

**PRIMARY RUNOFF  
ELECTIONS AND  
DECLINE IN VOTER  
TURNOUT**



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# Executive Summary

In ten states, a primary runoff election may be held if no candidate wins a majority of the votes cast in their party's primary. States currently using primary runoffs include Alabama, Arkansas, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina (30% threshold), Oklahoma, South Carolina, South Dakota (35% threshold), and Texas. FairVote studied voter turnout in all congressional primary runoffs held since 1994. Below are our key findings.

**Near-Universal Decline in Turnout.** Turnout declined between the primary and the runoff in 240 of the 248 regularly scheduled primary runoffs in the U.S House and U.S. Senate from 1994 to 2020. In other words, in 97% of primary runoff elections fewer people voted in the second round than in the first. The average decline in turnout was 38% and the median decline was 37%.

**Primary-Runoff Timing a Key Factor.** The longer the wait between the initial primary and the runoff, the higher the decrease in voter turnout between elections. Runoffs held between 31 and 40 days after the initial primary have a median turnout decline over three times higher than that of runoffs held between 11 and 20 days after the initial primary.

**Runoffs Nominate Winning Candidates for the General Election.** Of the 248 runoffs in this time period, 79 (32%) resulted in a primary winner who trailed in the first round. Forty-one of these went on to win the general election. These congresspeople had the broadest support in their districts, but would not have been elected to Congress under plurality voting. Despite their faults regarding voter turnout decline, runoffs aim to achieve an important goal: avoiding unrepresentative winners who do not have majority support.

## INTRODUCTION

A primary runoff election is held following the official results of an initial primary election if no candidate surpasses the necessary predetermined threshold for victory (typically 50% of votes, but standards may differ). The runoff is contested by the top two vote-getting candidates from the initial primary and the winner of this two-person race receives the party's nomination.

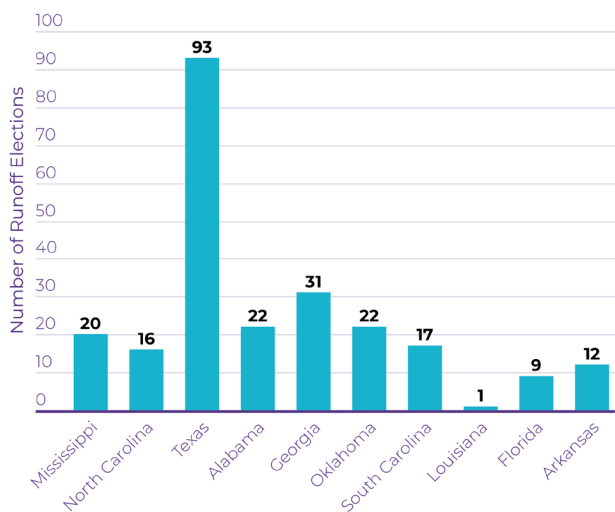
The runoff format is an effective way to understand the nuance of party opinion; voters have the opportunity to vote for the candidate they most strongly support in the first round without potentially wasting their vote. In the event that their candidate advances to the runoff, they have the opportunity to vote for them again. If their candidate does not advance to the runoff, voters can still vote for the runoff candidate who most closely aligns with their preferences. This format increases the likelihood that the winning candidate accurately represents the party and the party's voters, and allows a nominee to advance to the general election with majority support.

Despite the promise of primary runoffs, voter turnout is particularly problematic. Voter awareness of the system coupled with the dip in enthusiasm following the initial primary, has resulted in a trend of voter turnout dropping off in the runoff election. Low turnout in the runoff sullies the results of the election and largely defeats the purpose of holding a runoff election. Across the United States, voter turnout in runoff elections has frequently plunged so low that the legitimacy of the system and the elected officials has been called into question.

## BACKGROUND

The runoff electoral system is not anything new for the United States or the rest of the world. Currently, ten states use primary runoffs at the federal level, while others use the system at a state or municipal level. There is a good deal of variation across the country as some states only use runoffs for certain elections; Vermont, for example, only uses the runoff format in the event of a tie and South Dakota uses runoffs in federal and gubernatorial elections. California and Washington put a different spin on the traditional runoff format and conduct a “Top Two” runoff election, in which the top two vote-getters of the initial non-partisan primary run against each other for the general election, regardless of party. Georgia and Louisiana use the runoff format for the general election in addition to primaries. In 2020, six states held a total of 27 runoff elections. As of the 2020 general election the past 13 election cycles have seen 248 U.S. House and Senate Democratic and Republican nominees who have competed in primary runoff elections. Of this group, 112 were ultimately elected to serve in Washington, and 41 of the 112 would not have won their party’s nomination had the plurality voting system been used.

**Figure 1: Number of Primary Runoffs by State, 1994-2020**



Though runoffs are widely used, there are underlying costs, both monetary and political, that bring into question the viability of the traditional runoff format. The multiple rounds of manual voting drastically increase the administrative logistics and costs, while also necessitating an even higher degree of funding for a campaign to be

successful. On top of the high cost, there is a significant decline in participation for the second election. To understand the role of the runoff in voter-turnout, we analyzed all federal primary runoff elections from 1994 to 2020. This study takes into account the voter-participation of each election and the time-gap between the initial and runoff elections. The time gap between elections has shown to be a major contributor to the sharp decline in voter participation and if this issue is to be addressed the use of runoff elections must be examined.

The purpose of runoff elections is to allow voters to select a candidate with whom they most closely align in the first round, while still advancing nominees who best represent the voters to the general election. In order to combat the turnout issue, however, changes must be made. Instead of completely throwing out the existing runoff format that is used among multiple states, we recommend shifting to an “instant runoff” election, also known as ranked choice voting. This gives voters the chance to express their true preferences, costs significantly less money for jurisdictions and candidates, and shrinks the multiple round election to a single, more accessible election.

## OVERALL TURNOUT DECLINE IN PRIMARY RUNOFFS

**Figure 2: Mean Turnout Decline, 1994-2020**

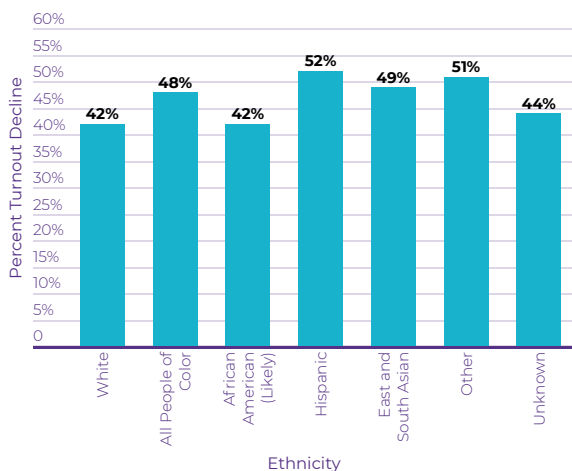


All primary runoff elections but eight from 1994 to 2020

have seen a dropoff in voter turnout from the initial primary election. Over this time period, the average turnout decline was 38.0% and the median turnout decline was 37.3%. The 2018 and 2020 elections had an uptick in primary and general election turnout compared to previous midterm and presidential election years, but the higher rates of voter turnout largely did not reach the primary runoffs. For primary runoffs, 2018 and 2020 had mean turnout declines of 46.1% and 42.9%, respectively. General elections are a national affair; election day in November is the same throughout the country, whereas primaries and especially primary runoffs are scattered across the calendar. Particularly in the case of states that hold their primary runoffs many weeks after the election, without the benefit of a nationwide election atmosphere and coverage, uncoordinated get-out-the-vote campaigns must be built in order to both notify voters of the runoff date and build motivation to return to the polls.

## TURNOUT DECLINE IN COMMUNITIES OF COLOR

**Figure 3: Average Decrease in Turnout by Ethnicity**



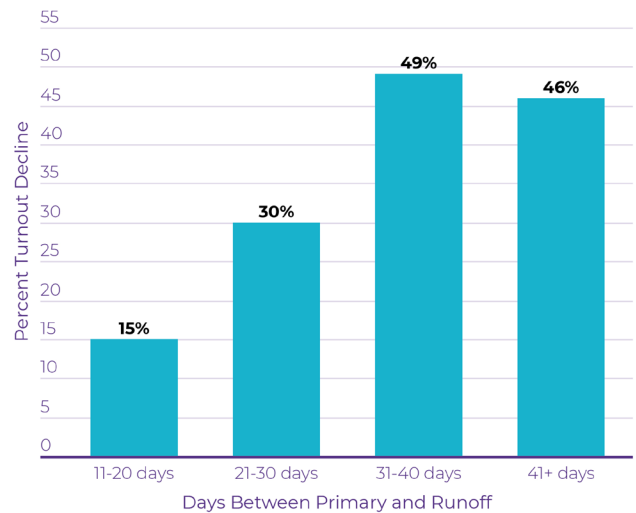
Turnout for all voters nearly always declines from primary to runoff, but there is a more significant drop among people of color. Turnout among people of color decreased by an average of 43.5% in 2020, compared to a 38.3% decrease in white turnout. As such, the percentage of the electorate made up of voters of color declined

from 34.7% in primary elections to 31.2% in runoffs. The Covid-19 Pandemic undoubtedly played a role in voter turnout, but it is notable that runoff turnout declines more significantly for voters of color than for white voters. The disparity in voter turnout reflects many burdens that more heavily affect people of color and as a result the runoff election is a less accurate representation of the electorate.

## GAPS IN DAYS BETWEEN ELECTION ROUNDS

As a result of federal efforts to uphold the voting rights of overseas and military voters, several states have opted to increase the number of days between primary elections and the subsequent runoffs. Extending the gap between elections appears to lead to a drastic decline in voter turnout, particularly in-person voter turnout.

**Figure 4: Median Turnout Decline, by Time Gap Between Elections**



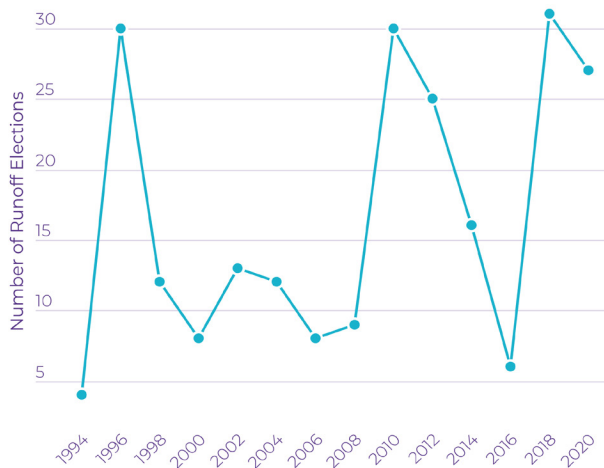
The longer the amount of time between elections, the greater the decline in turnout. Runoffs held between 31 and 40 days after the initial primary have a median turnout decline over three times higher than that of runoffs held between 11 and 20 days after the initial primary.

The clear trend is that as time between elections goes on, voter turnout trends downwards. In election rounds held closer together there is more sustained media coverage and it is easier for candidates to maintain momentum

gained during the campaign for the initial primary election.

## USE OF PRIMARY RUNOFFS OVER TIME

**Figure 5: Primary Runoffs by Year, 1994-2020**



The use of primary runoffs decreased steadily from 2010 to 2016, dropping from 30 runoff elections to 6 in the 6-year period. Though the number of runoffs spiked in 2018, it once again dipped in this 2020 primary election cycle. The sharp changes in usage suggest that though the need for the low-turnout runoffs may be dwindling, the standard plurality method's inability to produce accurate representation has triggered calls to examine other more representative electoral formats.

What is the cause of the uptick in runoff usage over the past decade? Both the 2010 and 2018 elections were midterm elections for first term presidents; the Obama presidency in 2010 and the Trump presidency in 2018 incited a strong push from their opposition in hopes of regaining political momentum lost in the preceding presidential elections. Resultantly, many candidates ran for their party's nomination and more runoffs were held. In 2010, 23 of the 30 primary runoff elections were for Republicans- the opposition party in the 2010 cycle. Likewise, in 2018, the Democratic party opposition held 21 of the 31 primary runoffs. After Democrats regained the House of Representatives in 2018, 17 of the 27 2020 House primary runoffs were held in Republican

primaries. In addition to other-party challengers causing an uptick in primary runoffs, elections for open seats often employ the primary runoff.

Out of the 248 primary runoff elections since 1994, 132 of them were open seat elections and 105 were held for opposition party challengers. A remarkably low percentage of runoffs were held for incumbents (4.4%), indicative of the large number of open seats and the swelling of opposition support particularly in 2010 and 2018.

The increase in runoffs during the 2018 and 2020 election cycles is particularly noteworthy because North Carolina did not hold any runoffs in 2016 and 2018, and held a single primary runoff in 2020. State legislators reduced the vote threshold to trigger a runoff from 50% to 30%, in effect making the runoff almost obsolete. The legislators cited the massive dropoff in turnout (54.6% between 1994-2014) between elections as well as the high cost to jurisdictions around the state. The state's issues with both the high cost and low turnout points to the need for a different electoral system that can address these crucial issues.

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR POLICY MAKERS

Despite the clear problems with primary runoff elections, election data points to specific issues that can be easily remedied. In the 2020 cycle alone, 41% of runoff elections nominated someone other than the winner of the primary election; in a plurality format, the voice of the majority would have been overruled 41% of the time. It is quite clear from this data that the plurality format does a poor job of representing the people and their interests.

Our study demonstrates that though runoff elections do better to elect a majority-representative candidate than a traditional plurality system, turnout in primary runoff elections is consistently lower than the initial primary elections. Furthermore, it demonstrates the detrimental effect of time on the representative capabilities of the two-round primary runoff format. As time goes on, voter turnout decreases; after days the turnout plummets to a point that evokes questions about the benefits of the primary runoff format as it stands now. The link between time and turnout should demonstrate to lawmakers that change is necessary if elections are to be fair and representative of the voting base. Fortunately, there are

alternative runoff election methods that have proven to be more effective in representation and a lower cost to jurisdictions

## RANKED CHOICE VOTING FOR MILITARY AND OVERSEAS VOTERS IN PRIMARY RUNOFF ELECTIONS

For states that intend to maintain two election dates, we recommend holding the elections as close together as possible. Methods for avoiding long gaps in election rounds and effectively accommodating overseas voters are outlined in FairVote's 2011 report [Legality of the Use of Ranked Choice Absentee Ballots for Military and Overseas Voters in Runoff Elections](#). In the recommended system, overseas voters are given the initial primary ballot and a ranked choice ballot in the event that a runoff takes place. If the runoff indeed takes place, the overseas voter's ranked choice ballot determines how their runoff vote is allocated. This practice, currently used in Alabama, Arkansas, Louisiana, Mississippi, and South Carolina, allows overseas voters to participate in the election process and allows election officials to keep the election dates closer together. This does boost voter turnout and ensures military and overseas voters are not denied the right to participate in elections, but there are still more effective methods of ensuring higher voter turnout and lower costs for jurisdictions.

## INSTANT RUNOFF FORM OF RANKED CHOICE VOTING

A far more effective method of primary voting is ranked choice voting, or instant runoff voting for all voters, both home and abroad.

Ranked choice voting allows voters the option to rank the candidates in order of preference. If a candidate receives more than half of the first choice votes, they win the election. However, if there is no majority winner after counting first choices, the race is decided by an

"instant runoff." The candidate with the fewest votes is eliminated, and voters who picked that candidate as 'number 1' will have their votes count for their next choice. This process continues until there's a majority winner or a candidate won with more than half of the vote.

This format holds the election to a single ballot, ensuring votes at home and abroad can be counted at the same time in the same manner. By holding the election on a single ballot, jurisdictions avoid high operational costs of holding separate elections, and voters are spared the burden of returning to the poll at a later arbitrary date. Most importantly in relation to the two-round primary runoff format, ranked choice voting prevents turnout decline between rounds. This system ensures that the candidates elected are broadly supported by their party and are not elected based on a low-turnout runoff.

## DATA SOURCES

The data used in this report was obtained from election results on Secretaries of State and Election Board websites.

We determined the demographics and voter turnout statistics for each district using voter data from L2 VoterMapping. For estimated Citizen Voting Age Population (CVAP) L2 uses weighted census data. For voter turnout, L2 uses surname classifications. While this method is somewhat blunt, it does provide a workable estimate for voter turnout by ethnic group in prior elections.



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