



The Good, the Bad and the In-Between: Washington’s Implementation of Top-Two Voting

By Matt Germer and Ryan Williamson

Americans want their votes to matter. To improve on its voting system, Washington could benefit from looking at its neighbor to the north, Alaska, which advances four candidates to the general election and uses RCV to determine the winner.

Executive Summary

In 2004, Washington state voters approved Initiative 872 (I-872), the “People’s Choice Initiative.” I-872 restored Washington’s then recently overturned blanket primary and designated that the top-two vote-getters in the primary would be advanced to the general election. Proponents of I-872 argued that the “top-two voting” system would increase competition and voter participation. Opponents argued that the new system would reduce options for voters in the general election and would result in single-party general elections.

Since then, sixteen years of top-two voting elections have shown mixed results for both opponents and proponents of the system. Overall, top-two voting has provided Washington citizens with more options in primary elections, generating more competition and giving them more say in outcomes. On the other hand, it has had little impact on voter participation and has occasionally resulted in races that left many voters feeling unsatisfied with their choices.

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Legislators and election scholars in Washington and around the country can take away a key learning from Washington's top-two voting experience: The top-two approach is an improvement to partisan primaries and plurality elections, but it could be improved by having more candidates advance out of the primary and by using an alternative voting system in the general election to ensure a majority winner.

Introduction

Americans want their votes to matter.¹ For all but the most competitive jurisdictions, the most consequential elections of any given political cycle are the primary elections.² Unfortunately, for the first 100 years of primary elections, nearly all states kept their primaries closed to registered members of the party, leaving out independent voters or voters from other parties.³ Even today, seven states continue to limit their primary elections to party members, and all but five states limit voters to a single primary—for one party or the other.⁴

In 1935, Washington state was one of the earliest states to break the mold and give more voters a say in primary elections, instituting a blanket primary, in which voters could choose among all candidates.⁵ For nearly 70 years, Washington voters supported their chosen candidates through blanket primaries before legal challenges and a governor's veto ended the blanket primary in 2004.⁶ The voters moved quickly to reinstate the blanket primary through Initiative 872 (I-872) in 2004, but with a new twist—only the top-two vote-getters would advance to the general election, regardless of party affiliation.⁷ This new "Top-Two" voting system revolutionized primary elections in Washington and provided a model for other states to follow.⁸

Proponents of top-two voting system argued that the new primary would increase competition, both in the primary and general elections, and promote voter participation.⁹ On the other hand, opponents worried that it would reduce the total number of options in general elections and isolate minority party voters if both general election candidates were affiliated with the majority party.¹⁰



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1. Amelia Thomson-Deveaux et al., "Why Many Americans Don't Vote," *FiveThirtyEight*, Oct. 26, 2020. <https://projects.fivethirtyeight.com/non-voters-poll-2020-election>.
2. "The Primary Problem," Unite America Institute, March 2021. <https://primaryproblem.uniteamerica.org/read-the-report>.
3. "The History of the Open Primaries Movement," Open Primaries, last accessed July 11, 2023. <https://www.openprimaries.org/history>.
4. "State Primary Election Types," National Conference of State Legislatures, June 22, 2023. <https://www.ncsl.org/elections-and-campaigns/state-primary-election-types>.
5. "History of Washington State Primary Systems," Washington Secretary of State, last accessed July 11, 2023. <https://www.sos.wa.gov/elections/data-research/history-laws-and-litigation/history-washington-state-primary-systems>.
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid.; "Initiative 872, People's Choice Initiative of 2004," Washington Secretary of State, 2004. <https://www2.sos.wa.gov/elections/initiatives/text/i872.pdf>.
8. Richard Barton, "California's Top-Two Primary: The Effects on Electoral Politics and Governance," Unite America Institute, June 2023. <https://www.uniteamerica.institute.org/research/californias-top-two-primary-the-effects-on-electoral-politics-and-governance>.
9. "State of Washington Voters' Pamphlet, State General Election," Washington Secretary of State, November 2004. https://www.sos.wa.gov/sites/default/files/2022-05/Voters_Pamphlet_2004.pdf.
10. Ibid.

After 16 years of top-two elections, both the proponents and opponents of I-872 were largely correct. The approach has opened up the most consequential elections to all voters and has created an incentive for candidates to reach out to a broad coalition of voters for support. At the same time, by limiting the general election to the two top candidates, it has resulted in elections where sizable proportions of voters do not have a candidate to vote for who aligns with their interests—and it has even created unusual elections where no majority-party candidate is available on the general election ballot.¹¹

In all, top-two voting gives citizens more power than the standard partisan primaries used in many other states, but the process still leaves much to be desired. Washington’s top-two voting system would benefit from implementing two key reforms present in the voting system in nearby Alaska: expanding the number of primary winners and using an alternative voting system in the general election, such as ranked-choice voting or approval voting. In so doing, the Evergreen State could improve its elections and reaffirm its status as a model to the rest of the country.

The Winding Road to Top-Two Elections

Primary elections are a relatively recent addition to America’s electoral landscape. First instituted in the early 1900s by progressive reformers in states like Wisconsin, primaries proliferated around the country over the next several decades.¹² Taking a different path from other state primaries, Washington implemented a blanket primary election in 1935, which allowed voters to support any candidate running for office, regardless of party.¹³ The blanket primary represented a radical change from partisan ballots, which had made it impossible to vote for candidates from different parties.¹⁴

From 1935 to 2004, Washington relied on the blanket primary to identify general election candidates.¹⁵ However, after legal challenges to the process at the turn of the century, Washington’s blanket primary was replaced in 2004 by a partisan primary.¹⁶ Dissatisfied with the change, Washington voters demanded the return of the blanket primary almost immediately and adopted I-872 in the 2004 general election, resulting in the top-two voting system that exists today.¹⁷

Washington's Road to the Top-Two Voting System

- 1935**

Washington implements a blanket primary election, which allowed voters the chance to support any candidate running for office, regardless of party.
- 2004**

Following legal challenges, Washington's blanket primary was replaced by a partisan primary.
- Washington voters respond by demanding the return of the blanket primary. Initiative 872 (I-872) is subsequently adopted, resulting in the top-two system.*
- 2008**

New top-two system takes effect.

11. Deborah Wang, “The next Washington state treasurer will be a Republican, but what kind?” *KUOW*, Nov. 4, 2016. <https://www.kuow.org/stories/next-washington-state-treasurer-will-be-republican-what-kind>.

12. Matthew Germer, “America’s Primary Elections Are Ripe for Reform,” *R Street Policy Study* No. 259, June 2022. https://www.rstreet.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/FINAL_RSTREET259.pdf.

13. “History of Washington State Primary Systems.” <https://www.sos.wa.gov/elections/data-research/history-laws-and-litigation/history-washington-state-primary-systems>.

14. *Ibid.*

15. *Ibid.*

16. *Ibid.*

17. Susan Gilmore, “What you need to know about Washington’s top-two primary,” *Seattle Times*, Aug. 13, 2008. <https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/what-you-need-to-know-about-washingtons-top-two-primary>.

Original Blanket Primary

In 1930s Washington, a blanket primaries’ ballot contained all candidates running for office from qualified parties, and voters selected one candidate per office.¹⁸ To advance to the general election, candidates had to win a plurality of votes against the other candidates of their own party and earn at least 1 percent of the total vote in the primary.¹⁹ Voters were free to vote for candidates from any party and could seamlessly switch between parties for each race on the ballot.²⁰

Using the 1998 U.S. Senate race as an example (Figure 1), the primary election ballot included 13 candidates across four different political parties.²¹ After tallying the totals, Patty Murray earned the most votes among the Democrats, Linda Smith earned the most votes among the Republicans and none of the third-party candidates reached at least 1 percent of the total vote.²² In the end, the general election featured only the top Democrat and top Republican—an outcome similar to what might be expected under a typical partisan primary.²³

The original blanket primary in Washington was successful at giving all voters the opportunity to contribute in primary contests, regardless of party affiliation. Yet the overlap of a partisan primary with a blanket primary occasionally produced quirky results, such as knocking out the second most popular candidate but advancing the third most popular candidate, as was the case with the 1980 gubernatorial primary. Republican John Spellman advanced out of the primary with 162,426 votes while incumbent Democrat Dixy Lee Ray failed to advance out of the primary with 234,252 votes, coming in second to challenger Democrat Jim McDermott.²⁴ Both Spellman and Ray competed among the same pool of voters, yet the candidate with more votes did not advance.

Legal Challenges and Legislative Tinkering

Washington enjoyed a blanket primary for nearly 70 years without disruption until a legal battle in another state created chaos.

In 1996, California voters approved Proposition 198, moving the Golden State away from closed partisan primaries to a blanket primary similar to Washington’s.²⁵ The California Democratic Party opposed the change and filed suit alleging that the blanket primary violated the party’s First Amendment rights

Figure 1: 1998 Primary Local Voters’ Pamphlet, Thurston County Washington, 1998

State of Washington U.S. Senator	
6 Year Term	Vote For One
Warren E. Hanson	Republican
Patty Murray	Democrat
Thor Amundson	Democrat
James Sherwood Stokes	Democrat
Mike The Mover	Reform
Robert Tilden Medley	Democrat
Harvey Vernier	Democrat
Linda Smith	Republican
Nan Bailey	Socialist Workers
Chris Bayley	Republican
Steve Thompson	Reform
John Marshall	Republican
Charlie R. Jackson	Reform

Source: https://s3.us-west-2.amazonaws.com/thurstoncountywa.gov-if-us-west-2/s3fs-public/2023-02/Auditor_Voters%20Pamphlet_Sep%201998.pdf.

18. Ibid.

19. RCW 29A.36.190 (2003), repealed by Initiative 872 in 2004. <https://app.leg.wa.gov/rcw/dispo.aspx?cite=29A.36.190>; *Democratic Party of Washington State v. Reed*, 343 F.3d 1198, 1201 (9th Cir. 2003). <https://casetext.com/case/democratic-party-of-washington-state-v-reed>.

20. “History of Washington State Primary Systems.” <https://www.sos.wa.gov/elections/data-research/history-laws-and-litigation/history-washington-state-primary-systems>.

21. “1998 Primary Local Voters’ Pamphlet,” Thurston County, Sept. 15, 1998. https://s3.us-west-2.amazonaws.com/thurstoncountywa.gov-if-us-west-2/s3fs-public/2023-02/Auditor_Voters%20Pamphlet_Sep%201998.pdf.

22. “Elections Search Results, September 1998 Primary,” Washington Secretary of State, last accessed July 2023. https://www.sos.wa.gov/elections/results_report.aspx?e=9&c=&c2=&t=985&t2=1&p=&p2=&y=

23. “Elections Search, November 1998 General,” Washington Secretary of State, last accessed July 2023. https://www.sos.wa.gov/elections/results_report.aspx?e=10&c=&c2=&t=985&t2=1&p=&p2=&y=

24. “Elections Search, September 1980 Primary,” Washington Secretary of State, last accessed July 2023. https://www.sos.wa.gov/elections/results_report.aspx?e=73&c=&c2=&t=&t2=&p=&p2=&y=

25. *California Democratic Party v. Jones*, 530 U.S. 567 (2000). <https://supreme.justia.com/cases/federal/us/530/567/case.pdf>.

of association. Ultimately, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled 7-2 that the blanket primary violated the First Amendment. Key to the ruling was the partisan nature of the proposed blanket primary. By identifying primary winners according to their membership in a political party and opening the primary to all voters, the Court ruled that California was “forcing political parties to associate with those who do not share their beliefs” thus violating their associational rights.²⁶

But Justice Scalia, writing for the majority in the California case, also left the door open for a different kind of blanket primary. He noted that although a partisan blanket primary violates the First Amendment, “under a nonpartisan blanket primary, a state may ensure more choice, greater participation, increased ‘privacy,’ and a sense of ‘fairness’—all without severely burdening a political party’s First Amendment right of association.”²⁷

Following the California case, the Democratic Party of Washington sued to remove the blanket primary in Washington, and the Ninth Circuit ultimately ruled in favor of the party in 2003.²⁸ With the blanket primary thrown out just before the 2004 election cycle, the Washington state legislature scrambled to pick up the pieces.

In the waning days of the legislation session in 2004, the Washington State legislature passed Senate Bill 6453, which advanced a two-part fix.²⁹ First, the bill reinstated the blanket primary as a nonpartisan primary, as conceptualized by Justice Scalia. All candidates would be listed on the primary ballot and the top-two candidates, regardless of affiliation, would advance to the general election.³⁰ To avoid the issue of associational rights, candidates would be permitted to self-identify their party preference, making the primary entirely nonpartisan under law.³¹ Second, the bill created a backup election system if the first was overturned by the courts.³² Under this backup system, known as an “open primary with private choice,” the primary would be held as a partisan endeavor, but voters would be free to choose which party’s ballot they would use each election, and the voter’s choice would be kept private.³³

The legislature passed Senate Bill 6453 with support from both parties and sent the bill to Gov. Gary Locke to sign.³⁴ Gov. Locke vetoed the section creating the blanket primary, leaving in place the backup option—an open primary with private

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Justice Scalia,
writing for the majority in
California Democratic Party v. Jones

26. Ibid, p. 586.

27. Ibid.

28. *Democratic Party of Washington v. Reed*, 343 F.3d 1198 (2003). <https://law.justia.com/cases/federal/appellate-courts/F3/343/1198/636401>.

29. Bill Summary, Senate Bill 6453, Washington State Legislature, 2004. <https://app.leg.wa.gov/billsummary?BillNumber=6453&Year=2003&Initiative=false>.

30. Ibid.

31. Ibid.

32. Ibid.

33. Bill Summary, Senate Bill 6453. <https://app.leg.wa.gov/billsummary?BillNumber=6453&Year=2003&Initiative=false>; Office of Governor Gary Locke, Veto Message on SB 6453, April 1, 2004. <https://lawfilesexet.leg.wa.gov/biennium/2003-04/Pdf/Bills/Veto/Senate/6453.VTO.pdf>.

34. Bill Summary, Senate Bill 6453. <https://app.leg.wa.gov/billsummary?BillNumber=6453&Year=2003&Initiative=false>.

choice.³⁵ With insufficient support to override his veto, the primary elections in 2004 were conducted using an open primary with private choice.³⁶

Top-Two Voting Initiative

Following the partial veto of Senate Bill 6453, supporters of the blanket primary filed I-872, the “People’s Choice Initiative.”³⁷ I-872 reinstated the blanket primary, once again putting all candidates onto the same primary ballot, but this time with the same twist lawmakers had proposed in the vetoed sections of Senate Bill 6453. Rather than advancing the top candidates from each party, candidates would self-identify a party preference and the top-two vote-getters would advance, regardless of party affiliation— an approach commonly known as a top-two election.³⁸

Despite opposition from the governor, the League of Women Voters, and the Libertarian and Green parties, the initiative passed with 60 percent of the vote and was set to replace the “open primary with private choice” after just one election.³⁹

Opponents of blanket primaries challenged the new system in court, delaying its implementation and resulting in an open primary with private choice for the 2006 election cycle.⁴⁰ Once again, the challenge went all the way to the U.S. Supreme Court, but this time the Court ruled 7-2 in favor of the blanket primary system.⁴¹ The key distinction, according to the Court, between the original blanket primary and the top-two primary centered around the distinct role of parties in the two systems. Under the original, unconstitutional blanket primary, the premise of the primary was to pick candidates to represent each party. Under the top-two system, however, parties merely functioned as political signaling tools for voters. Candidates self-identified a party preference, but the rules were agnostic to parties altogether.

With the First Amendment challenge resolved, the top-two system took effect for the 2008 primary elections and has continued to be used in primary elections ever since.⁴²

How the Top-Two System Has Fared in Practice

Each election cycle, the Washington Secretary of State prepares a voters’ pamphlet for federal and state elections.⁴³ This pamphlet includes statements by the candidates and arguments supporting and opposing statewide ballot measures.⁴⁴ When I-872 was presented to voters in 2004, proponent and opponent arguments were laid out for voters in the pamphlet (See **Figure 2** and

Figure 2: Statement for Initiative Measure 872, Washington State voters’ pamphlet, 2004

Statement For Initiative Measure 872

VOTE FOR THE PERSON — NOT THE PARTY
Last year the state party bosses won their lawsuit against the blanket primary, and in 2004 they convinced the Governor to veto legislation allowing voters to continue to vote for any candidate in the primary. Most of us believe this freedom to select any candidate in the primary is a basic right. Don't be forced to choose from only one party's slate of candidates in the primary. *Vote Yes on I-872.*

MORE COMPETITIVE PRIMARIES AND GENERAL ELECTIONS
Under I-872, the two candidates with the most votes in the primary win and go on to the general election ballot. No political party is guaranteed a spot on the general election ballot. Parties will have to recruit candidates with broad public support and run campaigns that appeal to all the voters. That's fair — and that's right.

PROTECT PRIVACY AND INCREASE PARTICIPATION
Under I-872, you will never have to declare party or register by party in order to vote in the primary. In the primaries in 2000, the turnout in Washington was *more than twice as high* as in states with party primaries — because voters in this state could support any candidate on the primary ballot. *Vote Yes on I-872.*

RETURN CONTROL OF THE PRIMARY TO THE VOTERS
The September primary this year gave the state party bosses more control over who appears on our general election ballot at the expense of the average voter. I-872 will restore the kind of choice in the primary that voters enjoyed for seventy years with the blanket primary. Protect Washington's tradition as a state that elects people over party labels. *Vote Yes on I-872.*
For more information, call 1.800.854.1635 or visit www.i872.org.

Rebuttal of Statement Against
I-872 gives voters *more choices* in the primary and *better choices* in the general. *All the voters* will decide who is on the November ballot. Whether it's one Republican and one Democrat, one major and one minor party, or even an Independent — they will be *the candidates the voters want the most*. The primary and general election should be decided by voters, not by exclusive party organizations that might be dominated by special interests!

Voters' Pamphlet Argument Prepared by:
TERRY HUNT, President, Washington State Grange; BILL FINKBEINER, State Senator, Republican; BRIAN HATFIELD, State Representative, Democrat; SAM REED, Secretary of State, Republican; JOHN STANTON, Chairman and CEO, Western Wireless; DARLENE FAIRLEY, State Senator, Democrat.

Source: https://www.sos.wa.gov/sites/default/files/2022-05/Voters_Pamphlet_2004.pdf.

35. Office of Governor Gary Locke, Veto Message on SB 6453, April 1, 2004. <https://lawfilesexternal.leg.wa.gov/biennium/2003-04/Pdf/Bills/Vetoes/Senate/6453.VTO.pdf>.
 36. Kit Oldham, “Washington holds first top-two primary election on August 19, 2008,” HistoryLink.org Essay 8937, Feb. 17, 2009. <https://www.historylink.org/File/8937>.
 37. “State of Washington Voters’ Pamphlet, State General Election.” https://www.sos.wa.gov/sites/default/files/2022-05/Voters_Pamphlet_2004.pdf.
 38. Ibid.
 39. “State of Washington Voters’ Pamphlet, State General Election.” https://www.sos.wa.gov/sites/default/files/2022-05/Voters_Pamphlet_2004.pdf; “Washington Initiative 872, Top-Two Primaries Measure (2004),” Ballotpedia, 2004. [https://ballotpedia.org/Washington_Top-Two_Primaries_Initiative_872_\(2004\)](https://ballotpedia.org/Washington_Top-Two_Primaries_Initiative_872_(2004)).
 40. “History of Washington State Primary Systems.” <https://www.sos.wa.gov/elections/data-research/history-laws-and-litigation/history-washington-state-primary-systems>.
 41. *Washington State Grange v. Washington State Republican Party*, 552 U.S. 442 (2008). <https://supreme.justia.com/cases/federal/us/552/06-713/index.pdf>.
 42. Oldham. <https://www.historylink.org/File/8937>.
 43. RCW 29A.32.010 (2022). <https://app.leg.wa.gov/RCW/default.aspx?cite=29A.32.010>.
 44. RCW 29A.32.031 (2022). <https://app.leg.wa.gov/RCW/default.aspx?cite=29A.32.031>.

Figure 3).⁴⁵ With the privilege of hindsight and data from eight state election cycles, including hundreds of elections for state legislature, the arguments for and against top-two voting are now ripe for evaluation.

Analysis of Proponents' Claims

The Washington State Grange, the Secretary of State and a coalition of bipartisan legislators put forward the following arguments in favor of the top-two voting initiative:

1. Voters would be able to choose a person and not a party;
2. Both primaries and the general election would become more competitive;
3. Top-two voting would protect privacy and increase participation; and
4. Control of the primary would belong to voters and not the party.

The first and fourth arguments are not well suited to empirical analysis; however, the second and third arguments can be analyzed using data from the eight elections conducted so far using a top-two approach from 2008 to 2022. Data showed that the proponents were correct on some points—in particular the claim that top-two voting would create competition—but they were also overstating the potential benefits at times, particularly regarding the amount of competition and voter participation created by top-two voting in the aggregate.

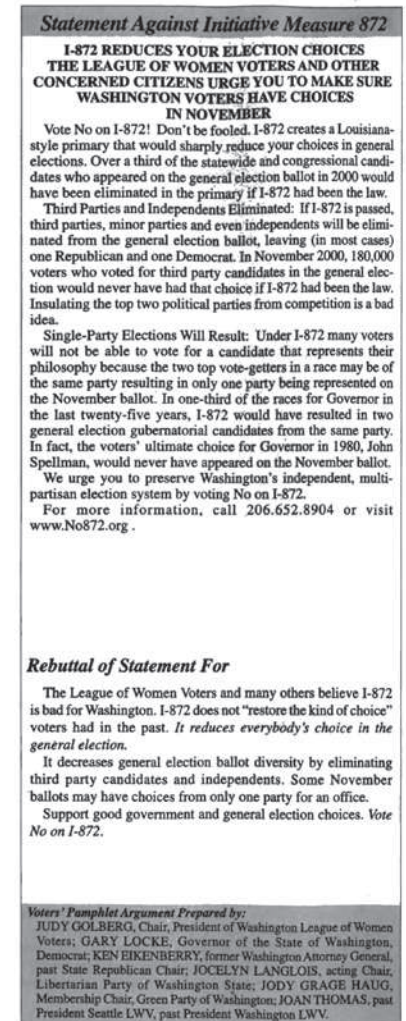
More Competition in the Primary and General Election

In the voters' pamphlet, the proponents argued that top-two voting would create "more competitive primaries and general elections."⁴⁶ In particular, they predicted that "[p]arties will have to recruit candidates with broad public support and run campaigns that appeal to all the voters."⁴⁷

Looking first to the primaries, the most charitable interpretation of the proponents' argument is relatively straightforward. Top-two primaries give voters more choices than a partisan primary because the top-two voting primary contains more competitors and thus fosters more competition. A cursory analysis shows this claim to be true. With all candidates for office appearing together on the primary ballot, including independent and third-party candidates, voters are regularly presented with more options than a standard partisan primary.

However, a more detailed analysis of competition requires investigating whether the races themselves were tighter and the outcomes were less clear. One common method of determining electoral competitiveness can be found by looking at races

Figure 3: Statement Against Initiative Measure 872, Washington State voters' pamphlet, 2004.



Source: https://www.sos.wa.gov/sites/default/files/2022-05/Voters_Pamphlet_2004.pdf.

45. "State of Washington Voters' Pamphlet, State General Election." https://www.sos.wa.gov/sites/default/files/2022-05/Voters_Pamphlet_2004.pdf.

46. Ibid.

47. Ibid.

decided by 10 points or fewer.⁴⁸ Looking at state legislative races, where 98 House seats and roughly 25 Senate seats are on the ballot each cycle, data tilts slightly in favor of the proponents of top-two voting.⁴⁹

In 2004 and 2006, the vast majority of state legislative primary races offered no competition at all, with just one candidate per party per office.⁵⁰ Only 22 partisan primary races were decided by 10 points or fewer.⁵¹

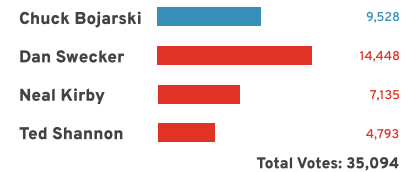
However, with the advent of top-two voting, not only did nearly every primary race offer at least two options for voters, but the number of close races increased as well.⁵² In 2008 and 2010, a comparable two-cycle window that used the same district lines as 2004 and 2006, the number of competitive races increased from 15 percent to 17 percent despite reducing the total number of elections by combining the two major party primaries into a single, party-agnostic affair.

Top-two voting primaries also introduced a new dynamic that was not previously possible in a partisan primary—the second spot on the general election ballot may come down to a tight race between the runner-up from the majority party and the top candidate of the minority party. For example, in 2008, four candidates ran for State Senator in the 20th Legislative District, one Democrat and three Republicans. Long-time incumbent Republican Dan Swecker led the primary with 40 percent of the total vote, leaving the second spot to a tight race between Democrat Chuck Bojarski and Republican Neal Kirby.⁵³ Bojarski bested Kirby by less than 7 points, creating a competitive primary election that would not have existed with partisan primaries.⁵⁴

Turning to the general elections, where only one candidate can win, a race is considered competitive if the winning candidate received 55 percent of the vote or less.⁵⁵ After the implementation of top-two voting, a win with less than 55 percent of the vote represents a close margin—after all, this means the second-place candidate came within 10 points of the winner. Before top-two voting, however, a victory with less than 55 percent of the total vote may not have been 10 points due to the possible presence of third-party candidates.

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**The top-two system in action.
2008 State Senator Legislative
20 District Results:**



48. Ryan Williamson, “Evaluating the Effects of the Top-Four System in Alaska,” *R Street Shorts* No. 122, January 2023. <https://www.rstreet.org/research/evaluating-the-effects-of-the-top-four-system-in-alaska>.

49. RCW 44.05.090 (2022). <https://app.leg.wa.gov/RCW/default.aspx?cite=44.05.090>; Washington State Constitution, Article II, Sections 4 and 5, 2019. <https://leg.wa.gov/CodeReviser/Documents/WAConstitution.pdf>.

50. “Elections Search Results, November 2006 General and November 2004 General,” Washington Secretary of State, last accessed July 11, 2023. https://www.sos.wa.gov/elections/results_report.aspx?e=134,67&c=&c2=&t=&t2=4&p=&p2=&y=

51. *Ibid.*

52. RCW 44.05.090 (2022). <https://app.leg.wa.gov/RCW/default.aspx?cite=44.05.090>; Washington State Constitution, Article II, Sections 4 and 5, 2019. <https://leg.wa.gov/CodeReviser/Documents/WAConstitution.pdf>.

53. “August 19, 2008 Primary Results,” Washington Secretary of State, last accessed July 11, 2023. <https://results.vote.wa.gov/results/20080819/legislative-all.html>.

54. *Ibid.*

55. Williamson. <https://www.rstreet.org/research/evaluating-the-effects-of-the-top-four-system-in-alaska>.

Overall, top-two voting does not appear to have impacted the total number of competitive races. In the 2004 and 2006 elections, the vast majority of general election races for the state legislature—over 75 percent—were not competitive.⁵⁶ After the implementation of top-two voting, the results have been similar: still more than three-quarters of races are not competitive.⁵⁷

But top-two voting may have increased competition at the margins. In 2004 and 2006, 54 races featured unopposed candidates, giving voters no choices in the general election.⁵⁸ In 2008 and 2010, after the implementation of top-two voting, the number of unopposed races dropped to 49.⁵⁹ One reason for this change is that contests featuring only one party shifted the competition from the primary election to the general, creating competitive general election races in previously uncompetitive districts and including the input of more voters.

For example, in 2010, two Democrats squared off in the general election for State Representative Position 1 in the 27th Legislative District.⁶⁰ This is a seat where Democrats held a 70-30 advantage over Republicans, providing an uncompetitive general election before top-two voting was implemented.⁶¹ But in 2010, Democrats Jake Fey and Laurie Jinkins competed against each other in the general election, with Jinkins ultimately winning 54-46. Thus, the top-two system shifted the competition from the primary to the general election, and, in so doing, reflected the input of the 15,390 more constituents who participated in the general election.⁶²

To summarize, the implementation of top-two voting in Washington shows mixed results when it comes to electoral competition. At a fundamental level, top-two voting provided citizens with more options in the primary election and occasionally created competition where it would not have otherwise existed, but the aggregate number of competitive races largely stayed the same.

Increased Voter Participation

The proponents also argue that top-two primaries increase voter participation in primary elections. Specifically, they claim that turnout in Washington was “more than twice as high” in the 2000 election compared to states that use partisan

Washington's Top-Two System Key Takeaway

Top-two voting provided citizens with more options in the primary election and occasionally created competition where it would not have otherwise existed, but the aggregate number of competitive races largely stayed the same.

56. “Elections Search Results, November 2006 General and November 2004 General.” https://www.sos.wa.gov/elections/results_report.aspx?e=134,67&c=&c2=&t=&t2=4&p=&p2=&y=

57. “November 04, 2008 General Election Results,” Washington Secretary of State, last accessed July 11, 2023. <https://results.vote.wa.gov/results/20081104/legislative-all.html>; “November 02, 2010 General Election Results,” Washington Secretary of State, last accessed July 11, 2023. <https://results.vote.wa.gov/results/20101102/legislative-all.html>.

58. “Elections Search Results, November 2006 General and November 2004 General.” https://www.sos.wa.gov/elections/results_report.aspx?e=134,67&c=&c2=&t=&t2=4&p=&p2=&y=

59. “November 04, 2008 General Election Results.” <https://results.vote.wa.gov/results/20081104/legislative-all.html>; “November 02, 2010 General Election Results.” <https://results.vote.wa.gov/results/20101102/legislative-all.html>.

60. “November 02, 2010 General Election Results.” <https://results.vote.wa.gov/results/20101102/legislative-all.html>.

61. “Elections Search Results, November 2006 General and November 2004 General.” https://www.sos.wa.gov/elections/results_report.aspx?e=134,67&c=&c2=&t=&t2=4&p=&p2=&y=

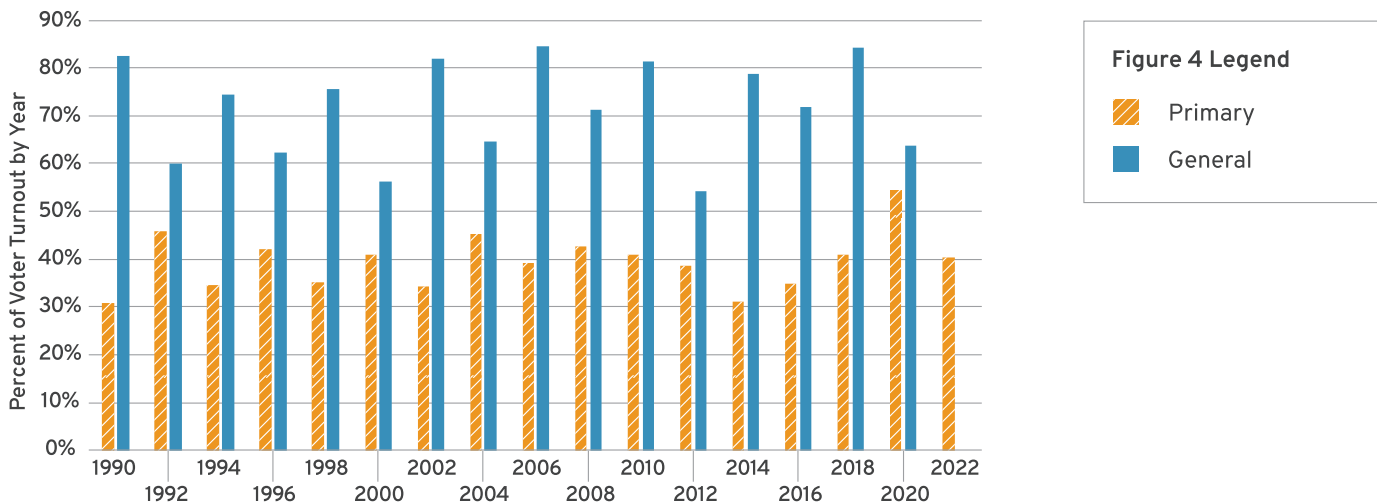
62. “August 17, 2010 Primary Results, Legislative District 27 – State Representative Pos. 1,” Washington Secretary of State, last accessed July 11, 2023. <https://results.vote.wa.gov/results/20100817/legislative-district-27-state-representative-pos-1.html>; “November 02, 2010 General Election Results, Legislative District 27 – State Representative Pos. 1,” Washington Secretary of State, last accessed July 11, 2023. <https://results.vote.wa.gov/results/20101102/legislative-district-27-state-representative-pos-1.html>.

primaries. This claim by proponents is less nuanced than the claims about competition, and data shows that the top-two voting primary system did not increase voter participation on the whole.

Before the end of the blanket primary after the 2002 election, Washington regularly experienced relatively good turnout in primary elections, particularly compared to other states. In 1990, for example, 30.71 percent of Washingtonians turned out for the primary election in a congressional midterm cycle.⁶³ By comparison, less than 20 percent of voters nationally participated in their state’s primary elections that year.⁶⁴ By 2000, more than 40 percent of Washingtonians participated in the primary election, ranking third among states with available data.⁶⁵

As shown in Figure 4, the implementation of the partisan primary with voter choice did not appear to impact turnout in a significant way. Turnout in the 2004 primary jumped to 45 percent, the highest level since 1992 and a level that would not be surpassed until 2020.⁶⁶ Two years later, 2006 saw a slight decline at 39 percent, but it nevertheless represented an increase over the previous midterm primary in 2002, which saw only 34 percent of voters participate. After implementing top-two voting in 2008, voter turnout in primaries declined from 2008-2014 and then grew from 2014-2020. Overall, the claim that top-two voting would increase voter participation in primary elections is unsupported by data.

Figure 4: Voter Turnout by Year



Source: “Voter Turnout by Election,” Washington Secretary of State, last accessed July 19, 2023. <https://www.sos.wa.gov/elections/data-research/election-data-and-maps/data-and-statistics/voter-turnout-election>.

63. “Voter Turnout by Election,” Washington Secretary of State, last accessed July 11, 2023. www.sos.wa.gov/elections/data-research/election-data-and-maps/data-and-statistics.
 64. Michael Oreskes, “Low Voter Turnout in Primaries, Once Again,” *The New York Times*, Oct. 4, 1990. <https://www.nytimes.com/1990/10/04/us/low-voter-turnout-in-primaries-once-again.html>.
 65. “Turnout in Primaries vs General Elections since 2000,” States United Action, July 28, 2022. https://statesuniteddemocracy.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/historic_turnout.html.
 66. “Voter Turnout by Election.” <https://www.sos.wa.gov/elections/data-research/election-data-and-maps/data-and-statistics>.

Analysis of Opponents' Claims

On the other side of the issue, the League of Women Voters, Gov. Gary Locke, the Libertarian and Green parties and state GOP leadership opposed the top-two voting initiative.

Similar to the proponents, the opponents also made a series of claims about top-two voting:

1. It would “sharply reduce” choices in the general election;
2. Third parties and independent candidates would be “eliminated” from the general election ballot; and
3. The candidates in the general election may be from the same party, leaving many voters struggling to find a candidate with whom they agree.

These claims can each be evaluated using data from the eight top-two election cycles. On the whole, opponents' claims had some validity, but they were also somewhat overstated.

“Sharply Reduced” Choices in General Election

Opponents of the top-two voting system argue that I-872 would “sharply reduce [voters'] choices in the general election.”⁶⁷ At first glance, the data appears to back up this claim; however, with additional context, the argument weakens.

It is true that top-two voting reduced the average number of candidates on the general election ballot. In 2000 and 2002, the last two-cycle period to use the original blanket primary format, the average state legislative general election race featured 47 races with more than two candidates—nearly 20 percent.⁶⁸ The change to the partisan primary with private selection in 2004 continued to provide a pathway to the ballot for third-party candidates, though the number of races with three or more candidates declined to 27 races—or 11 percent—driven mostly by the election in 2006 when only one state legislative race featured more than two candidates.⁶⁹

The implementation of top-two voting naturally reduced the number of general election candidates, as no race under a top-two system could feature more than two candidates.⁷⁰

But the analysis should not end there. The number of general election races featuring unopposed candidates also plays a role in the number of choices.

Opponents' Claims Key Takeaways

On the whole, opponents' claims are directionally accurate, but, like proponents, they overstate their arguments, with key races undercutting them, sometimes dramatically.



Opponents of the top-two system argue that I-872 would “sharply reduce [voters'] choices in the general election.” At first glance, the data backs up this claim; however, with additional context, the opponents' arguments are left wanting.

67. “State of Washington Voters’ Pamphlet, State General Election.” https://www.sos.wa.gov/sites/default/files/2022-05/Voters_Pamphlet_2004.pdf.

68. “Election Search Results, November 2002 General and November 2000 General,” Washington Secretary of State, last accessed July 11, 2023. https://www.sos.wa.gov/elections/results_report.aspx?e=4,20&c=&c2=&t=&t2=4&p=&p2=&y=

69. “Elections Search Results, November 2006 General and November 2004 General.” https://www.sos.wa.gov/elections/results_report.aspx?e=134,67&c=&c2=&t=&t2=4&p=&p2=&y=

70. “November 04, 2008 General Election Results.” <https://results.vote.wa.gov/results/20081104/legislative-all.html>; “November 02, 2010 General Election Results.” <https://results.vote.wa.gov/results/20101102/legislative-all.html>.

In 2004 and 2006, three races featured competition among co-partisans in the primary without any opposition from another party.⁷¹ These races would all have brought forward an alternative option to voters in the general election if they had been conducted using top-two voting instead, both increasing the number of candidates on the general election ballot and enabling minority party and independent voters to contribute to the outcome of the race.

As noted above, the number of unopposed races in the general election also decreased with the advent of top-two voting. Following the partisan primaries in 2004 and 2006, 54 races in the subsequent general elections provided no options for voters at all.⁷² This number declined to 49 races between 2008 and 2010.⁷³

With this extra context, the conclusions are again mixed. Opponents of top-two voting are correct that the number of choices in the general election did drop, as evidenced by the number of races with more than two candidates. But top-two voting also increased the number of races where voters had a choice by allowing co-partisans to compete against each other in the general election.

Elimination of Third Parties and Independents

Building off the argument above, opponents claimed that third parties and independents would be eliminated under top-two voting. This has proven to be flatly untrue. Third-party candidates and independents still compete for office under top-two systems and may even have more opportunity to spread their message through partisan self-identification.

After the implementation of top-two voting in 2008, third-party candidates continued showing up on the general election ballot. Sticking with state legislative races, third-party candidates maintained their presence on the general election ballot ranging from just five in 2008 to 15 in 2014.⁷⁴

While third-party candidates tend to fare poorly in the general election, they occasionally have competitive campaigns. For example, in the 2010 race for State Representative Position 2 in the 19th legislative district, Tim Sutinen of the “Lower Taxes Party” lost by just 5 points to incumbent Democrat Brian Blake.⁷⁵

Looking outside of state legislative elections, independent candidate



Opponents claimed that third parties and independents would be eliminated under Top-Two. This phrasing has proven to be flatly untrue both literally and figuratively. Third-party candidates and independents still compete for office under the system and may even have more opportunity to spread their message through partisan self-identification.

71. “Elections Search Results, September 2006 Primary,” Washington Secretary of State, last accessed July 11, 2023. https://www.sos.wa.gov/elections/results_report.aspx?e=136,66&c=&c2=&t=&t2=4&p=&p2=&y=

72. “Elections Search Results, November 2006 General and November 2004 General.” https://www.sos.wa.gov/elections/results_report.aspx?e=134,67&c=&c2=&t=&t2=4&p=&p2=&y=

73. “November 4, 2008 General Election Results.” <https://results.vote.wa.gov/results/20081104/legislative-all.html>; “November 2, 2010 General Election Results,” Washington Secretary of State, last accessed July 11, 2023.” <https://results.vote.wa.gov/results/20101102/legislative-all.html>.

74. “November 4, 2008 General Election Results.” <https://results.vote.wa.gov/results/20081104/legislative-all.html>.

75. “November 2, 2010 General Election Results.” <https://results.vote.wa.gov/results/20101102/legislative-all.html>.

Julie Anderson narrowly lost the 2022 special election for Secretary of State to incumbent Steve Hobbs by less than 4 points.⁷⁶

The persistent existence of third parties is also notable not just because of the top-two structure, but also because candidates now enjoy self-identification privileges. Before top-two voting, candidates may have pursued nomination as a third-party candidate as a way to advance to the general election ballot. A candidate with a base of 2-3 percent of the voters has little chance of advancing from a top-two election, but they could advance out of a partisan primary system. Even so, with that benefit of third-party affiliation removed, candidates continued to identify outside of the major party options under the top-two system.

Moreover, candidates have come to recognize the potential for signaling using the self-identification system. Dating back to the first election under the top-two system in 2008, candidates began to use party identification to tell voters where they stand on the issues, with one candidate for state legislative office identifying with the “Cut Taxes G.O.P. Party” and another identifying as “Progressive Dem. Party.”⁷⁷ State Rep. Christopher Hurst also recognized the power of signaling and began running as an “Independent Democrat” in 2010, a tactic that proved valuable for him personally and was repeated by candidates. By 2016, when Hurst chose not to run for re-election, 14 candidates carried on the practice by running as “Independent Democrats” or “Independent Republicans.”⁷⁸

Candidates also began combining multiple party identifications for unique advantages. For example, in 2016, Jason Ritchie identified as both a Democrat and a member of the Working Family Party.⁷⁹ The combination resonated well with voters, as he narrowly lost the election for State Representative Position 1 in the 5th Legislative District against incumbent Republican Jay Rodne by less than 4 points.⁸⁰

Over time, the potential for leveraging self-identification as a messaging tool developed into an art form of sorts. In the 2020 gubernatorial election, 36 candidates participated, purportedly identifying with 15 different parties, from “Fifth Republic Party” to the “Cascadian Labour Party.”⁸¹ Far from the elimination of third parties, self-identification under the top-two system has sparked a renaissance of party identifications and given a platform to candidates outside of the dominant Republican and Democratic parties.



Far from the elimination of third parties, self-identification under the top-two system has sparked a renaissance of party identifications and given a platform to candidates outside of the dominant Republican and Democratic parties.

76. “November 8, 2022 General Election Results, Washington State – Secretary of State,” Washington Secretary of State, last accessed July 11, 2023. <https://results.vote.wa.gov/results/20221108/washington-state-secretary-of-state.html>.

77. “November 04, 2008 General Election Results,” Washington Secretary of State, last accessed July 11, 2023. <https://results.vote.wa.gov/results/20081104/legislative-all.html>.

78. “November 8, 2016 General Election Results.” <https://results.vote.wa.gov/results/20161108/legislative-all.html>.

79. Ibid.

80. Ibid.

81. “August 4, 2020 Primary Results, Governor,” Washington Secretary of State, last accessed July 11, 2023. <https://results.vote.wa.gov/results/20200804/governor.html>.

Single-Party Elections

Opponents of top-two elections also raised objections to the system on the grounds that it would allow two candidates from the same party to square off in the general election without any alternative options. In such cases, “many voters will not be able to vote for a candidate who represents their philosophy.”⁸² Such circumstances have played out in high-profile races and with some regularity.

In a classic example, Republicans found themselves without a candidate in the Lieutenant Governor’s race in 2020. In the primary, 11 candidates competed for the office—four Democrats, five Republicans and two Libertarians.⁸³ Two Democrats, U.S. Rep. Denny Heck and State Sen. Marko Liias, brought with them substantial political profiles, whereas none of the Republican candidates emerged as frontrunners. Ultimately, Heck and Liias advanced out of the primary with 25 percent and 19 percent, respectively, while the Republicans split 43 percent of the vote five ways and failed to advance a candidate.⁸⁴ In the general election, many Republicans felt that they had no candidate who reflected their philosophy on the ballot and resorted to supporting write-in candidate Joshua Freed.⁸⁵

Perhaps more notably, top-two voting has even resulted in elections where majority party voters did not have a candidate on the general election ballot at all. In the 2016 race for State Treasurer, Democratic voters, who represent a majority in Washington, were left to choose between two Republican candidates.⁸⁶ This came to be because three Democratic candidates split the vote in the primary election, each earning between 13 and 20 percent of the vote, leaving the two Republican candidates to advance with 23 and 25 percent each.⁸⁷ While Republicans rejoiced at the guarantee of a victory in the statewide race, the topsy-turvy primary result represented the worst nightmares of the Democratic Party leadership who opposed I-872.

In this sense, opponents of top-two elections were correct—the system does occasionally create results that leave many voters without a candidate who reflects their worldview in the general election. However, single-party races have also provided some benefit by giving minority party voters the chance to play kingmaker and help temper the ideological extremism of their representatives.



Opponents of top-two elections were correct. The system does occasionally create results that leave many voters without a candidate; however, single-party races have also provided some benefit by giving minority party voters the chance to play kingmaker and helping to temper the ideological extremism of their representatives.

82. “State of Washington Voters’ Pamphlet, State General Election.” https://www.sos.wa.gov/sites/default/files/2022-05/Voters_Pamphlet_2004.pdf.

83. “August 4, 2020 Primary Results, Lt. Governor,” Washington Secretary of State, last accessed Sept. 6, 2023.. <https://results.vote.wa.gov/results/20200804/lt-governor.html>.

84. Ibid.

85. “November 3, 2020 General Election Results, Statewide – Lt. Governor,” Washington Secretary of State, last accessed July 11, 2023. <https://results.vote.wa.gov/results/20201103/statewide-lt-governor.html>; Joseph O’Sullivan, “Former Bothell Mayor Joshua Freed announces write-in campaign for lieutenant governor,” *Seattle Times*, Aug. 20, 2020. <https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/politics/former-bothell-mayor-joshua-freed-announces-write-in-campaign-for-lieutenant-governor>.

86. “November 8, 2016, General Election Results, State Treasurer,” Washington Secretary of State, last accessed July 11, 2023. <https://results.vote.wa.gov/results/20161108/state-treasurer.html>.

87. “August 2, 2015 Primary Results, State Treasurer,” Washington Secretary of State, last accessed July 11, 2023. <https://results.vote.wa.gov/results/20160802/state-treasurer.html>.

For example, in 2014, Republicans Clint Didier and Dan Newhouse emerged from the 4th Congressional District primary election with Didier garnering 32 percent compared to the more moderate Republican Dan Newhouse's 26 percent.⁸⁸ Although Democrats represented just 20 percent of the primary voters, their impact was substantial. Newhouse, the more moderate of the two candidates, ultimately won the race by less than 2 points.⁸⁹ Under Washington's old system, or under most of the primary rules around the country, Newhouse would have been eliminated during the primary phase, likely leading to a resounding Didier victory. But the top-two election incentivized the two Republican candidates to reach out to all voters, including Democrats, giving more voters more say in the outcome of the election. This led one prominent political observer to comment, "a top-two voting primary can offer a path toward something radically promising."⁹⁰

Parties may squander this opportunity, however. Looking again to the race for Secretary of State in 2020, Republicans had the opportunity to tilt the outcome of the election against Democrat Steve Hobbs and in favor of independent candidate Julie Anderson. Hobbs ultimately won the election with just 49.8 percent of the vote.⁹¹ If Republicans had chosen to rally around Anderson rather than support an underdog write-in candidate, which took a valuable 4.4 percent of the vote, it is possible that Anderson could have unseated the Democrat.

In all, while the opponents of top-two elections were correct that the system could result in races where a substantial portion of the electorate faced a choice between two unappealing alternatives, these elections have also provided healthy incentives for candidates to reach out to all voters and given more voters more influence over otherwise uncompetitive elections.

Grading on a Curve—Comparing to Idaho and Alaska

To this point, this paper has described how top-two voting has impacted elections in Washington. However, another way to assess the value of this approach is to compare Washington's elections with those of two of its neighbors—Idaho and Alaska.

Single-Party Elections Key Takeaway

While the opponents of top-two elections were correct that the system could result in races where a substantial portion of the electorate faced a choice between two unappealing alternatives, these elections have also provided healthy incentives for candidates to reach out to all voters and have given more voters more influence over otherwise uncompetitive elections.

88. "August 5, 2014 Primary, Congressional District 4," Washington Secretary of State, last accessed July 11, 2023. <https://results.vote.wa.gov/results/20140805/congressionaldistrict4.html>.

89. "November 4, 2014 General Election, Congressional District 4," Washington Secretary of State, last accessed July 11, 2023. <https://results.vote.wa.gov/results/20141104/congressionaldistrict4.html>.

90. David Wasserman, "What Washington State Can Teach Us About Gridlock In 'The Other Washington,'" *FiveThirtyEight*, Jan. 29, 2015. <https://fivethirtyeight.com/features/what-washington-state-can-teach-us-about-gridlock-in-the-other-washington>.

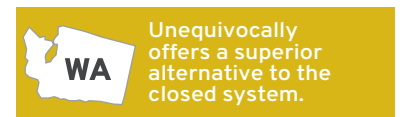
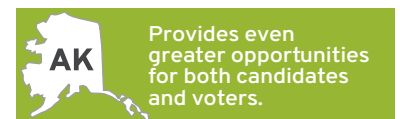
91. Ibid.

At one end of the spectrum, Idaho employs partially closed primaries.⁹² This means that only voters who have registered with a party may participate in that party's primary, unless the party itself decides to allow other voters to participate. In addition, because Idaho is overwhelmingly Republican, most state legislative races serve more like coronations than opportunities for voters to express their preferences.⁹³ Of Idaho's 70 state house races in 2022, only 10 were decided by 10 percentage points or less—less than 15 percent of the races—whereas 20 percent of Washington races were decided by that margin.⁹⁴ Additionally, nearly 75 percent of races in Idaho that year featured only one candidate on the ballot.⁹⁵ Washington, meanwhile, offered voters only one candidate in roughly 20 percent of races.⁹⁶ As has been written elsewhere, top-two elections would be an improvement over Idaho's current system.⁹⁷

Although the top-two approach to elections cannot completely fix issues of competition, turnout or representation in Washington, this innovation unequivocally offers a superior alternative to the closed system in neighboring Idaho. Were Idaho to follow Washington's lead, a greater number of candidates would be incentivized to participate, competition would move from closed, low turnout primaries to the general election, and voters would be given greater opportunities to express their preferences toward candidates and hold incumbents accountable.

But that does not mean Washington's system cannot be improved. For example, Alaska's top-four innovation provides even greater opportunities for candidates and voters. Following the passage of Ballot Measure 2 in 2020, Alaska implemented a blanket primary just like Washington, but the four candidates with the most votes advance to the general election, instead of just two.⁹⁸ The major difference between Washington and Alaska is that Alaskans have an opportunity to rank each of the candidates on the ballot instead of picking just one. Ranked-choice voting (RCV) has been shown to produce a number of benefits including more choices for voters, more representative outcomes and increased participation.⁹⁹

Although the top-two approach to elections cannot completely fix issues of competition, turnout or representation in Washington, this innovation unequivocally offers a superior alternative to the closed system in neighboring Idaho. But that does not mean Washington's system cannot be improved.



92. "Primary Elections in Idaho," Idaho Secretary of State's Office, last accessed July 11, 2023. https://sos.idaho.gov/elect/primary_elections_in_idaho.html.

93. "Voter Registration Totals," Idaho Secretary of State's Office, last updated July 10, 2023. <https://sos.idaho.gov/elections-division/voter-registration-totals>.

94. "2022 General Election, Office Election Results," State of Idaho Elections Department, last accessed July 11, 2023. <https://sos.idaho.gov/elections-division/voter-registration-totals>; "November 4, 2008 General Election Results." <https://results.vote.wa.gov/results/20081104/legislative-all.html>; "November 2, 2010 General Election Results." <https://results.vote.wa.gov/results/20101102/legislative-all.html>.

95. "2022 General Election, Office Election Results." <https://sos.idaho.gov/elections-division/election-results>.

96. "November 4, 2008 General Election Results." <https://results.vote.wa.gov/results/20081104/legislative-all.html>; "November 02, 2010 General Election Results." <https://results.vote.wa.gov/results/20101102/legislative-all.html>.

97. Matthew Germer, "Polishing Gem State Elections: The Case for Electoral Reform in Idaho," *R Street Policy Study* No. 274, January 2023. <https://www.rstreet.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/r-street-policy-study-no-274.pdf>.

98. James Brooks, "Alaska becomes second state to approve ranked-choice voting as Ballot Measure 2 passes by 1%," *Anchorage Daily News*, Nov. 17, 2020. <https://www.adn.com/politics/2020/11/17/alaska-becomes-second-state-to-approve-ranked-choice-voting-as-ballot-measure-2-passes-by-1>.

99. "Ranked Choice Voting," FairVote, last accessed July 11, 2023. <https://fairvote.org/our-reforms/ranked-choice-voting>.

Aside from the general benefits accrued by all RCV elections, allowing four candidates to advance instead of two would drastically reduce the instances in which major party supporters do not have a candidate of their choice on the ballot as well as increase opportunities for minor-party candidates. Even if a candidate from a voter's preferred party does not have a high chance of winning the race, citizens would still be able to vote according to their preferences by ranking their party's candidate first, while still expressing a preference for the other candidates through the ranked-choice ballot.

Conclusion

When I-872 passed in 2004, voters sent the message that they wanted to restore the blanket primary and maintain the ability to select among candidates from all parties in the primary. The arguments of the proponents of the initiative not only carried the day but also proved to be mostly true. Even so, opponents' warnings also proved to be valid, highlighting many of the ways in which the implementation of top-two elections came with trade-offs.

Ultimately, lawmakers and election scholars from around the country can learn from the experience of Washington's top-two approach to elections. The system does a good job of granting voters maximum flexibility and can create healthy incentives for candidates to run broadly appealing campaigns while leaving space for third-party candidates. At the same time, top-two voting has resulted in general elections where voters, both of the minority and majority party, have no politically aligned option.

To improve on its current voting system, Washington could benefit from looking at its neighbor to the north, Alaska, which advances four candidates to the general election and uses RCV to determine the winner. Still, even just the use of top-two voting has benefited Washington voters by promoting competition in ways that closed partisan primaries and plurality elections cannot do.

RCV Elections Key Takeaway

Aside from the general benefits accrued to all RCV elections, allowing four candidates to advance instead of two would drastically reduce the instances in which major party supporters do not have a candidate of their choice on the ballot as well as increase the opportunities for minority party candidates.

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