	33,087
South Carolina		15.9%	15.7%	15.9%	6.3%	9.4%	3,913,195	621,841	613,014	621,841	245,031	367,983
South Carolina	X	9.8%	9.7%	9.8%	1.0%	8.8%	3,913,195	385,254	380,859	385,254	37,224	343,635
South Dakota		21.8%	20.6%	21.8%	1.2%	16.1%	647,656	141,044	133,586	141,044	8,070	104,043
Tennessee		26.1%	24.4%	24.4%	8.0%	16.5%	4,809,085	1,256,617	1,175,045	1,175,045	382,157	792,888
Texas		14.8%	13.8%	13.8%	5.6%	8.2%	18,936,798	2,799,780	2,618,036	2,618,036	1,068,463	1,549,573
Texas	X	4.3%	4.0%	4.0%	2.3%	1.7%	18,936,798	805,233	752,962	752,962	434,889	318,073
Utah		16.5%	15.4%	15.4%	0.6%	14.8%	2,268,328	373,767	349,504	349,515	12,712	336,792
Vermont		20.4%	19.8%	20.4%	13.3%	7.0%	527,334	107,637	104,454	107,637	70,007	36,987
Virginia		9.2%	8.5%	9.2%	3.8%	5.4%	5,791,571	530,369	490,204	530,369	220,111	310,258
Washington		32.1%	31.1%	32.1%	18.1%	11.6%	5,470,311	1,753,545	1,700,840	1,753,545	989,462	634,190
West Virginia		21.3%	19.8%	21.3%	10.7%	9.1%	1,507,617	320,937	298,825	320,937	161,252	137,573
Wisconsin		23.4%	21.9%	21.9%	11.8%	10.0%	4,554,755	1,066,569	997,334	997,334	538,857	455,830
Wyoming		33.1%	32.0%	33.1%	4.6%	27.9%	421,868	139,809	134,862	139,809	19,459	117,752

Source: BPC analysis of state election data.

Note: U.S. turnout rates reflect average state turnout. The following primaries lack full coverage: Kentucky, Mississippi, South Dakota, Utah, and Virginia. The following runoff primaries lack full coverage: Arkansas, Mississippi, Oklahoma, South Carolina, and Texas. TBC is estimated from HO in states where HO and Total Votes numbers are equal.

Table 6. 2022 State Primary Turnout Rates

State	Runoff Election?	Turnout Rates					Eligible Voters	Votes Cast				
		Total Ballots Counted (TBC)	Highest Office (HO)	Total Votes	Democratic Party	Republican Party	Voting-Eligible Population (VEP)	Total Ballots Counted (TBC)	Highest Office (HO)	Total Votes	Democratic Votes	Republican Votes
United States		20.2%	19.1%	20.0%	7.8%	11.3%	229,348,689	52,245,940	49,394,229	51,666,523	22,306,509	26,519,038
Alabama		24.3%	23.5%	24.3%	5.4%	18.9%	3,504,009	851,684	824,605	851,684	188,578	660,789
Alabama	X	13.3%	13.2%	13.3%	1.7%	12.2%	3,504,009	465,320	460,885	465,320	60,553	425,779
Alaska		36.6%	36.3%	36.6%	13.3%	32.1%	526,581	192,542	191,015	192,542	70,295	168,770
Arizona		28.6%	28.0%	28.6%	12.0%	16.5%	5,102,862	1,457,635	1,428,085	1,457,635	610,974	841,824
Arkansas		21.1%	20.4%	21.1%	4.4%	16.1%	2,165,098	457,856	442,359	457,856	94,472	347,887
Arkansas	X	1.3%	0.8%	1.3%	0.0%	1.3%	2,165,098	27,794	17,822	27,794	-	27,794
California		28.6%	27.7%	28.6%	16.0%	10.0%	25,499,386	7,285,230	7,063,868	7,285,230	4,074,439	2,557,329
Colorado		28.1%	26.7%	28.1%	12.1%	14.6%	4,331,680	1,217,471	1,157,334	1,217,471	523,489	633,845
Connecticut		7.9%	7.7%	7.9%	4.3%	3.5%	2,642,282	207,924	203,763	207,924	114,259	93,665
Delaware		9.9%	8.9%	9.9%	6.7%	2.2%	754,390	75,040	67,159	75,040	50,521	16,638
Florida		25.1%	21.3%	25.1%	10.3%	11.0%	14,726,345	3,701,549	3,135,720	3,701,549	1,514,988	1,620,732
Georgia		27.2%	25.5%	25.5%	9.6%	15.9%	7,598,775	2,069,362	1,936,336	1,936,336	731,594	1,204,742
Georgia	X	5.4%	5.1%	5.1%	3.5%	1.6%	7,598,775	411,694	385,229	385,229	262,207	123,022
Hawaii		33.5%	32.5%	33.5%	24.2%	7.3%	1,016,166	340,159	330,006	340,159	245,488	73,903
Idaho		23.6%	22.6%	23.6%	2.4%	20.3%	1,390,959	328,244	314,749	328,244	33,147	281,824
Illinois		19.4%	18.9%	19.4%	9.9%	9.0%	8,887,190	1,724,052	1,679,722	1,724,052	882,693	797,029
Indiana		13.3%	11.6%	13.3%	3.7%	7.9%	5,006,017	664,651	581,018	664,651	185,202	395,816
Iowa		15.2%	15.0%	15.2%	6.7%	8.4%	2,354,102	357,603	352,674	357,603	158,745	198,858
Kansas		47.7%	44.7%	44.7%	13.7%	22.6%	2,110,625	1,007,625	942,851	942,851	288,770	476,348
Kentucky		22.4%	20.9%	22.4%	9.0%	11.9%	3,248,435	728,545	678,008	728,545	292,310	385,698
Maine		12.6%	11.7%	12.6%	6.7%	5.9%	1,107,281	139,995	129,135	139,995	74,311	65,684
Maryland		23.8%	22.3%	22.3%	15.5%	6.8%	4,336,552	1,032,608	966,228	966,228	671,160	295,068
Massachusetts		21.1%	20.5%	21.1%	15.6%	5.5%	4,989,124	1,052,414	1,023,625	1,052,414	777,226	275,188
Michigan		28.5%	26.8%	28.5%	12.4%	14.5%	7,593,596	2,167,798	2,037,655	2,167,798	938,382	1,099,273
Minnesota		19.1%	18.3%	19.1%	10.4%	7.8%	4,159,783	793,236	759,456	793,236	431,923	323,020
Mississippi		11.9%	11.2%	11.2%	3.8%	7.4%	1,973,539	235,747	220,592	220,592	74,023	146,569
Mississippi	X	7.5%	7.0%	7.0%	0.0%	7.0%	1,973,539	147,947	138,436	138,436	-	138,436
Missouri		23.9%	22.3%	22.3%	8.0%	14.3%	4,600,093	1,098,298	1,027,695	1,027,695	368,255	655,675
Montana		33.7%	32.1%	33.7%	10.9%	21.0%	869,537	293,049	279,266	293,049	94,855	182,373
Nebraska		29.8%	26.7%	29.8%	7.3%	19.7%	1,391,773	414,869	371,992	414,869	101,089	273,763
Nevada		21.1%	18.2%	21.1%	7.9%	10.3%	2,226,619	469,209	404,310	469,209	175,740	228,570
New Hampshire		21.9%	21.4%	21.9%	8.6%	13.2%	1,114,185	243,776	238,439	243,776	96,275	147,501
New Jersey		12.3%	11.8%	12.3%	7.0%	5.3%	6,231,579	766,012	733,486	766,012	433,733	332,279
New Mexico		17.2%	15.9%	17.2%	8.2%	7.7%	1,530,561	263,337	243,927	263,337	125,238	117,551
New York		3.2%	3.2%	3.2%	2.2%	1.0%	13,662,971	440,482	434,805	440,482	297,692	141,543
North Carolina		18.3%	17.7%	18.3%	7.9%	9.8%	7,832,169	1,432,819	1,383,423	1,432,819	618,775	764,648
North Carolina	X	2.5%	2.2%	2.3%	0.0%	0.0%	7,832,169	195,199	170,910	182,651		
North Dakota		18.6%	17.3%	18.6%	3.9%	13.4%	571,405	106,168	98,871	106,168	22,385	76,486
Ohio		18.8%	18.1%	18.8%	6.1%	12.4%	8,814,551	1,659,377	1,597,580	1,659,377	540,084	1,094,480
Oklahoma		18.5%	18.3%	18.5%	5.9%	12.6%	2,880,366	534,216	527,678	534,216	170,411	363,805
Oklahoma	X	13.1%	13.0%	13.1%	3.3%	9.9%	2,880,366	378,719	374,414	378,719	94,206	284,513
Oregon		34.6%	27.4%	34.6%	16.0%	12.2%	3,211,177	1,111,233	880,587	1,111,233	512,481	391,971
Pennsylvania		28.9%	27.0%	27.0%	13.2%	13.8%	9,756,057	2,814,955	2,633,999	2,633,999	1,284,908	1,349,091
Rhode Island		16.8%	16.5%	16.8%	14.2%	2.6%	814,616	137,024	134,137	137,024	115,396	21,937
South Carolina		14.3%	13.9%	14.3%	4.6%	9.3%	3,951,376	565,538	549,595	565,538	181,590	368,005
South Carolina	X	5.7%	5.6%	5.7%	1.1%	4.4%	3,951,376	224,432	220,087	224,432	45,364	174,723
South Dakota		28.5%	27.7%	28.5%	0.7%	19.0%	654,710	186,896	181,542	186,896	4,346	124,329
Tennessee		18.6%	15.7%	18.6%	5.4%	10.3%	4,787,749	891,678	752,203	891,678	257,841	494,362
Texas		16.2%	16.1%	16.2%	5.7%	10.4%	18,835,119	3,045,313	3,029,773	3,045,313	1,080,083	1,965,230
Texas	X	7.7%	7.5%	7.7%	2.7%	5.0%	18,835,119	1,452,380	1,418,712	1,452,380	510,910	941,470
Utah		20.0%	19.0%	20.0%	0.9%	18.1%	2,304,459	461,463	438,530	461,463	21,827	416,703
Vermont		25.5%	24.8%	25.5%	19.6%	5.8%	523,679	133,578	129,720	133,578	102,408	30,560
Virginia		2.8%	2.7%	2.8%	0.9%	1.9%	6,044,311	170,257	164,485	170,257	56,277	113,980
Washington		35.4%	35.0%	35.4%	19.4%	14.2%	5,487,568	1,941,933	1,920,440	1,941,933	1,063,152	776,753
West Virginia		18.8%	15.7%	18.8%	5.2%	10.6%	1,383,453	260,274	217,863	260,274	71,478	146,385
Wisconsin		27.9%	27.1%	27.9%	11.4%	15.7%	4,412,553	1,229,500	1,195,851	1,229,500	501,760	693,519
Wyoming		42.3%	39.8%	42.3%	1.9%	39.9%	431,277	182,232	171,574	182,232	8,201	172,047

Source: BPC analysis of state election data.

Notes: United States turnout rates reflect average state turnout, including runoffs. The following primaries do not have full coverage: Delaware, Mississippi, New York, Utah, and Virginia. The following runoff primaries do not have full coverage: Arkansas, Georgia, Mississippi, and North Carolina. TBC is estimated from HO in states where HO and Total Votes numbers are equal. HO is estimated from TBC in North Carolina.

APPENDIX B: DATA AND METHODOLOGY

Data Sample

The sample consisted of state primary and primary runoff elections for federal offices that took place in 2010, 2014, 2018, and 2022. Runoffs that did not involve federal races were included in the data set if their primary counterpart included federal races. States that held primaries that did not include any federal races due to a lack of contested contests were included, such as Connecticut's 2014 primary. Dedicated primary elections for state offices were excluded, such as New York's separate primary for state offices in 2014 and 2018. In the case of New York's mixed primaries in 2022, its August 23 primary date is used (featuring U.S. congressional and state Senate races) rather than June 28 (featuring U.S. Senate, state executive offices, and state Assembly races). Louisiana's 2014, 2018, and 2022 primaries were excluded, as they occurred on Election Day and functioned more as general elections. Primaries for special elections were not included. These criteria yielded a sample size of 229 primary elections, of which 197 were primary contests and 31 were runoff primary contests.

Throughout this paper, turnout figures exclude runoff primaries unless otherwise specified.

Turnout

Voting-Eligible Population

Voting-eligible population (VEP) captures the total number of people who are legally eligible to vote, taking into account age, citizenship status, and criminal record.²² Michael McDonald, a professor at the University of Florida, has helped to popularize VEP as a more accurate turnout denominator than simply using voting-age population (VAP). This was calculated by subtracting the number of noncitizens and ineligible felons from the voting-age population (VAP) of each state. VAP data is from the 2010 and 2014 Current Population Survey (CPS) Annual Social and Economic Supplements.²³ 2018 figures were derived by extrapolating the 2016 and 2017 CPS adult civilian persons for each state.²⁴ 2022 figures were calculated by extrapolating 2020 VAP from the decennial census (PL 94-171) and 2021 VAP from the 2021 American Community Survey (ACS) 1-Year Estimates (DP05).

Noncitizen population data is from the 2010 and 2014 ACS 1-Year Supplemental Estimates.^{25,26} Figures from 2018 were extrapolated from 2014 and 2016 ACS estimates. In each case, the percentage of noncitizens was calculated for each state and then used to derive the adult noncitizen population. 2022 noncitizen population was extrapolated from the 2020 ACS 5-Year Estimates (B27020) and the 2021 ACS 1-Year Estimates.

Ineligible felon estimates for 2010 are from the Sentencing Project's report *State-Level Estimates of Felon Disenfranchisement in the United States, 2010*.²⁷ This data was extrapolated to 2014, taking into account intervening policy changes in California, Delaware, Indiana, South Dakota, and Vermont. Figures from 2018 were derived by extrapolating data from the Sentencing Project's report *6 Million Lost Voters: State-Level Estimates of Felony Disenfranchisement, 2016*.²⁸ Intervening policy changes in Alabama, California, Delaware, Iowa, Maryland, Nevada, New York, South Dakota, and Virginia were also taken into account. Ineligible felon estimates for 2022 were taken from the Sentencing Project's report *Locked Out 2022: Estimates of People Denied Voting Rights*. These figures diverge somewhat from McDonald's United States Elections Project VEP estimates by counting as ineligible (excluding from VEP) those who have fully served their sentences but have outstanding fines, fees, and other costs whose payment is a condition of re-enfranchisement. The number of people affected is largest in Alabama, Arizona, Florida, Mississippi, Tennessee, and Virginia, resulting in lower VEP estimates (and slightly higher turnout figures) than if those affected were counted as eligible.

Votes Counted

Three measures of participation were calculated: total ballots counted (TBC), which captures how many eligible votes were counted in each primary; highest office (HO), which captures the greatest number of votes counted for each party's single race, referendum, or series of non-overlapping legislative districts with the greatest number of votes; and "Total Votes," which captures the most accurate measure of participation directly provided by each state. Election data was derived from each state's official election reporting website. HO usually took the form of a gubernatorial or Senate race or a statewide referendum. In primaries without votes for any of those races, HO was calculated using the statewide office that garnered the greatest number of total votes. When no statewide election took place, HO was calculated by adding together the vote totals of the elections with non-overlapping district boundaries that garnered the greatest number of total votes. Where HO did not take the form of a nonpartisan office or cross-party referendum vote, a state's overall HO turnout was calculated by adding the HO of each party that participated in that state's primary. Votes for write-in candidates were counted as part of HO for states that reported such figures.

TBC is the preferred method of calculating turnout. It was collected for each state that directly reported the metric and for states that provided detailed enough election results to calculate TBC. For each state where both TBC and HO turnout figures could be calculated, a difference quotient was measured. This quotient was then averaged across all states, with the resultant mean used to estimate TBC for states where it could not otherwise be determined. TBC was found to be 6.9% higher than HO on average. This is due to a combination of overvotes and undervotes that are not reflected by the HO calculation.

A third measure of participation, Total Votes, is the most accurate measure of votes derived directly from official state election data—TBC where possible, and HO otherwise. The Total Votes measure of turnout was used for Democratic and Republican vote totals (in other words, TBC where directly reported by states and HO otherwise).

In the case of Kentucky’s 2018 primary and North Carolina’s 2018 and 2022 primaries, the lack of a statewide race made HO difficult to calculate. Instead, state-provided TBC figures were used to estimate HO based on the average HO/TBC difference calculated among all states with both available figures. Utah’s 2014 primary turnout was difficult to calculate due to the lack of statewide primary races or centralized reporting. HO was estimated from an extrapolation of the number of votes in Utah’s most populous counties based on total population covered by those counties. Utah’s 2022 HO turnout for the Democratic primary was also calculated by examining county-level races.

Turnout Rate

Three measures of turnout rate were calculated. “TBC Turnout” is the TBC vote count for each primary election divided by the corresponding state’s VEP. “HO Turnout” is the HO vote count for each primary election divided by the corresponding state’s VEP. “Total Votes Turnout” is the Total Votes vote count divided by the corresponding state’s VEP. TBC Turnout was used throughout this paper, except for Democratic and Republican turnout, for which Total Votes Turnout was used. All three measures were used for robustness tests.

These calculated turnout rates are conservative measures of total turnout in that they account for all potentially eligible voters rather than all registered voters. This decision was made for several reasons. First, the reliability and accuracy of registration rates varies greatly by state. Deriving turnout rates from registration data brings these same reliability and accuracy issues to the interpretation of differences in primary turnout. Second, VEP-derived turnout is a truer picture of the public’s participation in elections. Otherwise-eligible voters who are not registered should indeed be included in measures of primary turnout. Finally, using party registration figures would reward states who limit primary eligibility to only those voters who have officially registered with a party. We do not see value in reporting high turnout for a state simply because the pool of eligible voters is restricted compared with other states. Using VEP rewards states that turn out a larger percentage of their voting-eligible population, regardless of that state’s specific registration laws or primary type.

Party Turnout

Democratic and Republican vote totals use Total Votes. They are more conservative measures of participation than each state’s overall Total Votes since they more frequently reflect HO values than TBC and exclude third-party

or unaffiliated voter participation. In top-two and top-four primaries, party vote totals reflect the HO vote totals for candidates of each respective party. “Democratic Turnout” and “Republican Turnout” refers to the percentage of a state’s voting-eligible population that voted in the respective major party’s primary (or, in the case of top-two and top-four primaries, the percentage that cast ballots for each major party). They do not reflect the percentage of that party’s registered voters or identified members that participated.

Other Variables

In addition to calculating midterm primary turnout rates, this study examines other factors that might boost or diminish turnout. Each variable tested is described below.

Coverage

Coverage reflects whether every eligible voter in the state can vote in a primary for a major party. A state primary lacks full coverage when this is not the case—usually when there was no competitive statewide election or referenda, not all congressional districts were competitive, and the state did not allow voters to cast ballots in uncontested races. It is also a common occurrence in runoff primaries. A race that was uncompetitive but could still be voted for on the ballot counted as coverage, as the voter could choose to vote or not vote for that candidate, and in most states the voter could write in a candidate of their choice. States that lacked full coverage were coded as 1 for “Lacks full coverage” and otherwise coded as 0. A quantitative variable was also constructed to estimate what proportion of people could participate in their preferred major-party primary. Full coverage for both parties was coded as 2 for the “Lacks Full Coverage Scale” variable. Full coverage for one party and no coverage for the other major party was coded as 1, and no election coverage for either major party would be coded as 0 (North Carolina’s 2022 runoff is coded as such, since it covered very few voters). Partial coverage for each party was quantified based on the percentage of congressional or legislative races that voters could participate in. The following primaries required an estimation of coverage based on city or county races: Utah’s 2014 primary, Arkansas’s 2018 runoff primary, Texas’s 2018 runoff primary, and Alabama’s 2018 runoff primary.

Top-Ticket Races

The presence of a competitive top-of-the-ticket race may encourage turnout. Gubernatorial and Senate races for major parties that involved at least two names on the ballot were counted as top-ticket races. The variable “Top-Ticket Races” consisted of the number of contested gubernatorial and Senate races across major parties, ranging between 0 and 4. “Top-Ticket Binary” was coded as 1 when a top-ticket race occurred and 0 otherwise and was the main variable used in descriptive analysis. The number of major parties with a top-ticket race, labeled “Top Party Races,” ranged between 0 and 2 and was the primary variable

used in regression analysis. “Top Democratic” and “Top Republican” were two binary disaggregates of Top Party Race. “Top Democratic” was coded as 1 when a top-ticket Democratic race occurred and 0 otherwise, while “Top Republican” was coded likewise for Republican races. Similarly, “Top Senate” was coded as 1 when a contested Senate race occurred and 0 otherwise, while “Top Governor” was coded as 1 when a gubernatorial race occurred and 0 otherwise.

Referenda

Several states allow statewide referenda to be placed on primary election ballots. These legally binding, cross-party decisions may boost turnout by both encouraging partisans to vote and allowing nonaffiliated voters to participate in the primary. States were coded as having a referendum if a ballot question could be voted on by any eligible voter and the result of that ballot question was binding. This includes ballot measures, constitutional amendments, constitutional measures, special referenda, legislative referenda, binding propositions, state issues, state questions, state measures, and initiated measures. This does not include party questions, advisory questions, or nonbinding propositions such as appear in Georgia, South Carolina, and Texas. Fifteen states placed binding referenda on their primary ballots at least once in the past four midterm cycles.

Nominating Conventions

In many states, parties host nominating conventions or caucuses in which delegates vote for candidates for federal and/or state offices. Which positions are concerned, who is allowed to participate, and what the vote decides varies widely from state to state. Some states use these contests in lieu of primary elections altogether, while others use them to decide who will be on the primary ballot, who will get party resources, or who simply gets the party’s official endorsement. For the purposes of this analysis, states were considered as using nominating conventions when at least one major party used this vote to have a material effect on the ability of candidates to appear on the primary ballot. This includes states such as Colorado and North Dakota where candidates who obtain a certain threshold of delegate support receive automatic placement on the ballot while candidates who fall below that threshold are either shut out altogether or must collect signatures to secure ballot access. It also includes states such as South Dakota and Utah where winning candidates automatically claim the party’s nomination, or where candidates are automatically nominated with a certain threshold of support. Additionally, states where regional nominating conventions impart similar benefits to congressional candidates were included. This is the case in New Jersey. It does not include states whose nominating conventions only provide endorsements and/or monetary support to winning candidates, or states that do not hold nominating conventions. Data came from internet searches for Democratic and Republican nominating conventions for each state, as well as state reports on the practice produced by Connecticut²⁹ and Utah.³⁰

PVI

Cook Partisan Voting Index scores were used to control for the effect statewide partisanship has on primaries. In general, states that lean more heavily Democratic or Republican are expected to have higher primary turnout. This is because the general election will be less competitive, increasing the importance of the primary in determining the eventual winner. PVI was measured as an absolute value, meaning strongly Democratic and Republican states were scored identically. Because state PVI scores are calculated using the last two presidential elections, lagged two-election averages were used, such that 2016 and 2020 election results were used for 2022 PVI scores, 2012 and 2016 election results were used for 2018 PVI scores, 2008 and 2012 election results were used for 2014 PVI scores, and 2004 and 2008 election results were used for 2010 PVI scores. PVI scores for 2010, 2014, and 2018 were calculated using past presidential election data from Dave Leip's *Atlas of U.S. Presidential Elections*.³¹ 2022 PVI scores were from the Cook Political Report.³²

Legislative and Runoff Elections

Most states hold primaries for state legislative races concurrently with primaries for national offices. A handful of states do not. Louisiana, Mississippi, New York, New Jersey, and Virginia held at least one nonpresidential congressional primary between 2010 and 2022 that did not include state legislative races. Primary elections that did not include state legislative races were coded as 1 under "No State Legislative Election" and 0 otherwise.

Eight states have used runoff elections in the past three midterm primary election cycles to determine winners in cases where no candidate achieves an absolute majority of support in the first primary election. These states are Alabama, Arkansas, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, Oklahoma, South Carolina, and Texas. In regression tests where runoff primaries were included, these elections were coded as 1 under the variable "Runoff Election."

Primary Type

There are a wide range of state laws regarding who can participate in partisan primary elections. The National Conference of State Legislatures' primary-type classification system was used to group states. "Open" states allow any eligible voter to participate in the primary of their choice. "Partially Open" systems allow voters to choose which primary to participate in, but voters must declare this choice publicly or informally promise party allegiance. "Open to Unaffiliated" systems allow previously unaffiliated voters to participate in the primary of their choice but restricts affiliated voters to their current party affiliation. "Partially Closed" systems allow parties to close their elections to affiliated voters. "Closed" systems require voters to be previously registered with a party to participate in their primary election. "Top-Two" systems require all candidates for office to run on the same ballot, advancing the top two vote-

getters to the general election regardless of party affiliation. “Top-Four” systems work similarly except the top four vote-getters for each office advance to the general election. Where states use different primary types for different contests, the primary type for federal congressional races was coded. This seven-part classification scheme was reduced to an open/not-open binary for regression analysis, where “Open,” “Partially Open,” “Open to Unaffiliated,” “Top-Two,” and “Top-Four” systems were coded as 1 while “Partially Closed” and “Closed” systems were coded as 0. A three-part classification of “Open,” “Semi-Open,” and “Closed” was also created. In this scheme, “Open,” “Top-Two,” and “Top-Four” states were coded as “Open”; “Partially Open,” “Open to Unaffiliated,” and “Partially Closed” states were classified as “Semi-Open”; and “Closed” states were classified as “Closed.” NCSL-provided classifications for 2010, 2014, 2018, and 2022 were used, along with a search for law changes using NCSL’s Election Reform Legislation Database (for 2010) and State Elections Legislation Database (for 2011-2018).

Date, Region, and Concurrence

The date for each election was from the NCSL’s State Primary Election Dates and was checked against official state election reports.³³ Year was coded for each election (2010, 2014, 2018, or 2022). Day of the week (omitted from the main report) was also coded as a binary variable: 0 if the election took place on Tuesday, and 1 if it took place on another day. Hawaii holds midterm primary elections on Saturdays, and Louisiana did so in 2010, while Tennessee holds them on Thursdays and Rhode Island held its 2018 primary on a Wednesday. If an election occurred during the months of July or August, it was coded as a summer election (also omitted from the main report). A four-part census region division was used, classifying states as Northeast, South, Midwest, or West.

Election concurrence data was collected. A binary simultaneous variable was coded for each election—1 if that election occurred at the same time as another state’s election, and 0 if it was the only state primary election to occur on that day. The number of simultaneous primary elections held that day was also recorded, ranging from 1 (if only a single primary election was held) to 10. Two regional concurrence variables were also used. A binary regional concurrence variable was coded 1 where a state’s primary election occurred on the same day as another state’s election in the same region, and 0 otherwise. The number of simultaneous primary elections held in the same region on a state’s Election Day was also coded, ranging from 1 (if no other primary elections occurred in the same region) to 4. These concurrence metrics were measured both including and excluding runoff elections from consideration, so that regression models that excluded runoff primaries also excluded counting these elections in variables capturing concurrence.

Uncontested Contests

States do not handle uncontested primary contests uniformly. Some states allow voters to vote for an uncontested candidate, give them the option to write in a name, or even vote for “none of the above.” Other states do not put uncontested contests on the ballot. States that did not allow voters to cast ballots for uncontested primary races were coded as 1 under “Uncontested No Vote,” and 0 otherwise. Data was derived from each state’s official primary election results. This variable was only used in regressions excluding runoff primaries, as runoffs by definition only involve contested races.

Methodology

Two different sets of regressions are run: one controlling for year and region (OLS), and another controlling for state and year (two-way fixed effects or “difference-in-differences”). The OLS regressions make comparisons of primary voter turnout between elections, after taking into account differences due to year-to-year variation, region, and other variables. Each coefficient can be interpreted as “all-else-equal”—the average difference in turnout between elections with the policy feature and those without, after taking into account every other variable. The difference-in-difference estimation makes comparisons of changes in primary voter turnout between elections in the same state. Each coefficient can be interpreted as the average change in primary turnout within a state when it makes that policy switch, compared to the change in turnout in other states that did not make that policy switch. Causal statements—such as including a referendum on the ballot “caused” higher turnout—are more credible in this regression, as any observed differences are more likely to be due to the policy change itself rather than any unaccounted for factors specific to each state such as population size, racial composition, education, and voting laws. In order for a variable to be measured in the difference-in-differences design, it must undergo within state change over the period of analysis.

For OLS estimations, regressions are run both including and excluding runoff contests. For difference-in-difference regressions, runoff contests are always excluded. In both cases, TBC turnout is used as the dependent variable. All results are robust to using HO and Total Votes measures of turnout. The table below displays the output of these three regressions (“felm” refers to “fixed effects linear model”). Regression 3 uses robust standard errors clustered by state.

Regressions 2 and 3 exclude runoff elections and thus omit this variable. Regression 3 further omits the following variables because they are subsumed with the state fixed effect (i.e., there is no variation within each state): whether state and federal elections are held separately, whether nominating conventions are used to whittle the primary candidates down, and whether

voters are allowed to participate in uncontested contests. Regression 1 omits the Uncontested No Vote variable because runoff elections are included and this variable is a missing value for those elections. The Not Tuesday variable is excluded from Model 3 due to parsimony; its inclusion does not significantly alter the results.

Table 7. Nonpresidential Primary Turnout, 2010–2022

	TBC Turnout		
	OLS		feIm
	(1)	(2)	(3)
Voter Coverage	4.786*** (1.173)	3.154*** (1.535)	1.835 (1.313)
Top Party Races	1.144** (0.542)	1.150** (0.580)	2.078*** (0.537)
Referendum	5.618*** (1.072)	5.427*** (1.084)	5.251** (1.970)
Runoff	-5.208** (1.339)		
State Elections Separate	-2.134 (1.374)	-4.172*** (1.598)	
Nominating Convention	-4.373*** (0.918)	-4.012*** (0.947)	
No Uncontested Vote		-1.387 (0.999)	
Summer	2.415*** (0.729)	2.936*** (0.786)	-0.540 (0.928)
Not Tuesday	2.409 (1.635)	1.244 (1.708)	
PVI	0.120** (0.057)	0.108* (0.059)	-0.144 (0.106)
Regional Simultaneous	1.966*** (0.756)	1.912** (0.804)	1.459** (0.686)
Open Type	1.024 (0.726)	0.751 (0.801)	1.707 (1.225)
Constant	5.086* (2.593)	8.494*** (3.150)	
Region FE	Yes	Yes	No
State FE	No	No	Yes
Year FE	Yes	Yes	Yes
Includes Runoffs	Yes	No	No
Obsevation	220	197	197

Note: *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

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