



Polishing Gem State Elections: The Case for Electoral Reform in Idaho

By Matthew Germer

Electoral competition is good—for the population and the economy—and states should construct their elections to ensure voters have meaningful choices.

Executive Summary

Idaho struggles with uncompetitive elections. Whether due to unopposed candidates or blowout elections, more than half of the elections in the state are decided in the primary rather than in the general election.¹

This phenomenon is not new in Idaho—voters have had limited options in most races for decades—but new solutions in use across the country may help. Unlike Idaho, which uses closed partisan primaries that limit who can participate, nearly half of U.S. states now offer primaries that are open to voters of all stripes.² In so doing, these states ensure that what are often the most meaningful elections—the primary elections—offer the opportunity for all constituents to participate.

1. "Official Election Results," State of Idaho Elections Department, last accessed Jan. 9, 2023. https://www.livevoteturnout.com/ENR/idaho/124/1/en/Index_124.html.
2. "State Primary Election Types," National Conference of State Legislatures, Jan. 5, 2021. <https://www.ncsl.org/research/elections-and-campaigns/primary-types.aspx>.

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Alternatively, states like Alaska are experimenting with a bolder and more promising reform that combines blanket primaries with instant-runoff general elections.³ This new style of election ensures that the general election is the deciding contest for all districts, regardless of partisan composition, and provides voters with more meaningful choices than they get with closed primaries and winner-take-all general elections.

Either of these options would help increase competition in Idaho's elections.

Introduction

Electoral competition is good. Just as in a marketplace—where competition leads to lower prices, greater efficiency, increased innovation and economic accountability—competition is a key component to a healthy political culture.⁴ Studies from around the world have shown that competitive elections lead to a more engaged electorate, a stronger performance on behalf of constituents and better economic outcomes.⁵ In contrast, uncompetitive elections undermine public accountability and lead to misalignment between public opinion and political action.⁶

Unfortunately, Idaho has very little electoral competition. While the Gem State's 105 state legislators are elected every two years, these elections often provide few meaningful options for voters in November.

Idaho represents the quintessential example of the "primary problem."⁷ Its general elections are not competitive because one party has overwhelming dominance across the state, making primary elections determinative. Many factors contribute to the lack of competition, including demography, geography and politics, but the structure of Idaho's elections is one of the most significant.⁸ Idaho would be wise to rethink its electoral system and increase its electoral competition through reforms like open primaries or blanket primaries with instant-runoff general elections.

This paper evaluates the lack of competition in Idaho's elections, with a specific focus on the 2022 cycle. It also investigates potential options for improving electoral competition.

Idaho General Elections Are Not Competitive

By and large, Idaho elections are not competitive affairs. The Republican Party holds a supermajority in the state legislature, and its electoral structure has made many of its state legislative elections more ceremonial than meaningful.⁹ Strong partisan majorities are not in and of themselves a problem—Idaho belongs to a large class of states with one-party control—but the structure of Idaho's elections has concentrated

3. Eric Bradner, "How Alaska's ranked-choice voting system works," CNN Politics, Aug. 31, 2022. <https://www.cnn.com/2022/08/31/politics/alaska-how-ranked-choice-voting-works>.
4. William J. Kolasky, "The Role of Competition in Promoting Dynamic Markets and Economic Growth," TokyoAmerica Center, Nov. 12, 2002. <https://www.justice.gov/atr/speech/role-competition-promoting-dynamic-markets-and-economic-growth>.
5. Heather Evans, "Competitive elections are good democracy, creating more engaged voters over a longer period of time," London School of Economics, July 28, 2014. <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/usappblog/2014/07/28/competitive-elections-are-good-democracy-creating-more-engaged-voters-over-a-longer-period-of-time>; John Ashworth et al., "Political Competition and Local Government Performance: Evidence from Flemish Municipalities," Wissenschaftszentrum Berlin für Sozialforschung (wzb.eu), 2006. https://www.wzb.eu/system/files/docs/sine/political_competition_and_efficiency.pdf; Daniela Ariza Marin et al., "Political competition, electoral participation and local fiscal performance," *Development Studies Research* 8:1 (2021), pp. 24-35. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/21665095.2021.1872394>.
6. Jeffrey R. Lax and Justin H. Phillips, "The Democracy Deficit in the States," *American Journal of Political Science* 56:1 (January 2012), pp. 148-166. <http://www.columbia.edu/~jrl2124/democratic%20deficit.pdf>.
7. "The Primary Problem," Unite America Institute, March 2021. <https://www.uniteamerica.org/reports/the-primary-problem>.
8. John Burnett, "Americans are fleeing to places where political views match their own," NPR, Feb. 18, 2022. <https://www.npr.org/2022/02/18/1081295373/the-big-sort-americans-move-to-areas-political-alignment>.
9. Clark Corbin, "Republicans increase supermajority in Idaho Legislature," *Idaho Capital Sun*, Nov. 9, 2022. <https://idahocapitalsun.com/2022/11/09/republicans-poised-to-increase-supermajority-in-idaho-legislature>.

political power in a plurality of politically active voters who participate in primary elections.¹⁰ The outsized power of this plurality incentivizes elected officials to act in the interests of these voters even if they do not align with the broader interests of the greater electorate—an effect known as “the primary problem.”¹¹

Idaho Is Overwhelmingly Republican

Idaho is a bastion for the GOP and has been for quite some time. Republicans have held uninterrupted control of the state legislature since 1961 and the governor’s mansion since 1995.¹² At the federal level, Idaho has voted for every Republican presidential nominee since 1968 and has sent Republicans to the U.S. Senate since 1980.¹³ The only disruption to GOP dominance in the last 25 years occurred in the late 2000s when Democrat Walt Minnick represented Idaho’s 1st Congressional District for a single term.¹⁴

Republicans enjoyed another strong showing in the 2022 election. Coming into the election, Republicans boasted a 58-12 majority in the House of Representatives and a 28-7 majority in the Senate.¹⁵ Even with a substantial supermajority, the GOP grew its House delegation by one seat and maintained its 21-seat advantage in the Senate.¹⁶

GOP control over Idaho politics is hardly a surprise given the political affiliation of the state’s voters. Republicans overwhelmingly outnumber Democrats, third-party voters and unaffiliated voters. Of the more than 1 million registered voters in the state, 580,000 voters are registered with the Republican Party, 130,000 with the Democratic Party and 146,000 with third parties.¹⁷ Nearly 280,000 are unaffiliated, which means that Republicans represent a majority of all registered voters.¹⁸

Closed Primaries Undercut Competition

Although one party maintains substantial popularity among Gem State voters, Idaho need not have uncompetitive elections. Even if Republicans hold a strong majority in a district, the electoral system could give voters more options in more elections.

The root cause of the problem is Idaho’s “partially closed” primary system. Under a partially closed system, the parties decide whether to allow voters who are not registered with the party to participate in the primary.¹⁹ For the 2022 primary elections, Democrats, perhaps eager to encourage voters to develop an attachment to their candidates, opened their primary to all voters regardless of registration status.²⁰ Republicans, meanwhile, limited their electorate to registered Republicans only.²¹

10. Dakota Thomas, “Partisan Control of States After the 2022 Election,” The Council of State Governments, Nov. 15, 2022. <https://www.csg.org/2022/11/15/partisan-control-of-states-after-the-2022-election>.

11. “The Primary Problem.” <https://www.uniteamerica.org/reports/the-primary-problem>.

12. “Idaho Election Results,” Idaho Secretary of State’s Office, last accessed Nov. 23, 2022. <https://sos.idaho.gov/elections-division/election-results>; “Party control of Idaho state government,” Ballotpedia, last accessed Jan. 3, 2023. https://ballotpedia.org/Party_control_of_Idaho_state_government.

13. Ibid.

14. “Walt Minnick (D-Idaho),” ProPublica, last accessed Jan. 3, 2023. <https://projects.propublica.org/represent/members/M001175-walt-minnick>.

15. “2020 General Election Results – Legislative,” Idaho Secretary of State’s Office, last accessed Nov. 23, 2022. <https://sos.idaho.gov/elections-division/2020-results-legislative>.

16. “Official Election Results.” https://www.livevoteturnout.com/ENR/idaho/124/1/en/Index_124.html.

17. “Voter Registration Totals,” Idaho Secretary of State’s Office, Last updated Dec. 13, 2022. <https://sos.idaho.gov/elections-division/voter-registration-totals>.

18. Ibid.

19. “State Primary Election Types,” National Conference of State Legislatures, Jan. 5, 2021. <https://www.ncsl.org/research/elections-and-campaigns/primary-types.aspx>.

20. Kelcie Moseley-Morris, “Idaho GOP convention committee approves rule to limit ‘crossover voting,’” *Idaho Capital Sun*, July 15, 2022. <https://idahocapitalsun.com/2022/07/15/idaho-gop-convention-committee-approves-rule-to-limit-crossover-voting>.

21. Ibid.

The pernicious effect of closed primaries becomes clear in light of how few seats are determined in a general election and instead are decided in the primary.

Each election cycle, all 105 legislative seats are on the ballot in Idaho—35 Senate seats and 70 House seats.²² In 2022, 50 of those races, covering 24 of the 35 legislative districts, featured a candidate running unopposed in the general election.²³ For voters in these districts, the November election was a mere formality. Their legislative representatives were chosen months earlier in the primary.

These unopposed candidates all ran in districts that have a strong Republican Party majority among the voters.²⁴ It should come as no surprise that Democrats and third-party candidates failed to run a candidate.²⁵ After all, minority parties and candidates have a limited amount of resources to spend on campaigns, and races that appear unwinnable are not attractive investments.

Beyond the completely unopposed general elections, another 23 races featured opposition that had a minimal chance of winning and resulted in a blowout with the winner earning more than two-thirds of the vote.²⁶ This includes the 14 races where the Republican enjoyed more than double the support of the Democratic candidate and the 9 races where the Republican similarly overwhelmed a third-party candidate.²⁷ In practice, these elections were nearly as uncompetitive as an unopposed race.

That so many Idaho elections were uncompetitive is not unique to 2022. The 2020 election cycle featured 79 uncontested or blowout elections, the 2018 cycle saw 67 and 2016 saw 76.²⁸ Since 2000, no election cycle has seen fewer than 55 highly uncompetitive races in the general election, with the average year featuring nearly 68, or nearly two-thirds of all races in a cycle.²⁹

In the remaining districts, very few races result in the narrow margins of victory that keep voters engaged and produce beneficial political and economic outcomes. In 2022, only 10 races ended within a 10-point margin for the winner.³⁰ Put differently, only 69,083 voters cast a ballot in a competitive legislative district in 2022—less than 7 percent of all registered voters.³¹

The fact that the general elections were overwhelmingly uncompetitive is hard to debate; however, the general elections were not the only contests in the cycle. Across the 73 uncontested and blowout races in the general election, 19 were uncontested in the primary as well. Voters in these elections, which represent nearly 20 percent of all seats, had no meaningful opportunity to provide feedback about their representation at any point in the cycle.

Even in districts with competitive primary elections, the small electorates in closed primaries raise doubts about whether the primary winner truly represents

22. Constitution of the State of Idaho, art. III, § 2-3. https://sos.idaho.gov/elect/stcon/article_III.html.

23. "Official Election Results." https://www.livevoteturnout.com/ENR/idaho/124/1/en/Index_124.html.

24. Ibid.; "Voter Registration Totals." <https://sos.idaho.gov/elections-division/voter-registration-totals>.

25. "Official Election Results." https://www.livevoteturnout.com/ENR/idaho/124/1/en/Index_124.html.

26. Ibid.

27. Ibid.

28. "Idaho Election Results." <https://sos.idaho.gov/elections-division/election-results>.

29. Ibid.

30. "Official Election Results." https://www.livevoteturnout.com/ENR/idaho/124/1/en/Index_124.html; "Voter Registration Totals." <https://sos.idaho.gov/elections-division/voter-registration-totals>.

31. Ibid.

the interests of the broader district. Each legislative district in Idaho contains approximately 50,000 residents, yet it is not uncommon for as few as 5,000 voters to participate in a Republican primary. If three or more Republicans are competing among this small electorate, the winner may advance to an uncompetitive general election with fewer than 2,000 primary votes on their behalf.³² The 2022 race for House Seat A in Legislative District 12 is perhaps the best example, with Jeff Cornilles advancing to an uncontested general election after winning a three-way primary race with just 1,997 of the 5,667 votes cast—just 7.7 percent of the registered voters in the district.³³

In all, over two-thirds of Idaho’s races in 2022 featured no effective competition in the general election, and far too many hinged on the outcomes of low-turnout, closed partisan primaries.

Improving Competitiveness in Idaho General Elections

Idaho voters may rarely have a meaningful choice at the ballot box in November, but two popular reforms—open primaries and blanket primaries with instant-runoff general elections—could help solve this problem.

Solution 1: Open Primaries

In what would be a rather straightforward change, Idaho could look to the example of other red states and open its primary elections to all voters regardless of party affiliation.³⁴

Under current law, political parties can choose whether to allow unaffiliated voters or voters who are registered with other parties to vote in the primary elections.³⁵ The Idaho Democratic Party has opted to allow all voters to participate in their primary elections; however, the Republican Party has chosen to keep theirs closed and available to registered party members only.³⁶

While an argument could be made that each party should be free to decide its own rules and that the registered voters of each party should be the ones deciding who to send to the general election, this approach falls short under scrutiny.³⁷

First, and perhaps most importantly, primary elections are not private elections. The cost of partisan primaries, whether at the federal, state or local level, is borne by the taxpayers. Yet closed partisan primaries are not open to all voters.³⁸ Rather, voters are required to identify as a member of a particular political party in order to reap the benefit their tax dollars. Nearly 280,000 Idaho voters prefer not to identify with any political party.³⁹ These unaffiliated voters are punished for exercising their First Amendment right to not associate with an organization when their tax dollars are spent on private elections in which they are not allowed to participate.

32. “Official Election Results.” https://www.livevoteturnout.com/ENR/idaho/124/1/en/Index_124.html.

33. Ibid.; “Voter Registration Totals.” <https://sos.idaho.gov/elections-division/voter-registration-totals>.

34. “State Primary Election Types.” <https://www.ncsl.org/research/elections-and-campaigns/primary-types.aspx>.

35. Idaho Code § 34-904A (2022). <https://legislature.idaho.gov/statutesrules/idstat/title34/t34ch9/sect34-904a>.

36. Moseley-Morris. <https://idahocapitalsun.com/2022/07/15/idaho-gop-convention-committee-approves-rule-to-limit-crossover-voting>.

37. Andy Schmookler, “Open Primaries: A Wrong Idea,” The Huffington Post, June 15, 2016. https://www.huffpost.com/entry/open-primaries-a-wrong-id_b_10471396.

38. Katy Owens Hubler and Wendy Underhill, “Election Costs: Who Pays and With Which Funds?” Legis Brief, National Conference of State Legislatures, March 2018. <https://www.ncsl.org/research/elections-and-campaigns/election-costs-who-pays-and-with-which-funds.aspx>.

39. “Voter Registration Totals.” <https://sos.idaho.gov/elections-division/voter-registration-totals>.

Additionally, the lack of meaningful options in the general election pushes the electoral competition into the primary instead—if it occurs at all. If the only competitive election in most legislative districts happens in the primary election, gatekeeping voters out of the deciding contest compels voters to identify with a particular political party or be functionally disenfranchised.

Opening Idaho’s primary elections to all voters would be a relatively simple step toward improving electoral competition and one that is already common across the country. Nearly half of all states place no restrictions on who can participate in partisan primaries, with five others forsaking partisan primaries altogether.⁴⁰ These are states that span the political spectrum—including Alabama, Montana, Texas and West Virginia, which, like Idaho, have strong Republican majorities.⁴¹

Open primaries would increase access for all voters to the elections that matter and would be a relatively simple solution to Idaho’s lack of electoral competition. The elections would still be bifurcated into partisan primaries and a general election, but voters of all stripes could participate.

Solution 2: Blanket Primaries with Instant-Runoff General Elections

A bit broader in scope than open primaries but with a greater opportunity for substantial impact, blanket primaries with instant-runoff elections represent an alternative solution to low electoral competition.

Blanket primaries, also known as “jungle primaries,” are used across the country.⁴² Washington, California and Nebraska use blanket primaries with a “top-two” model, in which the two most popular candidates square off in the general election.⁴³ This structure is identical to the system already used by Idahoans in nonpartisan races for local office and judicial positions.⁴⁴

Some states are expanding upon the top-two model by allowing for more than two winners to advance. Alaska held its first blanket primary in 2022, with the top four candidates moving on to the general election.⁴⁵ This new style of election is gaining attention, and states like Wyoming have begun drafting legislation to mimic the “Alaska model.”⁴⁶

Nevada also may soon have blanket primaries, as it recently passed a “Final-Five Voting” initiative that would amend the state constitution to advance the top five vote-getters to the general election.⁴⁷ If passed again in 2024, final-five voting will be enshrined in the Nevada constitution.⁴⁸

40. “State Primary Election Types.” <https://www.ncsl.org/research/elections-and-campaigns/primary-types.aspx>.

41. Ibid.

42. Meg Kinnard, “Louisiana uses a ‘jungle primary’ for its elections. What does that mean?” PBS NewsHour, Oct. 20, 2022. <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/politics/louisiana-uses-a-jungle-primary-for-its-elections-what-does-that-mean>.

43. “State Primary Election Types.” <https://www.ncsl.org/research/elections-and-campaigns/primary-types.aspx>.

44. Joe Parris, “Candidates running for local office will not list political affiliation on ballots,” KTVB, Nov. 1, 2021. <https://www.ktvb.com/article/news/local/208/non-partisan-elections-ada-county/277-2e328901-ec4d-4523-9afa-6580067d1600>.

45. Bradner. <https://www.cnn.com/2022/08/31/politics/alaska-how-ranked-choice-voting-works>.

46. Leo Wolfson, “Wyoming Legislature Considering Open Primaries, Ranked Choice Voting Elections,” Cowboy State Daily, Aug. 25, 2022. <https://cowboystatedaily.com/2022/08/25/wyoming-legislature-considering-open-primaries-ranked-choice-voting-elections>.

47. Jonathan Bydlak, “Final five voting may be having its moment,” The Hill, Nov. 17, 2022. <https://thehill.com/opinion/congress-blog/3739414-final-five-voting-may-be-having-its-moment>.

48. Ibid.

Blanket primaries provide particular value because they recognize the shifting purpose of primary elections.⁴⁹ While primaries were originally constructed to democratize the party nomination process, over time they have come to function more as a winnowing mechanism. Too many candidates on the general election ballot could be unwieldy for voters, so primaries serve to reduce the number of candidates to a manageable level. Blanket primaries are effective at winnowing the field while still allowing for competitive elections, including in districts with an overwhelming majority for one party. For example, a district with a strong Republican majority could see multiple Republican candidates advance to the general election. By shifting the decisive election forward to the general election, more voters will contribute to the outcome, and the winner is more likely to reflect the interests of the entire constituency.

The major question around blanket primaries centers around how many winners should be allowed to advance to the general election.

Under the top-two model, two candidates advance to the general election, which then functions as a runoff election between the two. In contrast with other systems, the top two-model incentivizes candidates to reach out to a broader coalition of voters to gain majority support.⁵⁰ In districts with a heavy partisan skew, a top-two approach could allow two candidates from the same party to advance. Majority party voters would have more voice in such an election, as the general election would feature two candidates from the majority party from which to choose. Meanwhile, candidates would be incentivized to reach out to opposing party voters and independent voters to win.

In practice, the vast majority of top-two elections are lopsided affairs between opposing parties. Additionally, in races between two co-partisans, often the candidates double down on issues that appeal to their bases, driving voters from other parties toward supporting hopeless write-in candidates or sitting out the race altogether.⁵¹ While top-two elections may provide more meaningful competition in general elections compared to the existing system, they offer limited benefit.

Alternatively, the “Alaska model” and final-five voting advance the top four or five vote-getters in the primary election to the general election.⁵² There, voters rank the candidates, and an instant-runoff election is then conducted to determine the winner. These systems enjoy the same benefits as other forms of blanket primaries—all candidates appear on one ballot for use by all voters—but they also enjoy unique advantages that result from the instant-runoff election between multiple candidates.

In an instant-runoff election, also referred to as ranked-choice voting, voters rank all candidates in order of preference.⁵³ If one candidate earns more than 50 percent of the first-choice votes, then that candidate is the winner. If not, the candidate with the lowest number of first-choice votes is eliminated, and the count is re-tabulated using

49. Matt Germer, “America’s Primary Elections Are Ripe for Reform,” R Street Policy Study No. 259, June 1, 2022. <https://www.rstreet.org/2022/06/01/americas-primary-elections-are-ripe-for-reform>.

50. Steven Sparks, “How top-two primaries encourage candidates to broaden their appeal to a wider range of voters,” London School of Economics, July 30, 2019. <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/usappblog/2019/07/30/how-top-two-primaries-encourage-candidates-to-broaden-their-appeal-to-a-wider-range-of-voters>.

51. Ibid.

52. Bradner, <https://www.cnn.com/2022/08/31/politics/alaska-how-ranked-choice-voting-work>; “Final-Five Voting,” The Institute for Political Innovation, last accessed Jan. 9, 2023. <https://political-innovation.org/final-five-voting>.

53. “Ranked Choice Voting,” FairVote, last accessed Jan. 9, 2023. <https://fairvote.org/our-reforms/ranked-choice-voting>.

those voters' second choices.⁵⁴ The process is continued until one candidate earns a majority of votes and wins the election.⁵⁵

This system provides unique benefits not enjoyed in other systems. For example, with multiple candidates advancing out of the primary election, odds are high that voters will have meaningful options in the general election—whether between the parties or within them. Given Idaho's political composition, it is quite likely that many races would see more than one Republican candidate advance.

Take, for example, the 2022 race for House Seat A in Legislative District 1, where the Republican candidate ran unopposed in the general election.⁵⁶ In the primary election, five Republicans ran for the seat, with the winner securing only 38 percent support from a total of 12,591 ballots cast.⁵⁷ Under the Alaska model, the top four Republican candidates would advance out of the primary. The decision about which Republican should represent the district would be in the hands of all voters in the district, including the more than 11,000 voters who were locked out of the primary by their partisan affiliation or lack of thereof.⁵⁸

The new structure has already proven its value to Alaskan voters. After debuting in 2022, 60 percent of Alaskans, including strong majorities of both Republicans and Democrats, reported that races were more competitive compared to previous winner-take-all elections.⁵⁹ Thus, blanket primaries, particularly those with instant-runoff general elections, offer a promising solution to Idaho's uncompetitive election problem.

Conclusion

Electoral competition is good—for the population and the economy—and states should construct their elections to ensure voters have meaningful choices. Unfortunately, at present, Idaho elections are largely uncompetitive.

Each election cycle, scores of races feature an unopposed candidate or minimal competition from minority parties. The lack of competition in the general election pushes the deciding election backward to the primary, where far fewer voters can and do participate. The result is less competitive elections and an unfair system for the hundreds of thousands of Idaho voters who are effectively disenfranchised.

Fortunately, Idahoans have multiple potential reforms at their disposal. Open primaries or blanket primaries along with instant-runoff general elections hold the promise of more competitive elections. While no reform can solve every political problem, these options would offer improvements to the current system and would benefit voters across the Gem State.

54. Ibid.

55. Ibid.

56. "Official Election Results." https://www.livevoteturnout.com/ENR/idaho/124/1/en/Index_124.html.

57. Ibid.

58. "Voter Registration Totals." <https://sos.idaho.gov/elections-division/voter-registration-totals>.

59. Amanda Moser, "Polling Shows Alaskan Voters Received Clear Instructions on the System, Found Ranking to be 'Simple,' and saw more Competitive Races," Alaskans for Better Elections, Nov. 15, 2022. <https://alaskansforbetterelections.com/polling-shows-alaskan-voters-received-clear-instructions-on-the-system-found-ranking-to-be-simple-and-saw-more-competitive-races>.

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