

Evaluating the Effects of the Top-Four System in Alaska

By Ryan Williamson



In 2022, the top-four system in Alaska gave citizens greater choice and elevated the most broadly appealing candidates, in turn improving representation.

Executive Summary

In 2020, Alaska modified its electoral process to a top-four ranked choice voting system and away from more traditional partisan primaries, making Alaska the first state to do so for state executive and legislative races, as well as federal congressional seats. The 2022 cycle was the first time an alternative system was employed in the state, first with a special election to fill the vacancy caused by the death of Rep. Don Young, and then for all other legislative and statewide elections in November. A review of initial evidence found that races in the state became more civil and competitive overall, and, despite it being a major change in process, the top-four approach caused little disruption in the composition of government. Elected officials and incumbents continued to fare well under the new format compared with their performance in recent traditional elections.

Introduction

Alaskan voters passed Ballot Measure 2 in 2020, altering their electoral system to move away from a traditional primary system in favor of a top-four system.¹ Under this new arrangement, candidates for elected office appear on the ballot together during the primary, regardless of partisan affiliation. Voters cast a ballot for their favorite candidate, and the four candidates who receive the greatest number of votes proceed to the general election. Typically, if a candidate receives 50 percent of the vote, they are declared the winner. However, if no candidate reaches a majority, then the last-place candidate is eliminated and their votes are reallocated to the voters' second choices. This process continues until one candidate achieves a majority and wins the election.

The 2022 election cycle was the first time each legislative seat was subject to the new rules, providing valuable real-world data about how a top-four approach affects elections. This paper explores how the new system increased competition among candidates without upsetting the overall partisan balance in the state and evaluates how the top-four approach affected incumbents and shaped the strategies of successful candidates. It concludes by considering the future of top-four voting in Alaska.

The Top-Four Approach Rewarded Candidates with Broad Appeal

Alaska's congressional races illustrate how the new election rules can change incentive structures for candidates. With up to four candidates on the ballot, winning a majority after the first round of tabulation is now more difficult. Because of this, candidates must campaign not only for first-choice, but also for second-choice, support, which is an added incentive to avoid negative campaigning and to appeal to supporters of their opponents.² By compelling



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candidates to craft broad coalitions among competitive constituencies, politicians have more to lose by engaging in uncivil campaigning.³

Though Alaska votes reliably Republican in presidential elections, its partisan and ideological composition is unique in a variety of ways, and it tends to favor politically moderate candidates who are willing to challenge national party platforms.⁴ For example, despite the Republican lean of the state, 63 percent of Alaskans believe abortion should be legal in all or most cases.⁵ In addition, Alaska's Permanent Fund Dividend, a redistributive program akin to universal basic income, represents one of the most important issues to voters of all stripes and has been the focal point of many debates among Alaska's politicians.⁶ Finally, Alaska was the third state, behind Colorado and Washington, to legalize marijuana for recreational purposes, even as other Republican and Democratic states continued to oppose legalization.⁷

The unique political composition of Alaska is perhaps best reflected in the tenure of Lisa Murkowski, who has made a name for herself as one of the most moderate members of the U.S. Senate, voting with her party only about 56 percent of the time.⁸ In recent years, Murkowski deviated from her party by voting to convict Trump on his impeachment charges, voting against the 2017 repeal of Obamacare and being the only Republican to vote against confirming Brett Kavanaugh for a seat on the Supreme Court.⁹ Her stances have earned scorn from fellow Republicans as far back as 2010 when she failed to win the Republican primary. Nevertheless, she famously won re-election with 39 percent of the vote as a write-in candidate.

Likewise, Don Young, who served Alaska in the U.S. House of Representatives for nearly half a century, routinely faced regular challenges for his seat. In his last four bids for re-election, Young survived multiple competitive elections while never receiving more than 54.4 percent of the vote. While serving in the House, he was a reliable Republican vote but took a more moderate position than most others in the chamber, especially with respect to federal spending.¹⁰ Like Murkowski, Young made a name for himself prioritizing the preferences of Alaskans over those of his party.

Taking these factors into consideration, the victory of Democrat Mary Peltola over Republicans Sarah Palin and Nick Begich should not be surprising. Peltola ran a highly localized, Alaska-centric campaign tied to issues like fishing, whereas her main challenger, Sarah Palin, appealed to voters through more populist, culture-war-centric issues.¹¹ Although Peltola reached across the aisle and asked to be ranked second among voters who didn't mark her as their first choice, Palin ran against ranked-choice voting, calling it "rigged."¹² The two Republicans spent more time attacking each other than they did making the case against Peltola.¹³ This is perhaps one of the reasons why Peltola's vote share increased between the special and general election.¹⁴

As previously mentioned, top-four voting is designed to reduce polarization, as candidates are incentivized to craft broad coalitions to win.¹⁵ Peltola managed to do this by earning endorsements from Lisa Murkowski as well as a number of Young's former staffers.¹⁶ Though Peltola's victory may simply reflect Alaska's unique political culture, the dynamics of the election nonetheless shaped her victory. A more progressive candidate likely would have struggled to earn as many first-choice votes, and second-choice votes from Republican voters may have been even harder to come by. This would have spelled defeat, as second-place votes from Republicans are what pushed Peltola over the 50 percent threshold.¹⁷

By understanding the incentives of the electoral system and the complexity of the state's partisanship, and by running as a moderate Democrat rather than as an ardent partisan beholden to the national platform, Peltola was able to win a full term to represent Alaskans.¹⁸

Similarly, Murkowski won another six-year term in the U.S. Senate over a challenge from Kelly Tshibaka, a more conservative and populist opponent, by effectively wielding her unique brand of conservatism. In previous elections, Murkowski won with only a plurality, which meant most voters wanted someone else in the office but could not agree on an alternative.

The top-four voting system offered a real test of Murkowski's brand within the state by requiring the winner to achieve a majority. However, this may have been to her benefit, as she did not need to appeal to more traditional or populist Republicans to advance past the primary—she just had to initially finish in the top four. As a result any liabilities she had with the Republican base were muted in a way that they may not have been in a more traditional partisan primary.



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After the first round with all four candidates, Murkowski held a less than one percentage point lead over Tshibaka.¹⁹ Her lead was even smaller in the second round. However, by the third and final round of tabulation, Murkowski's lead widened, culminating in her seven-point victory. This substantial increase in her vote share came from Democratic supporters overwhelmingly ranking her above Tshibaka.²⁰

Taken together, victories by Peltola and Murkowski demonstrate how top-four voting both rewarded those willing to engage in more civil campaigning and boosted candidates who represented the unique views of voters in Alaska.

Top-Four Voting Increased Electoral Competition in Alaska

The new top-four system also increased the number of competitive races in Alaska. As with other states, Alaska was redistricted in response to new data from the 2020 census. Although this means that we cannot make district-by-district comparisons across election years, we can compare how electoral competitiveness across the state changed before and after the implementation of top-four voting.

The increase in competition was felt by the voters themselves, as evidenced by a poll taken immediately after the election in which 60 percent of Alaskans reported that the 2022 elections were more competitive than other recent elections.²¹ This sentiment is supported empirically by fewer uncontested races and an increased number of races that were decided by narrow vote margins. The greater competition inherently fostered in top-four systems represents an important improvement to elections in the state, as competition is known to improve accountability and representation.²²

One way Alaska was able to increase competition was by moving primary election battles into the general election. Under the old primary system, each party held primaries to determine their general election candidates. In evenly divided, "purple" districts, these primaries set the stage for competitive general elections. However, in heavily skewed districts where one party held a substantial advantage over the other, the primary elections often served as the deciding contest, as the majority party candidate cruised to victory in the general election. These primary elections were typically low-turnout affairs, with only a few thousand voters participating, which is only about 10 to 20 percent of all registered voters in the district.²³

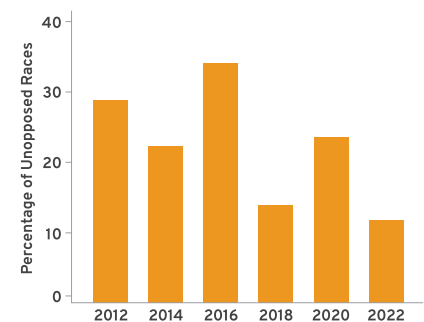
As is common across the country, the constituents of most of Alaska's legislative districts lean heavily toward one party. In 2020, voters in more than one-third of the 60 districts voted overwhelmingly in favor of either the Republican or Democrat.²⁴ For these districts, the deciding election was the lower-turnout primary election. Under the new top-four structure, however, the deciding election shifted to the general election. In fact, in 13 races, the candidates all hailed from just one party, and four of these races proved to be especially tight, requiring additional rounds of tabulation to determine a winner.²⁵

This increase in competition in the 2022 elections is evident in the number of races in which there were multiple candidates vying for the same seat relative to other elections in the past 10 years. **Figure 1** illustrates that less than 12 percent of elections were uncontested in the 2022 cycle, slightly lower than the next lowest year in recent history (14 percent in 2018) and well below the average from the previous decade of 24.5 percent.²⁶ Thus, the implementation of a top-four approach took elections that would have been decided in low-turnout primaries and brought them to the general election, decreasing the number of uncontested races and giving more voters meaningful options in November.

For context, in 2010, nearly one-third of all state legislative elections in the United States featured only one major party candidate, and over 75 percent of incumbents did not face a primary challenger.²⁷ That trend has persisted with time. Across the country, more than one-quarter (23 out of 88) of the legislative chambers holding elections during the 2022 cycle had partisan control decided before Election Day because there were already enough uncontested races featuring one party's candidates to constitute a majority.²⁸ Therefore, Alaska's number of contested elections is noteworthy.²⁹

Another way to assess competitiveness is by evaluating the final vote margin, as increasing the number of candidates is only helpful if they serve as viable alternatives to each other. Assessing competitiveness this way in states that use the top-four system, winning candidates

Figure 1: Percentage of Unopposed State Legislative Races in Alaska, 2012-2022*



*Data was obtained for each year from official returns provided by the Alaska Division of Elections. Unopposed races are classified as those in which only one candidate was named on the ballot.

Source: "Primary, General, and Statewide Special Election Results," Alaska Division of Elections, last accessed Dec. 15, 2022. <https://www.elections.alaska.gov/doc/info/ElectionResults.php#2022A>.

received 55 percent or less of the vote—a standard definition of competitiveness—in almost one-third of state legislative elections across the 60 lower and upper chamber seats, one-quarter of senate races and nearly one-third of House of Representative races.³⁰

Compared with the previous five election cycles, 2022 marks the highest level of competition for Alaska state legislative seats, as shown in Figure 2. Between 2012 and 2022, only 17 percent of elections were classified as competitive in the general election, which means that 2022’s cycle nearly doubled that recent historical average.

Though 30 percent may not seem high, state legislative races are notoriously uncompetitive affairs, as noted previously with respect to the number of uncontested elections. Therefore, it appears that the implementation of top-four voting in Alaska delivered on its promise of more competitive elections.

Both Parties Fared Well with the Top-Four System

Contrary to some arguments from skeptics of reform, Alaskan Republicans generally fared well with the top-four approach. While some opponents to the new system have described it as a “scam to rig elections” in favor of Democrats and others have suggested that it makes it difficult for parties to support their candidates, neither of these arguments are valid.³¹ The evidence shows that Republicans saw no change in their ability to translate their support into seats in the state legislature.

A comparison of 2022 elections against past elections illustrates Republicans’ continued strength in Alaska. The easiest way to examine this question is to calculate the ratio between the average Republican vote share across all state legislative elections for each cycle between 2012 and 2022 and the percentage of seats won by the Republican Party in the Alaska legislature. A value of 1 implies that the average Republican vote share was the same as the percentage of seats won that cycle (for example, an average of 60 percent of the vote and 60 percent of available seats won). A number greater than 1 represents the party overperforming their vote share.

As illustrated in Figure 3, Republicans had one of their best years in recent history by this metric, with a vote-to-seat ratio of 1.19. This is well above both the average of the preceding decade (1.16) and the median (1.11). Thus, 2022’s increased competition did not have a negative impact on Republican candidates.

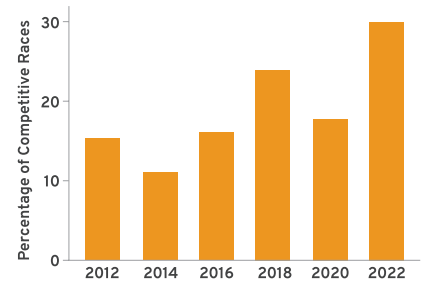
This change in competition without a meaningful change in partisanship is not a coincidence. A main advantage of having multiple candidates from the same party competing for office, as is possible under a top-four system, is that it provides a viable off-ramp for supporters who want to see their party win but who may not like the candidate who won a partisan primary. It also gives a choice to members of the opposing party, whose candidates may not be viable in a given district but who still would like a meaningful say in who represents them. In other types of elections, if an unfavorable candidate advances out of the primary, a voter may feel stuck choosing between the lesser of two evils—a member of their own party with whom they have substantial disagreements or a member of the opposing party.

With up to four candidates on the ballot as established with top-four systems, voters have greater choice and an ability to identify a more agreeable candidate. In 2022, for example, Republicans were able to field multiple candidates and therefore were not stuck with weak candidates who could have lost the general election. This dynamic was particularly present in the 2022 Alaska state legislative elections. (A notable exception to this is the election of Democratic Rep. Mary Peltola to the House of Representatives. However, this proved to be more of an anomaly than a norm for reasons discussed earlier.)

For example, in Alaska State Senate Districts (SD) A, C, D, E, L and R, Republicans faced at least one challenge from another Republican in the general election. In each of these, the Republican who won likely would not have advanced in a more traditional closed primary system where more ardent, less broadly appealing candidates typically prevail.³²

The case of SD E is particularly striking. After the initial round of balloting, Cathy Giessel earned 33.64 percent of the vote, Roger Holland earned 33.1 percent and Roselynn Cacy earned 32.92 percent. Both Giessel and Holland ran as Republicans while Cacy ran as a

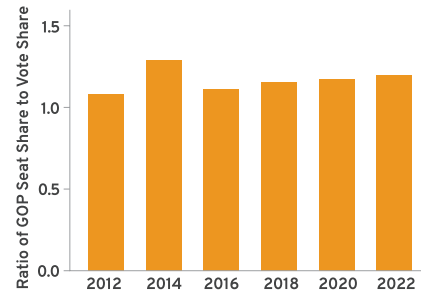
Figure 2: Percentage of Competitive State Legislative Races in Alaska, 2012-2022*



*Data was obtained for each year from official returns provided by the Alaska Division of Elections. Competitive races are classified as those in which the winning candidate received 55 percent or less of the vote.

Source: “Primary, General, and Statewide Special Election Results,” Alaska Division of Elections, last accessed Dec. 15, 2022. <https://www.elections.alaska.gov/doc/info/ElectionResults.php#2022A>.

Figure 3: Republican Seat Share to Vote Share Ratio in Alaska, 2012-2022*



*Data was obtained for each year from official returns provided by the Alaska Division of Elections. Values are calculated by dividing the percentage of seats won by Republicans after an election by the average percentage of the vote that Republican candidates received in that election.

Source: “Primary, General, and Statewide Special Election Results,” Alaska Division of Elections, last accessed Dec. 15, 2022. <https://www.elections.alaska.gov/doc/info/ElectionResults.php#2022A>.

Democrat. However, Holland ran as a much more staunchly conservative Republican, criticizing former Senate President Giessel for not being conspicuously Republican enough.³³

Given that no candidate received at least 50 percent of the vote, a second round of tabulation was undertaken after reallocating Cacy's vote to their second choice. These voters overwhelmingly preferred Giessel to Holland.³⁴ Under a traditional closed primary system, the general election likely would not have featured Giessel at all, which is precisely what happened in her 2020 primary.³⁵ As evidenced by elections in other states, this could have actually cost Republicans a seat in the legislature as, absent a more moderate Republican, voters tended to prefer moderate Democrats over more populist Republicans.³⁶ This anecdote illustrates how being able to field multiple candidates can ensure partisan success even with polarizing candidates on the ballot.

Incumbents Largely Retained Their Seats Under the Top-Four System

A final observation from Alaska's 2022 election is that increased competition did not result in incumbents faring worse. Incumbents have long been advantaged when seeking reelection, regardless of the institutional rules in place.³⁷ As shown in [Figure 4](#), Alaska's shift to top-four voting did not have an effect on this advantage, as incumbents continued to fare well with the new voting system.

The 2022 cycle saw 90 percent of incumbents win reelection, which is one of their best showings in the last decade. This number exceeds the average incumbent win rate from the prior five election cycles by more than three percentage points and is within four percentage points of the two election cycles where incumbents fared better.

This 90 percent reelection rate is particularly striking as the 2022 election cycle came at the end of the most recent round of redistricting. Drawing new maps alters the partisan makeup of districts and sometimes pits incumbents against one another, both of which are factors that can make it harder—or even impossible—for incumbents to win. As a point of comparison, 81 percent of incumbents in Alaska won reelection in 2012 after the last round of redistricting.

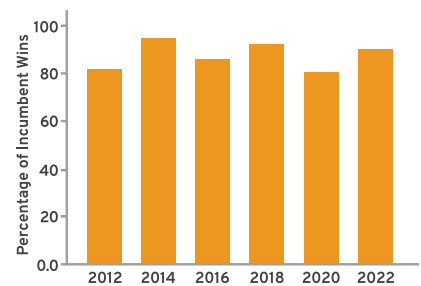
Though incumbents, especially those in the majority, may be hesitant to embrace electoral reforms because such changes can introduce uncertainty and make it more difficult for them or their party to retain power, the fact that incumbents fared as well in 2022 as they did in years prior suggests that such concerns may be unwarranted.

Conclusion

The top-four voting system adopted in Alaska succeeded in increasing the number of candidates running in the general election and overall competition for legislative seats. Under the new system, candidates who ran civil campaigns that appealed to broader audiences were more likely to succeed and incumbents also fared comparably well. Future research should evaluate these and other metrics in subsequent election cycles to identify the trends that persist and emerge as voters and candidates become more familiar with the new system.

The 2022 results also demonstrated the immense benefits of the top-four structure for voters. The system gave citizens greater choice and elevated the most broadly appealing candidates, which improved representation. Importantly, Alaskans viewed the process favorably, largely describing it as "simple" despite some arguments to the contrary.³⁸ In the face of efforts to repeal the system, a successful top-four election represents a huge win for the Last Frontier voters, and elected officials would be wise to retain it. Doing so keeps Alaska on the cutting edge of reform and prevents reversion toward a less competitive and less representative electoral system.³⁹

Figure 4: Percentage of State Legislative Incumbent Wins in Alaska, 2012-2022*



*Data was obtained for each year from official returns provided by the Alaska Division of Elections. Only elections that featured an incumbent are considered. For 2012 through 2020, incumbent losses in both the primary and general elections are included.

Source: "Primary, General, and Statewide Special Election Results," Alaska Division of Elections, last accessed Dec. 15, 2022. <https://www.elections.alaska.gov/doc/info/ElectionResults.php#2022A>.

About the Author

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