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Expanding the number of candidates who advance out of the primary from two to four substantially reduces the opportunity for wonky results.

EXPLAINER

The Two Top Ways to Improve Top-Two Elections

October 2023

Background

When [Washington](#) state voters approved Initiative 872 (I-872) in 2004, the state became the first in the nation to adopt so-called “top-two” elections. In 2010, [California](#) followed suit, and now nearly 50 million American voters elect their leaders using a top-two system. Under top-two voting, all candidates self-identify with a party and appear together on the same primary ballot, with the two most popular candidates squaring off head-to-head in the general election. As explored in scholarship from [R Street](#) and [Unite America](#), a top-two system gives voters more options in primary elections, generates more competition and provides the opportunity for meaningful input for all voters, regardless of party.

But top-two voting also comes with trade-offs. Candidates from the majority party can split support among primary voters, elevating two candidates from the minority party who are not well aligned with the voters of the district. Alternatively, in overwhelmingly partisan districts, two majority-party candidates may advance to the general election, leading to hapless write-in campaigns that reduce the influence of minority-party voters.

Americans concerned about the “[primary problem](#)” and its impact on our polarized politics should look to top-two voting as an improvement on traditional partisan primary elections. And the shortcomings of this approach could be remedied by looking to [Alaska](#) and implementing two simple changes: increasing the number of primary winners and using an instant runoff.

Increasing the Number of Primary Winners from Two to Four

Expanding the number of candidates who advance out of the primary from two to four substantially reduces the opportunity for wonky results.



For example, top-two voting [allows](#) for the majority-party candidates to split the primary vote, leading to two minority-party candidates advancing to the general election.



When that occurs, the two candidates who advance to the general election ballot do not align with a majority of voters’ political interests.



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With four candidates in the general election, one more modification would be necessary to ensure that a candidate has more than just meager support: an instant-runoff election.

Contact us

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In the other direction, when two majority-party candidates advance, minority-party voters have no one on the general ballot who shares their interests and may resort to choosing a long-shot [write-in](#) candidate.



When four candidates move on, voters are much more likely to have options from both major parties—or even third parties—in the general election, while keeping the flexibility for voters to choose from among all candidates in the primary.

Using an Instant-Runoff Election in the General Election to Ensure a Majority Winner

With four candidates in the general election, one more modification would be necessary to ensure that a candidate has more than just meager support: an instant-runoff election.



Under an instant runoff, voters rank the candidates in order of preference. If no candidate earns a majority, the candidate with the lowest support is eliminated, their votes are reallocated to their voters' second choice and the totals are recalculated. This process continues until a candidate earns a majority of support in a round, ensuring that the winner is broadly popular among voters.



Instant runoffs not only help prevent unpopular winners, but they also ensure that voters of all persuasions can show support for their preferred candidates without worrying that “splitting the vote” will harm their partisan interests.



At the same time, they encourage candidates to run campaigns that appeal to a majority of voters. The result is more freedom and choice for voters with healthier incentives for politicians.

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