

# **Federal Primary Election Runoffs and Voter Turnout Decline, 1994-2012**

*July 2013*

## **Summary of Facts and Findings**

### *Near-Universal Decline in Turnout:*

- ❖ Of 171 regularly scheduled primary runoffs in U.S House and U.S. Senate from 1994 to 2012, all but six of them resulted in a turnout decrease between the initial primary and the runoff, meaning that 96.5% of runoff elections had fewer people voting in the second round than in the first. The average decline in turnout was 35.3% and the median decline was 33.2%.

### *Primary-Runoff Time Gap a Key Factor:*

- ❖ The longer the wait between the initial primary and the runoff, the higher the decrease in voter turnout between elections. Primary elections with a gap of more than thirty days had a median decline in voter participation of 48.1%, while those with a gap of twenty days or less had a median decline of 15.4%.

### *Largest Turnout Decrease:*

- ❖ The largest decrease in turnout took place in the 2008 Democratic runoff for the congressional seat in Texas' 32nd district, which saw a 93.9% decrease in turnout from the initial primary to the runoff election.

### *Average Decrease in Turnout in U.S. Senate and U.S. House primaries:*

- ❖ 40.2% in Senate runoffs and 34.7% in House runoffs.

### *Average Decrease in Turnout by Party:*

- ❖ 37.1% in Democratic primary runoffs and 33.9% in Republican primary runoffs.

### *Runoff Winners Represented in Congress:*

- ❖ Even with their flaws tied to turnout decline, runoffs serve an important function: seeking to avoid unrepresentative winners. Out of 171 runoffs, 52 resulted in a primary winner who trailed in the first round, 26 of which would go on to win the general election. These Members of Congress and Senators, who had the broadest support in their districts, would not have been elected to Congress under plurality voting.
- ❖ States currently using primary runoffs include Alabama, Arkansas, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, Oklahoma, South Carolina, and Texas.

## Introduction

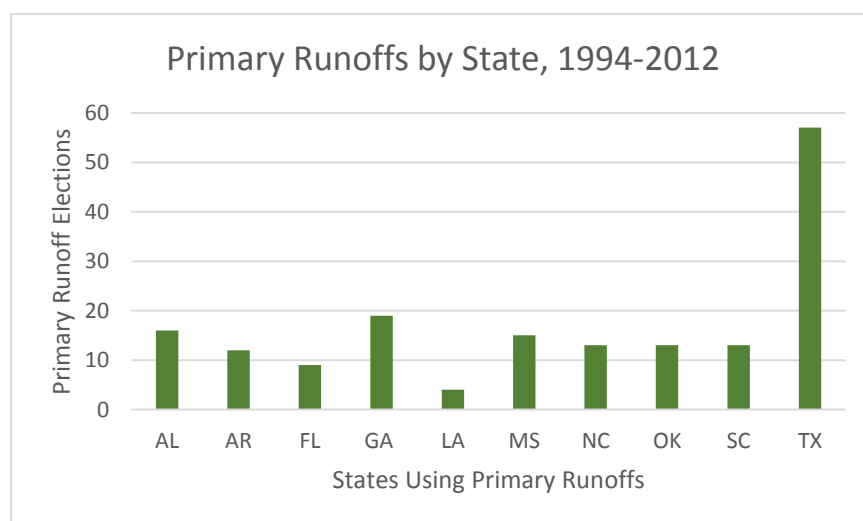
Primary runoff elections are held after an initial election in the event that no candidate surpasses a pre-determined vote threshold (typically 50%, although lower in some states). In a runoff, the top two vote recipients from the initial round compete, and whichever candidate receives the most votes in the runoff becomes the party's nominee.

Runoffs increase the likelihood that a party's nominee is representative of the party's primary voters. They also give voters in the first round an enhanced ability to express their preferences without "wasting" their votes on a candidate whom they prefer, but who has little chance of winning. In a runoff system, voters can vote for the candidate they most strongly support in the first election. If that candidate advances to the runoff, the voters can back them again. If that candidate does not advance to the runoff, voters can then express their preference for whichever of the top two candidates they prefer.

Runoff elections have a long history in the United States and abroad. Many U.S. cities use runoff systems to elect mayors, and several states use runoffs in their state legislative elections. Georgia and Louisiana employ the system in federal and state legislative general elections, while Washington and California have a Top Two automatic runoff system, in which the top two finishers from the first round face off in the November election for state and federal races. Nebraska uses a similar system for its nonpartisan state legislative elections. Around the world, many of the nations that elect their president with a national popular vote system also employ runoff elections if no candidate surpasses a certain vote threshold in the initial election.

Runoffs are also used in federal primary elections. In 2012, six states held 25 primary runoff elections for U.S. Congress and Senate, and in 2010, nine states held 30 such elections. Over the past ten election cycles, there have been 171 U.S. House and Senate Democratic and Republican nominees who competed in primary runoff elections, 76 of whom were ultimately elected to Congress. Of those 76 candidates, 26 would not have won their party's nomination under plurality voting.

The graph below shows the number of primary runoffs occurring in each state in which they are used since 1994:



Unfortunately, traditional runoff systems have serious flaws. They can cost jurisdictions millions of dollars in extra administrative costs and nearly double the campaign funds necessary to win an election. Negativity typically increases during runoff campaigns, and logistical problems often arise for election officials charged with running the second election.

Perhaps the most problematic aspect of runoff elections is the decrease in voter turnout for the runoff stage of the primary. Decreased turnout dilutes the main benefit of a runoff: improving representation by allowing voters in primaries to select a candidate with broad popular support. In the United States, primary runoff turnout rates often plunge so low that the democratic legitimacy of the elections is cast into doubt.

In order to quantify and attempt to explain turnout declines, we analyzed all federal primary runoff elections held between 1994 and 2012. This study compares declines in primary runoff voter participation by election year, and identifies a key factor that affects turnout in runoffs: the time gap between when the initial primary is held and when the runoff is held.

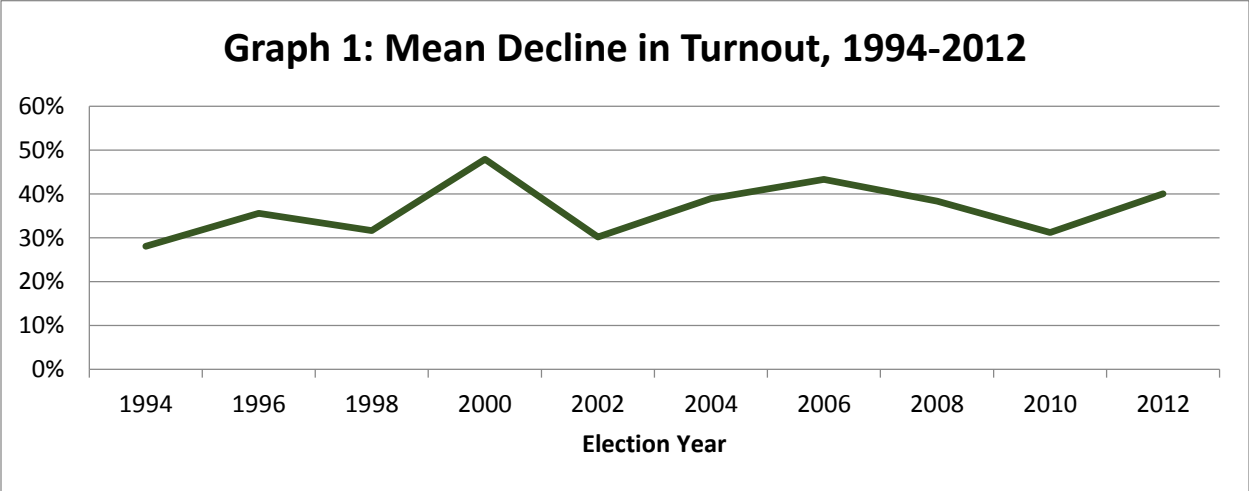
To combat the phenomenon of turnout decline in runoff elections, we do not recommend that states that currently use runoffs abandon them altogether. Runoffs allow voters to freely support whichever candidate they prefer in the first round of an election and advance nominees more representative of primary voters' views to the general election. However, improvements to runoff systems can and should be made. We suggest the adoption of instant runoff voting, a ranked choice voting method that gives voters greater opportunity to express their true preferences in an election, costs jurisdictions less money to implement, and ensures that every voter is able participate in every round of an election by showing up to the polls only once.

### **Overall Turnout Decline in Primary Runoffs**

In all but six of the federal primary runoffs that took place between 1994 and 2012, voter turnout declined, often dramatically, between the initial primary and the runoff. For these elections, the mean turnout decline was 35.3% and the median decline was 33.2%.

Year	Number of Runoffs	Mean Turnout Decline	Median Turnout Decline
2012	25	40.0%	36.1%
2010	30	31.2%	21.4%
2008	12	38.4%	31.1%
2006	8	43.3%	53.7%
2004	12	39.0%	35.4%
2002	13	30.2%	30.0%
2000	8	48.0%	53.6%
1998	12	31.6%	33.1%
1996	31	35.6%	33.2%
1994	20	28.1%	26.9%
<b>Total</b>	<b>171</b>	<b>35.3%</b>	<b>33.2%</b>

Overall, year-based calculations show a consistent trend of sharp decreases in turnout after initial primaries in each election cycle. The mean turnout decline per year (Graph 1) shows a very slight increase in average turnout decline since 1994. Most remarkably, the average decline has mostly remained in the 30%-40% range regardless of the number of runoffs in a given year.



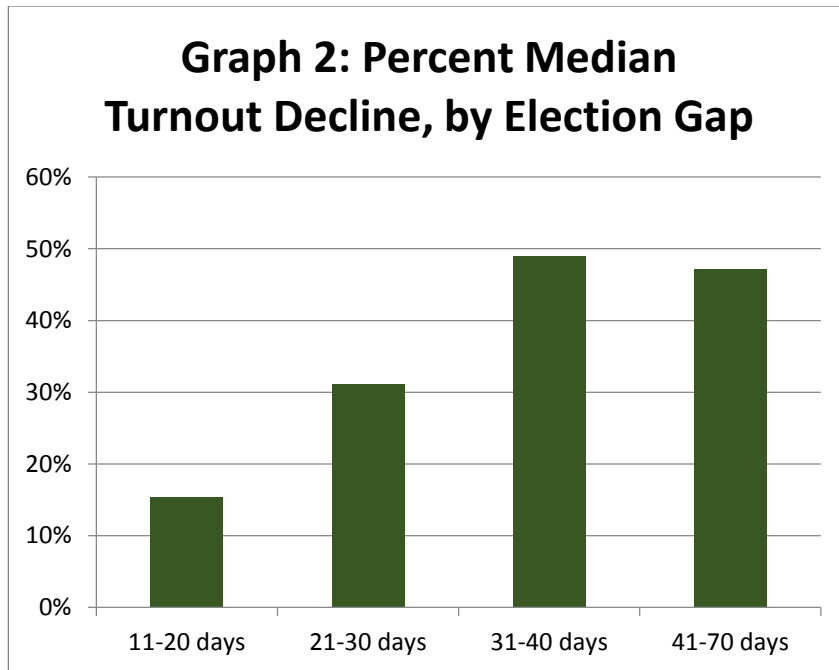
The years 2000 and 2006 represent the peaks of mean primary runoff decline at 48% and 43%,

respectively. The relatively small sample size of runoffs in those years likely accounts for the unusually high decline rates.

In 2000, the outlier primary races that contributed to these greater average decreases in turnout were Texas’ Senate race and its 11th and 24th House district races, as well as Mississippi’s Senate contest. Among these elections, turnout decreased, on average, by 65% between the primary and the runoff election. Turnout decline in 2006 was exacerbated by a 58% or higher decrease in runoffs in Texas’ Senate race and its 10<sup>th</sup> district House race, as well as in Mississippi’s Senate race and in South Carolina’s 1<sup>st</sup> district House race. These four races had an average 66.3% decrease in turnout.

**Gap in Days between Election Rounds**

In recent years, due in large part to federal laws passed in order to uphold the voting rights of overseas and military voters, several states have increased the number of days between initial primary elections and runoffs in order to enhance access for overseas voters. Unfortunately, this extended gap between elections seems to lead to a sharp decrease in voter turnout, and the greater the number of days between election rounds, the greater the decline in turnout.



Election Gap	Number of Races
10-20 Days	11
21-30 Days	92
31-40 Days	22
41 + Days	34
Dates not available	12

Runoffs held 31 days or more after the original primary saw median turnout declines more than three times greater than runoffs held 11 to 20 days after the initial primary election. The fact that turnout is more likely to be sustained in runoffs that are relatively close to the first round suggests that voters might be more likely to see the runoff as part of a single contest if the two rounds are

held close together. Media coverage of the two rounds is more likely to be continuous, for example, and campaign operations to get out the vote may be easier to sustain.

## **Recommendations for Policymakers**

Our study shows that turnout in primary runoff elections is consistently lower than in initial primary elections. It further demonstrates that the longer the time between the original primary and the runoff election, the lower the number of voters who will return to the polls. Gaps of thirty days or more have an especially detrimental effect on turnout. The fact that the length of time between an initial primary election and its runoff so clearly affects turnout should encourage policymakers to consider improvements to the runoff system. Luckily, there are alternative runoff election methods for policymakers who want to curb declines in voter turnout while also ensuring that every voter, including those overseas, is able to participate in the elections that decide their parties' nominees.

### ***Ranked choice voting for military and overseas voters in primary runoff elections***

For states that want to maintain two different election dates, we recommend keeping them as close together as possible. One way to avoid long gaps between elections and accommodate overseas voters is to follow the practice detailed in FairVote's 2011 report [\*Legality of the Use of Ranked Choice Absentee Ballots for Military and Overseas Voters in Runoff Elections\*](#). In this system, overseas voters receive two primary ballots: one for the first round and a ranked choice ballot for the prospective runoff. If there is a runoff election, the runoff ballots are used to determine the results, with the ballot counting as a vote for the candidate ranked highest on the ballot among those candidates who have advanced in the runoff. This practice, which is currently used in Arkansas, Louisiana, and South Carolina, allows overseas voters fair access to the ballot, but also allows election officials to keep the runoff closer to the initial election date and thereby boost overall turnout.

### ***Instant runoff voting form of ranked choice voting***

A better method would be to implement an instant runoff system for every voter, both at home and abroad.

Instant runoff voting (also known as ranked choice voting or preferential voting) combines two separate elections into one. Instant runoff voting would allow primary voters to rank candidates in order of preference. If no one candidate achieved the requisite threshold of first choice rankings, the bottom-ranked candidate would then be removed from the race and each of those ballots would be added to the totals of the candidate ranked next on the ballot. This process continues until a candidate surpasses the winning threshold. Alternatively, to simulate a runoff more exactly, the system can work such that only the top two candidates advance to the second round of counting.

As the entire election would occur on one ballot, votes cast at home and overseas would be counted the same way. Instant runoff voting ensures that every voter, including those overseas, receives an adequate opportunity to express their preferences, without burdening jurisdictions with the cost and labor of an extra day of elections or burdening voters by forcing them to return to the polls to make their voices heard. Most importantly, since everyone's votes will be counted in both the initial tabulation and subsequent ones, instant runoff voting will never lead to a decrease in voter turnout, ensuring that political parties are able to nominate candidates with the broadest support among all members, not just those who show up for a low-turnout second election.

*Special thanks to Rob Richie, Robert Fekete, Katherine Sicienski, William Hix, Devin McCarthy, and Andrea Levien for their contributions to this report.*





FairVote  
6930 Carroll Avenue  
Suite 610  
Takoma Park, MD 20912