



Reimagining the Ballot: A Comprehensive Look at Primary and General Election Systems

By Ryan Williamson and Matt Germer

Several states are exploring reforms for their 2024 elections to promote greater choice and competition in both phases of their electoral processes.

Executive Summary

The existing party structure in the United States significantly undermines competition in both primary and general elections, resulting in political gridlock and inadequate representation of voter’s viewpoints. In response, several states are exploring reforms for their 2024 elections to promote greater choice and competition in both phases of their electoral processes. As these states consider changes, it is vital that they tailor potential reforms to the unique characteristics of their state to maximize participation and representation within the complexities of electoral processes.

This paper discusses the critical role primary elections play in democratic participation and candidate selection, highlighting the various primary systems—including open, closed, and blanket primaries—and exploring the unique advantages and drawbacks of each. It then delves into the implications of having different numbers of candidates in general elections. It concludes by emphasizing that different electoral systems may better fit specific regional contexts and that blanket primaries combined with ranked-choice voting in the general election can significantly enhance democratic engagement.

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Introduction

Elections within the United States—both primary and general—are marked by a lack of viable competition because of our entrenched two-party duopoly. This lack of competition leads to partisan gridlock, limited policy innovation, and suboptimal representation of diverse viewpoints within the electorate.¹ Therefore, many states are looking to implement reforms that promote greater choice, competition, and representation in the political system.²

Specifically, there is increasing momentum around potential changes to primary election systems in several states.³ Some states are contemplating reforms to open up partisan primaries in an effort to engage more voters and address drawbacks of the existing system.⁴ Others are exploring changes that would make their processes more restrictive.⁵ Importantly, changes at the primary level also have significant impacts on who ultimately runs in and wins general elections in November.

Open primaries allow voters to choose which party's primary they want to participate in without requiring the voter to register as a member of that party. Closed primaries allow voters to cast ballots only if they have registered with that party. Blanket primaries negate the need for party registration by including all candidates for each office on the same ballot, regardless of affiliation.

The diverse approaches being considered across the country highlight the complex considerations involved in balancing party interests, voter engagement, and the integrity of the electoral process. Given the increased attention to electoral systems, this study explores the different ways primaries and general elections can be designed and conducted and discusses the relative merits of each.

Designing Better Primary Elections

Designing better primary electoral systems is crucial for states aiming to foster a robust democracy that truly represents the diversity of citizens' voices. Primaries serve as a mechanism for selecting candidates and ensuring that those who represent the party in general elections have the support of the party's electorate. They promote democratic participation by involving party members or the general public in the candidate-selection process. They also serve as a proving ground by helping candidates refine their campaign messages and organizational strengths, and by providing a transparent and accountable alternative to behind-the-scenes selections by party elites. Additionally, they engage voters early, which can boost



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1. Katherine M. Gehl and Michael E. Porter, "Why Competition in the Politics Industry Is Failing America," Harvard Business School, September 2017. <https://www.hbs.edu/competitiveness/Documents/why-competition-in-the-politics-industry-is-failing-america.pdf>.
2. Gloria Rebecca Gomez, "Proponents of open primaries ballot measure sue over 'misleading' description of it," *AZ Mirror*, July 18, 2024. <https://azmirror.com/2024/07/18/proponents-of-open-primaries-ballot-measure-sue-over-misleading-description-of-it>; Andrew Kenney, "One of the biggest changes ever proposed for Colorado elections is on a journey to this November's ballot," *CPR News*, June 11, 2024. <https://www.cpr.org/2024/06/11/initiative-310-ranked-choice-voting-colorado-elections-journey-to-november-ballot>; Eric Dietrich, "Backers say they have signatures to qualify nonpartisan primary and majority vote initiatives for fall ballot," *Montana Free Press*, June 12, 2024. <https://montanafreepress.org/2024/06/12/ci-126-ci-127-backers-say-they-have-signatures-to-qualify-initiatives-for-fall-ballot>; Tabitha Mueller and Eric Neugeboren, "After restructuring, are Nevada ranked-choice ballot measure backers ready for 2024?," *The Daily Indy*, May 7, 2024. <https://thenevadaindependent.com/article/after-restructuring-is-nevada-ranked-choice-ballot-measure-ready-for-election>; Jack Dura, "'Top two' primary election measure makes South Dakota's November ballot," *The Associated Press*, May 21, 2024. <https://apnews.com/article/south-dakota-open-primary-ballot-initiative-cdc43a6cee1447fd53d06de79bfb325d>.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.
5. Adam Kuckuk and Ben Williams, "With Super Tuesday Looming, States Amend Their Primaries," National Conference of State Legislatures, Feb. 26, 2024. <https://www.ncsl.org/state-legislatures-news/details/with-super-tuesday-looming-states-amend-their-primaries>.

turnout, as well as bring diverse ideas and perspectives to the forefront, which enriches policy discussions.

The various primary election systems that can be considered, such as open, closed, and blanket, influence the selection of candidates and the overall political landscape. Each type of primary brings its own set of advantages and disadvantages, impacting the competitiveness and inclusivity of the electoral process. Another factor to consider when redesigning a state's electoral system is the number of general election candidates that will be presented to voters. This can vary significantly in different electoral systems, with races featuring two, three, four, or more candidates, each of which present different electoral dynamics. The varying effects of these factors on voter turnout, campaign strategies, and political discourse underscores the need for thoughtful consideration when designing primary systems.⁶

When it comes to determining winners, the choice between plurality winners, runoff elections, and ranked-choice voting is also a crucial consideration, as each option has tradeoffs between simplicity and representation. Winners under a plurality system achieve victory simply by earning the highest percentage of votes, even if a majority of voters supported other candidates. For example, during North Carolina's 13th congressional district Republican primary in 2016, future Senator Ted Budd won with only 20 percent of the vote; the other 80 percent was split among 16 other candidates.⁷ Conversely, runoff elections guarantee a majority winner. If more than two candidates are running and no candidate wins a majority of votes, then the top two candidates run in another election weeks later to decide the winner. Ranked-choice voting operates similarly to runoff elections, but votes are cast in a single election on a single ballot and voters rank-order the candidates from most to least preferred. If a candidate wins a majority of first-place votes in the first round, then they are declared to victor. If not, then the last place candidate is dropped from consideration and those who cast ballots for that candidate have their vote reallocated to their second choice. This process continues until a candidate wins more than 50 percent of the vote. This is why ranked-choice voting is sometimes also referred to as an instant runoff. Ranked-choice voting offers the potential for a more nuanced approach than plurality voting, capturing broader support among voters, albeit with added complexity.⁸

Competition and representation stand at the forefront of these debates in states that are considering redesigning their primary systems, and this work is necessary to foster healthy competition among candidates and ensure a thriving democracy.⁹ It is also important to recognize that different electoral systems may be more suitable for different regions or political contexts.



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6. Joshua Ferrer and Michael Thorning, "2022 Primary Turnout: Trends and Lessons for Boosting Participation," Bipartisan Policy Center, March 2023. https://bipartisanpolicy.org/download/?file=/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/Primary-Turnout-Report_R03.pdf.

7. "North Carolina's 13th Congressional District election, 2016," Ballotpedia, last accessed Sept. 4, 2024. https://ballotpedia.org/North_Carolina%27s_13th_Congressional_District_election_2016; "Ranked Choice Voting," FairVote, last accessed Sept. 10, 2024. <https://fairvote.org/our-reforms/ranked-choice-voting>.

8. Ashley Lopez, "The U.S. has a 'primary problem,' say advocates who call for new election systems," NPR, Sept. 18, 2023. <https://www.npr.org/2023/09/18/1199318220/nonpartisan-open-primaries-explainer>.

9. Ashley Lopez, "The U.S. has a 'primary problem,' say advocates who call for new election systems," NPR, Sept. 18, 2023. <https://www.npr.org/2023/09/18/1199318220/nonpartisan-open-primaries-explainer>.

Blanket Primaries: An Alternative to Traditional Systems

In electoral policy, much attention is given to the dichotomy of open and closed primaries as they represent two distinct approaches to the primary election process, each with its own set of rules and implications for voter participation and party dynamics. In an open primary, voters are not required to declare affiliation with a specific political party to participate in the primary election. This means that voters can choose which party's primary they wish to vote in, regardless of their own party affiliation or lack thereof. Open primaries generally aim to encourage broader participation and allow independent or nonaffiliated voters to have a say in the selection of candidates.¹⁰

In contrast, closed primaries restrict participation to registered members of the party holding the primary. Voters are required to be affiliated with the party to take part in the primary election process. Closed primaries are often seen as a way for parties to maintain control over their candidate-selection process and prevent interference from voters who do not align with the party's principles.

The choice between open and closed primaries can have significant implications for the political landscape. Open primaries can lead to more moderate candidates being selected, as they must appeal to a broader spectrum of voters, including independents and moderates from other parties. As one expert states, "legislators elected in open primaries also show some evidence of attenuated extremity."¹¹ One prominent example is that of House member Dan Newhouse (R-Wash.). In 2014, Newhouse defeated the more conservative Clint Didier, and in 2022 became the only Republican who voted to impeach former President Donald J. Trump who then went on to defeat a Trump-backed primary candidate.¹²

Closed primaries, on the other hand, may produce candidates who cater to the ideological base of the party, potentially leading to more polarized outcomes. Economists note that, "US representatives from states with closed primaries take policy positions that are furthest from their district's estimated median voter's ideal positions."¹³ An example of this emerged from the 2010 Republican Senate primary in Nevada. In that primary, Sharron Angle, a candidate with strong support from the Tea Party movement, campaigned on a platform that included conservative positions on issues such as limited government, opposition to the Affordable Care Act, and stricter immigration policies.¹⁴ Her stances resonated with the more conservative base of the electorate, and her victory in the closed primary over more moderate Republican candidates such as Sue Lowden and Danny Tarkanian demonstrated the influence that the party's ideological base can have



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10. Carlo Macomber, "Nonpartisan Primaries Increase Primary Turnout," Unite America Institute, June 28, 2024. <https://www.uniteamerica.org/articles/nonpartisan-primaries-increase-primary-turnout>.
11. Christian R. Grose, "Reducing Legislative Polarization: Top-Two and Open Primaries Are Associated with More Moderate Legislators," *Journal of Political Institutions and Political Economy* 1:2 (June 2020), pp. 267-287. <https://ideas.repec.org/a/now/jnlpip/113.00000012.html>.
12. 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/>; Emily Brooks, "Dan Newhouse, House Republican who impeached Trump, wins reelection," *The Hill*, Nov. 9, 2022. <https://thehill.com/homenews/campaign/3723502-dan-newhouse-house-republican-who-impeached-trump-wins-reelection>.
13. Elisabeth R. Gerber and Rebecca B. Morton, "Primary Election Systems and Representation," *The Journal of Law, Economics, and Organization* 14:2 (October 1998), pp. 304-324. <https://ideas.repec.org/a/oup/jleorg/v14y1998i2p304-24.html>.
14. Michael Mishak, "Sharron Angle wins; Harry Reid gets race he wanted," *Las Vegas Sun*, June 9, 2010. <https://lasvegassun.com/news/2010/jun/09/angles-win-has-reids-touch>.

in a closed primary system. However, in the general election, Angle's extreme positions were a significant factor in her defeat by Harry Reid, who managed to win re-election in a tough political environment for Democrats.¹⁵

A lesser-known alternative to open and closed primaries that merits serious consideration is the blanket, or nonpartisan, primary. Such primaries allow voters to select candidates from any party for each office. Proponents argue that this system does not disenfranchise taxpaying independents, who often feel excluded from the primary elections in states with strict party affiliation rules.¹⁶ By allowing independents to participate, blanket primaries enhance voter choice and engagement, which could potentially increase overall turnout. This inclusive approach also creates incentives for candidates to moderate their positions to appeal to a broader constituency, which could reduce political polarization. Moreover, in noncompetitive districts, blanket primaries ensure that all citizens have a meaningful say in the electoral process, rather than feeling sidelined by the dominant party's choice. This primary system has the added benefit of increasing competition and decreasing the number of unopposed general election races, fostering a healthier democratic environment where candidates are more responsive to their electorate. Indeed, in one examination of the implementation of the top-four system in Alaska, which utilizes a blanket primary, one expert explains that "Alaska succeeded in increasing the number of candidates running in the general election and overall competition for legislative seats."¹⁷ The study also goes on to state that, "under the new system, candidates who ran civil campaigns that appealed to broader audiences were more likely to succeed."¹⁸

Despite these advantages, critics of blanket primaries raise several concerns. One argument against this system is that it weakens party influence, turning candidates' party membership into more of a signaling mechanism for voters than a true membership in an organization, which could potentially undermine the cohesion and clarity of party platforms.¹⁹ A second issue arises from the open nature of the ballot, which introduces the risk of strategic voting, where individuals might vote insincerely to influence the outcome in favor of a less competitive candidate from the opposing party.²⁰ This can generate a misalignment that can then lead to a Congress where representatives are less predictable and less accountable to a consistent set of policy goals. For example, in the 2012 California congressional elections for the 31st District, the state's top-two primary system led to an unexpected outcome. Despite the district leaning Democratic, the presence of multiple Democratic candidates split their vote, while Republicans strategically supported two candidates: incumbent Gary Miller and Bob Dutton.²¹ This resulted in both Republicans advancing to the general election, leaving the more numerous



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15. Ibid.

16. "Not Invited to the Party Primary: Independent Voters and the Problem with Closed Primaries," Unite America Institute, February 2024. <https://www.uniteamericainstitute.org/research/not-invited-to-the-party-primary-independent-voters-and-the-problem-with-closed-primaries>.

17. Ryan Williamson, "Evaluating the Effects of the Top-Four System in Alaska," *R Street Shorts* No. 122, January 2023. https://www.rstreet.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/REALFINAL_policy-short-no-122-no-embargo.pdf.

18. Ibid.

19. Frank DeVito, "Open Primaries and Closed Debate," *The American Conservative*, Feb. 22, 2023. <https://www.theamericanconservative.com/open-primaries-and-closed-debate>.

20. "Open and Closed Primaries," FairVote, last accessed Sept. 4, 2024. <https://fairvote.org/archives/open-and-closed-primaries>.

21. Joshua Alvarez, "In CA-31, Democrats Nearly Repeat 2012 Mistake in Primary," *Independent Voter News*, June 9, 2014. <https://ivn.us/2014/06/09/ca-31-democrats-nearly-repeat-2012-mistake-primary>.

Democratic voters without a candidate. Consequently, Miller won in a district that might have otherwise voted for a Democrat.²²

Taken as a whole, the merits of blanket primaries likely outweigh the concerns. By enfranchising independents, enhancing voter choice, and potentially reducing polarization, blanket primaries offer a promising alternative to the traditional open and closed primary systems. While concerns about party influence and electoral complexity are valid, the overall benefits to democratic engagement and competition in creating a more inclusive, moderate, and responsive political landscape present a compelling case for their wider adoption.

Weighing the Merits of Different Numbers of General Election Candidates

In evaluating electoral systems, one critical aspect is the number of candidates presented to voters in the general election. This section will explore the relative merits of having two, three, four, or more candidates on the ballot, highlighting the benefits and drawbacks of each scenario.

Two Candidates

In elections with just two candidates, one from each of the major parties, the winner typically emerges with broad support because the majority of voters tend to prefer one of the major parties over the other.²³ This setup minimizes the risk of “spoiler” effects caused by third-party or independent candidates, which can influence the election outcome by drawing votes away from the major-party candidate who would have won in a head-to-head contest with the other major-party candidate and, in turn, elevate the less popular major-party candidate. A prominent example occurred in the 2020 Georgia Senate election, with the presence of Libertarian candidate Shane Hazel. His candidacy raised concerns about potential spoiler effects in the contest between Republican incumbent David Perdue and Democratic challenger Jon Ossoff.²⁴ Hazel attracted 2.3 percent of the vote, potentially drawing support away from the incumbent Republican.²⁵ With a highly competitive race where each vote mattered, the fear was that Hazel might siphon off enough votes from Perdue to prevent him from reaching the required majority of votes to avoid a runoff election. Ultimately, Perdue secured 49.8 percent of the vote, leading to a runoff between the two candidates in January 2021, which Ossoff won.²⁶ Had Perdue won only a slight percentage of Hazel’s votes, he would have won outright and negated the need for a runoff entirely.²⁷

However, this simplicity also has its drawbacks. In districts where one party dominates, it is not uncommon to see two candidates from the same party competing against each other in the general election. While this scenario guarantees



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22. Ibid.

23. “Dubious Democracy 2022,” FairVote, last accessed Sept. 4, 2024. <https://fairvote.org/report/dubious-democracy-2022>.

24. Alana Wise, “Jon Ossoff Wins Georgia Runoff, Handing Democrats Senate Control,” NPR, Jan. 6, 2021. <https://www.npr.org/2021/01/06/952417689/democrat-jon-ossoff-claims-victory-over-david-perdue-in-georgia-runoff>.

25. Ibid.

26. Ibid.

27. Griffin Connolly, “Republican Senate majority hangs in the balance as second Georgia race heads to runoff,” *Independent*, Nov. 7, 2020. <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/us-election-2020/georgia-senate-majority-runoff-election-perdue-ossoff-b1658141.html>.

a majority winner, it can lead to diminished voter engagement and reduced options for constituents. When voters feel limited in their choices, they may become less motivated to participate in the democratic process.²⁸

Moreover, the ideological homogeneity of the underlying constituency in these one-party-dominant districts can sometimes lead to a moderation of candidates' positions. With the need to appeal to a wider range of voters to secure the majority vote, candidates may adjust their platforms to be more centrist and accommodating to diverse viewpoints within the dominant party.²⁹ This can result in candidates who are more moderate in their policies and less extreme in their views, as they seek to attract a broad base of support. However, these benefits may be muted by voter behavior in practice. For example, a minority-party voter may choose to abstain from that election or may choose a long-shot write-in candidate. In so doing, a message is sent to the dominant party that outreach to minority-party voters may be a waste of time and resources.

Three Candidates

Incorporating a third candidate into the general election introduces a new dynamic by offering voters additional choices beyond the traditional two major-party candidates. This expansion of options allows candidates from various factions and ideological backgrounds to compete meaningfully for voter support, leading to a more diverse and representative pool of contenders.

The ideological homogeneity of the underlying constituency plays a crucial role in shaping how voters respond to this increased competition.³⁰ In areas where voters have diverse political views, the presence of a third candidate can mirror this diversity and create more options that resonate with a broader spectrum of the electorate. This can enhance voter engagement and turnout, as constituents feel more represented by the expanded range of candidates.³¹

Moreover, the opportunity for different factions within the same party to compete can promote healthy internal debate and encourage a robust exchange of ideas. By allowing factions to put forward their preferred candidates, the electoral process becomes more reflective of the party's diverse membership. This internal competition can lead to a stronger, more responsive, and more representative party over time.³²

However, introducing a third candidate also brings potential challenges. The increased number of contenders can create confusion among voters and complicate decision-making.³³ Decision paralysis is a common phenomenon



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28. Amelia Thomson-DeVeaux et al., "Why Many Americans Don't Vote," *FiveThirtyEight*, Oct. 26, 2020. <https://projects.fivethirtyeight.com/non-voters-poll-2020-election>.

29. Todd Donovan and Caroline Tolbert, "Civility in Ranked-Choice Voting Elections: Does Evidence Fit the Normative Narrative?," *Journal of Representative Democracy* 60:4 (June 4, 2023), pp. 1-18. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00344893.2023.2219267>.

30. Stephen Ansolabehere et al., "Purple America," *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 2:20 (Spring 2006), pp. 97-188. <https://pubs.aeaweb.org/doi/pdf/10.1257/jep.20.2.97>.

31. "Why these voters are considering third-party options in the 2024 presidential race," ABC News, March 8, 2024. <https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/voters-party-option-2024-presidential-race/story?id=107681896>. William Cross and André Blais, "Who selects the party leader?," *Party Politics* 18:2 (2012), pp. 127-150. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354068810382935>.

32. William Cross and André Blais, "Who selects the party leader?," *Party Politics* 18:2 (2012), pp. 127-150. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354068810382935>.

33. Saul Cunow et al., "Less is more: The paradox of choice in voting behavior," *Electoral Studies* 69 (February 2021). <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.electstud.2020.102230>.

in which an individual is unable to decide when faced with several options.³⁴ Elections are not immune from this, which could lead to voters opting out of the process entirely. Additionally, in a pure plurality system where the candidate with the most votes wins, the presence of a third candidate raises the specter of “spoiler” situations where votes may be split in a way that distorts the election outcome.

To address these challenges, alternative mechanisms for determining a winner, like runoffs or ranked-choice voting, may be necessary. These systems provide a structured way for voters to express their preferences among multiple candidates, reducing the likelihood of spoiler effects and ensuring that the eventual winner has broad support.

Four or More Candidates

As Alaska’s recent electoral system shift demonstrated, expanding the field to four candidates in a general election builds on the advantages noted above of having three candidates, while introducing additional complexity and nuance. With this higher number of candidates on a ballot, multiple candidates could represent distinct factions within the dominant party of a district, offering voters a more granular selection of political viewpoints and policy stances. For example, in their analysis of the 2022 election cycle in Alaska, two political analysts found that “half of all 2022 general election races included two or more candidates from the same major party.”³⁵ This intra-party competition can spark vigorous debates, highlight differing policy priorities, and present voters with a broad range of ideas from within a single party. While this may introduce some internal discord, it also supports the vitality of democratic discourse and has the potential to provide voters with more nuanced options that better align with their beliefs.

Expanding the candidate pool beyond four in a general election builds on the earlier arguments for three and four candidates but magnifies the challenges and benefits. The sheer number of contenders could overwhelm voters and lead to confusion as individuals navigate a crowded field of options, each candidate advocating for distinct policy positions and visions for governance.³⁶ To overcome decision paralysis and cast a ballot, voters will likely need to rely on some sort of heuristic short cut, such as voting for whoever appears first on the ballot.³⁷ Normally, partisanship is a sufficient indicator, but with a broader range of choices, voters may turn to other options such as name recognition, which can be influenced with increased celebrity or campaign spending. Managing a large candidate pool also raises logistical hurdles, including ballot-design considerations, debate-organization issues, and adequate voter access to comprehensive information about each contender.

The Competing Methods of Winner Selection

The method of selecting a primary election winner plays a crucial role in shaping democratic outcomes. This section will explore the competing merits of three



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34. Ibid.

35. Rachel Leven and Tyler Fisher, “Alaska’s Election Model,” Unite America Institute, October 2023. <https://docsend.com/view/hmamnd934tzjjt22>.

36. Cunow et al. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.electstud.2020.102230>.

37. Marc Meredith and Yuval Salant, “On the Causes and Consequences of Ballot Order Effects,” *Political Behavior* 35 (Jan. 6, 2012), pp. 175-197. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11109-011-9189-2>.

primary methods: plurality voting, runoff with top-two voting, and ranked-choice voting, as each offers distinct advantages and challenges.

Plurality Voting

The plurality method, a straightforward electoral system where the candidate with the most votes wins, is most notable for its simplicity and ease of comprehension, which makes it an attractive option for many states. However, this system carries inherent vulnerabilities, particularly regarding “spoiler” outcomes, where the presence of a third candidate can split the vote among ideologically similar candidates. For example, one analysis concludes, “Libertarian spoiler candidates have cost Republicans prominent races on several occasions.”³⁸ This division can lead to a winner who lacks broad support and, consequently, may not truly represent the majority preference of the electorate. Such scenarios often breed dissatisfaction among voters, as the winning candidate secures victory without a clear consensus from a significant portion of the electorate.³⁹

Even in scenarios with only two candidates, the winner-takes-all approach can contribute to the exacerbation of political polarization, as candidates may prioritize energizing their core support base rather than reaching across ideological divides to build broader coalitions. This emphasis on appealing to a narrow segment of the electorate can deepen divisions and hinder the development of consensus-driven governance.

For example, in Maine’s 2nd Congressional District, the 2018 election would have been decided differently under plurality rules.⁴⁰ In the initial vote count, Bruce Poliquin, the incumbent Republican, received the most first-choice votes but did not secure a majority.⁴¹ Under Maine’s ranked-choice voting system, because no candidate had a majority, the candidate with the fewest votes was eliminated, and their votes were redistributed based on the voters’ second choices.⁴² After the ranked-choice tabulation, Jared Golden, the Democrat, emerged as the winner with a majority of votes.⁴³

Runoff with Top-Two Voting

Runoff elections serve as a mechanism to secure a majority winner, reinforcing the legitimacy of the elected candidate and providing a clearer mandate for governance. This two-round system typically involves an initial election, followed by a subsequent runoff election between the top two candidates if no single contender achieves an outright majority in the first round. By ensuring that the winning candidate garners majority support, runoff elections aim to enhance the representativeness and accountability of the elected officeholder.

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38. Harrison Lavelle and Armin Thomas, “Which Key Race Outcomes Might Libertarians Have Changed?,” Split Ticket, Feb. 10, 2023. <https://split-ticket.org/2023/02/10/which-key-race-outcomes-might-libertarians-have-changed>

39. Rachel Hutchinson, “Plurality Winners in Primaries Hurt Parties, New Paper Finds,” FairVote, Feb. 13, 2024. <https://fairvote.org/plurality-winners-in-primaries-hurt-parties-new-paper-finds>.

40. “Maine Election Results: Second House District,” *The New York Times*, Jan. 28, 2019. <https://www.nytimes.com/elections/results/maine-house-district-2>.

41. Ibid.

42. Ibid.

43. Ibid.

While runoff elections offer the advantage of consolidating support behind a single candidate, they also entail notable drawbacks. The additional costs associated with organizing and conducting a second round of voting place a financial burden on states or jurisdictions, potentially straining resources and taxpayer funds. Several analyses have calculated that runoff elections cost states several million dollars.⁴⁴ Moreover, candidates participating in runoff campaigns are required to raise and expend more money to sustain extended electoral efforts, increasing the financial barriers to entry for candidates and potentially favoring incumbents or well-funded campaigns.

Runoff elections can also contribute to voter fatigue and reduced turnout in the second round, as some voters may feel disenchanted or disengaged after participating in the initial election. The delay in finalizing election results and concerns over electoral security in managing multiple rounds of voting further complicate this type of system. These logistical challenges and potential drawbacks diminish the appeal of runoff elections, despite their ability to guarantee majority support and a decisive electoral outcome.

Ranked-Choice Voting

Ranked-choice voting offers a distinctive approach to elections that ensures the selection of a candidate with majority support while mitigating the spoiler effect often seen in plurality systems. In ranked-choice systems, voters can rank candidates in order of preference, and ballot tallies are conducted in multiple rounds, reallocating votes from less popular candidates until one contender secures a majority of votes. This iterative process incentivizes candidates to appeal to a broader range of voters and cultivate positive campaigning strategies, given the importance of securing second- and subsequent-choice preferences from electorates.

One of the primary benefits of ranked-choice voting is its potential to foster the formation of broader coalitions and encourage candidates to engage in more inclusive and issue-focused campaigns. By requiring candidates to reach beyond their core support base and cultivate cross-party appeal, this approach can promote unity and consensus-building in electoral contests, ultimately leading to outcomes that better reflect the diverse preferences of the electorate. Additionally, it has the capacity to enhance voter engagement and choice by providing individuals with a more nuanced and participatory voting experience, where their full range of preferences can be reflected in the election results.

Despite these benefits, the implementation of ranked-choice voting is not without complexities and challenges. The system requires substantial voter education to ensure that constituents understand how to utilize ranked preferences effectively and grasp the mechanics of the voting process.⁴⁵ Furthermore, adopting ranked-choice voting may require updates to voting equipment and infrastructure



Ranked-choice voting requires substantial voter education to ensure that constituents understand how to utilize ranked preferences effectively and grasp the mechanics of the voting process.

44. Ryan Williamson, "Instant runoffs offer states a chance to increase security and save money," *The Hill*, July 14, 2022. <https://thehill.com/opinion/congress-blog/3559483-instant-runoffs-offer-states-a-chance-to-increase-security-and-save-money>; David de la Fuente and Deb Otis, "High Costs and Low Turnout for U.S. Runoff Elections," *Third Way*, July 21, 2021. <https://www.thirdway.org/memo/high-costs-and-low-turnout-for-u-s-runoff-elections>; Ryan Williamson, "States Like Georgia Should Stop Paying So Much for Elections," *DC Journal*, Dec. 4, 2022. <https://dcjournal.com/states-like-georgia-should-stop-paying-so-much-for-elections>; Ryan Williamson, "Ranked-Choice Voting Could Improve Alabama's Primaries," *R Street Institute*, June 28, 2022.

45. Jeanette Lee, "How Community Groups Can Shape Alaska's Success on Ranked Choice Voting," *Sightline Institute*, Jan. 7, 2022. <https://www.sightline.org/2022/01/07/how-community-groups-can-shape-alaskas-success-on-ranked-choice-voting>.

to accommodate the unique tabulation process.⁴⁶ Because of these issues, it is unpopular—even prohibited—in certain states.

Moving Forward: Ballot Initiatives in 2024

With these factors in mind, it is important to emphasize that primary election reform does not have a one-size-fits-all solution. States should carefully consider which system would benefit their voters most.

One promising, current ballot initiative is Idaho’s attempt to institute a blanket primary with instant runoff voting.⁴⁷ Many elections in Idaho are noncompetitive, or even uncontested, affairs.⁴⁸ Similar to the changes enacted in Alaska, this move would benefit Idahoans by encouraging more candidates with different perspectives to run for office. It would also shift the competition between candidates from low-turnout primary elections toward high-engagement general elections. Montana and Colorado are considering a similar change that would reap the same benefits.⁴⁹ However, these two states have a history of splitting tickets, with voters supporting candidates from both major political parties.⁵⁰ A shift to a blanket primary with an instant runoff would allow that tradition to carry over into the primary phase of the electoral process.

South Dakota is taking a somewhat different approach. This fall, voters will decide whether they want to move away from a closed primary system and implement a top-two system similar to that of California and Washington.⁵¹ This avoids the decision about whether to employ runoffs or ranked-choice voting within the state. More importantly, it allows the state’s second largest voting group—unaffiliated and independent voters—to actively participate in the process.⁵²

Nevada’s Question 3 would institute the same blanket primary and ranked-choice voting as outlined earlier, but it would allow up to five candidates to proceed to the general election.⁵³ Nevada believes that that five candidates represent the “sweet spot” for ensuring “healthy, diverse competition,” while also avoiding voter confusion.⁵⁴ No other state has implemented this specific system before, so, if adopted, it could provide new insights for future reform efforts.



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46. “Ranked Choice Voting in Practice: Implementation Considerations for Policymakers,” National Conference of State Legislatures, Sept. 28, 2022. <https://www.ncsl.org/elections-and-campaigns/ranked-choice-voting-in-practice-implementation-considerations-for-policymakers>.
47. Iark Corbin, “Having exceeded goal, Idaho open primary supporters submit final signatures for verification,” *Idaho Capital Sun*, May 1, 2024. <https://idahocapitalsun.com/2024/05/01/having-exceeded-goal-idaho-open-primary-supporters-submit-final-signatures-for-verification>.
48. 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>.
49. Andrew Kenney, “One of the biggest changes ever proposed for Colorado elections is on a journey to this November’s ballot,” *CPR News*, June 11, 2024. <https://www.cpr.org/2024/06/11/initiative-310-ranked-choice-voting-colorado-elections-journey-to-november-ballot>; Eric Dietrich, “Backers say they have signatures to qualify nonpartisan primary and majority vote initiatives for fall ballot,” *Montana Free Press*, June 12, 2024. <https://montanafreepress.org/2024/06/12/ci-126-ci-127-backers-say-they-have-signatures-to-qualify-initiatives-for-fall-ballot>.
50. Nicole Girtten, “Montana GOP says proposed primary change ‘destructive,’ advocates say it tempers extremism,” *Daily Montanan*, April 4, 2024. <https://dailymontan.com/2024/04/04/montana-republicans-says-proposed-primary-change-destructive-advocates-say-would-temper-extremism>; Ernest Luning, “Is Colorado’s habit of splitting the ticket a relic of its political past?,” *Colorado Politics*, Oct. 21, 2022. https://www.coloradopolitics.com/columnists/trail-mix-is-colorados-habit-of-splitting-the-ticket-a-relic-of-its-political-past/article_899041e2-513b-11ed-9b9f-431c73a72ac0.html.
51. Jack Dura, “‘Top two’ primary election measure makes South Dakota’s November ballot,” *The Associated Press*, May 21, 2024. <https://apnews.com/article/south-dakota-open-primary-ballot-initiative-cdc43a6cee1447fd53d06de79bfb325d>.
52. Meghan Downey, “South Dakotans to vote on instituting top-two primary system,” *The Fulcrum*, June 4, 2024. <https://thefulcrum.us/electoral-reforms/open-primaries-south-dakota>.
53. Tabitha Mueller and Eric Neugeboren, “After restructuring, are Nevada ranked-choice ballot measure backers ready for 2024?,” *The Daily Indy*, May 7, 2024. <https://thenevadaindependent.com/article/after-restructuring-is-nevada-ranked-choice-ballot-measure-ready-for-election>.
54. “Final Five Voting,” *The Institute for Political Innovation*, last accessed Sept. 4, 2024. <https://political-innovation.org/final-five-voting>.

Understanding and weighing the tradeoffs of Nevada’s approach is especially important for Arizona, as their potential ballot initiative would institute a blanket primary, but it would not mandate ranked-choice voting. Instead, Arizona state officials will have the flexibility to increase the pool of candidates for consideration. Lawmakers and the governor would have the ultimate authority to determine the number of candidates that voters can choose from in the general election (up to five for single-member offices like the governorship and seven for multi-member offices like state legislative seats).⁵⁵ Given how competitive the state has been in recent election cycles, the decision on what kind of reform to implement will have significant consequences on who runs, who wins, and how voters feel about the representation they receive as a result.⁵⁶

Conclusion

In exploring the various electoral systems and the number of candidates that can appear on a ballot, it is clear that the structure of an election has significant implications for democratic engagement and outcomes. Blanket primaries, which allow voters to choose any candidate regardless of party affiliation, present a compelling alternative to traditional open and closed primaries. By enfranchising independents and reducing polarization, blanket primaries enhance voter choice and engagement. Despite concerns about weakening party influence and increasing ballot complexity, the benefits of greater inclusivity and moderation make blanket primaries a worthwhile consideration.

The number of candidates in a general election further shapes voter engagement and the nature of political competition. While a two-candidate system simplifies the process and ensures a majority winner, it often limits voter choice and may reduce engagement. Introducing three or more candidates increases the diversity of ideas and level of competition but requires mechanisms like runoffs or ranked-choice voting to avoid spoiler effects and ensure majority support.

Finally, the method of selecting a winner is crucial in ensuring fair and representative outcomes. Plurality voting, while straightforward, often leads to dissatisfaction and polarization. Runoff elections ensure majority support but come with added costs and potential voter fatigue. Ranked-choice voting stands out as the most effective method, eliminating spoiler effects and promoting broader coalitions, although it requires significant resources for education and implementation.

By carefully considering these key factors, electoral systems can be redesigned to foster a more inclusive, competitive, and representative democracy.



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55. Gloria Rebecca Gomez, “Proponents of open primaries ballot measure sue over ‘misleading’ description of it,” *AZ Mirror*, July 18, 2024. <https://azmirror.com/2024/07/18/proponents-of-open-primaries-ballot-measure-sue-over-misleading-description-of-it>.

56. “What to expect in Arizona’s competitive state primaries,” *KTAR News*, July 26, 2024. <https://ktar.com/story/5585791/what-to-expect-in-arizonas-competitive-state-primaries>.