

Solutions Landscape

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Introduction

Over recent years the trends of rising hyperpolarization, declining institutional and interpersonal trust, and increasing governmental dysfunction have reinforced one another and resulted in a growing sense of danger surrounding the health of American democracy. Ideas and efforts for addressing this challenge are so numerous and varied that societal leaders, advocates, academics, and concerned citizens may, understandably, have limited understanding of what reforms have been proposed, their benefits and demerits, or if they have already been implemented or been effective.

This “solutions landscape” is intended to help fill that knowledge gap by serving as a compilation of leading scholars’ and activists’ oft-proposed institutional reforms, their implementation status, and a synthesis of studies on their effectiveness. This “collaborative review” document will be updated periodically to include additional reforms and new studies on effectiveness, as well as changes in implementation status.

Comments, Updates, and Revisions

This document is a work in progress and meant to serve as a general summary of the overall institutional reform space and of the reforms specifically contained below; while thorough, it is not exhaustive. It is also not immune from error or misinterpretation. Therefore, if you are a researcher, analyst, journalist, etc., and would like to help improve this resource by offering other relevant studies of effectiveness, improved graphics, or policy developments, or by providing commentary or counterpoints concerning this document, please request commenting permissions for this Google Doc – or just send us your suggestions, links, and criticisms by contacting Andrew Henry at henry@crfb.org. This document will evolve and expand based on this feedback.



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1. Redistricting Reform

[Article I, Section 4 of the United States Constitution](#) grants state legislatures the power to conduct elections within their borders, including the authority to shape and reshape state and federal election jurisdictions. This process, known as redistricting, occurs after every census and is meant to reflect population changes and relocations, grouping inhabitants into districts of roughly equal populations based on their living patterns. However, since the [beginning of the nineteenth century](#), what should be an administrative redistricting process has been transformed into a political one, known as gerrymandering, by which the boundaries of election districts are manipulated to benefit incumbent parties and elected officials. This phenomenon constitutes an inversion of the concept of representative democracy; rather than the people choosing their local representatives in government, gerrymandering enables politicians to choose their voters, as well as insulate themselves and their party from electoral losses and minimize opposing parties’ input in government.

However, combining the practice of gerrymandering with geographic self-sorting by Democrats and Republicans, [only about 8% of congressional districts](#) are toss-ups, and only [15% of state legislative district elections have been decided by less than 10 points since 2018](#). For these reasons – in addition to congressional gridlock and because laws and policy concerning the conducting of elections generally fall under state purview – numerous state-level reforms have been proposed to reform the redistricting process, including delegating redistricting authority to independent redistricting commissions rather than state legislatures. Especially when combined with other reforms, such as [eliminating closed partisan primaries](#), advocates argue that legislators will be incentivized to appeal to a broader range of voters, rather than trying so hard to appeal to the extremes of their own party. Polarization, extremism, and the fear of working with the other party would be reduced, according to advocates.

Independent Redistricting Commissions

Independent redistricting commissions (IRCs) take redistricting authority out of the hands of partisan state legislators and grant it to a body of civically engaged citizens. There is no clear or universal method for achieving this “independence,” though the primary aim of any proposal is to balance the partisan affiliation of commissioners.

For example, balancing partisan affiliation might be achieved through commissions composed of an [equal number of Democrats and Republicans and chaired by an independent](#) or by appointing an [equal number of Democrats, Republicans, and independents](#). However, proposals often elevate other criteria as well, such as ensuring commissioners represent state geographic and demographic diversity (e.g., [race, ethnicity, and gender](#)) as closely as possible and are selected for analytical skill (e.g., considerable experience with demographic data analysis). These commissions are expected to create districts in a transparent fashion that foster competition and encourage politicians to better represent all of their constituents.

Advocates in favor of IRCs promote them as a means to allow voters to [break free from the electoral constraints placed upon them by partisan, self-interested state legislators](#) who use redistricting as a tool to keep themselves and their fellow incumbent party members in power. Some detractors, meanwhile, argue against transferring redistricting power to IRCs because such commissioners are [not accountable to voters](#) in the same way that elected officials are. Others argue that states should only implement IRCs universally – not in a piecemeal, state-by-state fashion – because partisan state legislatures that are slow to establish them give themselves greater ability to [control the outcome of elections in the US House](#).

Implementation in the States

Currently, **nine states exclusively use IRCs** for their redistricting process. About **half of the remaining states (21) remove at least some redistricting authority from state legislators** but do not go so far as attempting to establish a wholly independent body; the degree to which these states limit their legislatures’ redistricting capabilities varies significantly. The other 20 remaining states, meanwhile, continue to assign near-complete control over the redistricting process to their legislatures.

States by Independent Redistricting Commission (IRC) Implementation Level			
IRC States	Semi-IRC States	Supplementary Commission States	Legislative Control States
Alaska	Arkansas	Connecticut	Alabama
Arizona	Hawaii	Illinois	Delaware
California	Missouri	Indiana	Florida
Colorado	New Jersey	<i>Iowa*</i>	Georgia
Idaho	<i>Ohio*</i>	Maine	Kansas
Michigan	Pennsylvania	Maryland	Kentucky
Montana	Virginia	Mississippi	Louisiana
<i>New York*</i>		New Mexico	Massachusetts
<i>Washington*</i>		<i>Ohio*</i>	Minnesota
		Oklahoma	Nebraska
		Oregon	Nevada
		Rhode Island	New Hampshire
		Texas	North Carolina
		Utah	North Dakota
		Vermont	South Carolina
			South Dakota
			Tennessee
			West Virginia
			Wisconsin
			Wyoming

** Indicates the state has unique redistricting process features that make it difficult to classify. See text below for greater details.*

[States with IRCS](#) include Alaska, Arizona, California, Colorado, Idaho, Michigan, Montana, New York, and Washington – for both their federal and state legislative district maps. In addition to preventing legislators and other public officials from participating in the redistricting process, each of these states, save for Colorado and New York, also disallows commissioners from running for office in the state for several years after redistricting, reducing the risk of commissions being manipulated by the politically ambitious. Some of these states have taken further steps to limit any partisan influence on commission work. For example, Arizona has barred legislative staff from service, Idaho and Washington have barred lobbyists from service, and California, Colorado, Michigan, and New York have barred both. However, the work of these commissions is not always impervious to political reworking. For example, New York and Washington allow legislative supermajorities to modify commission-produced maps, [as New York did for the 2022 election cycle](#) before its maps were redrawn by the courts.

[Seven states have semi-independent commissions](#) whereby elected officials may serve as members, including Arkansas, Hawaii, Missouri, New Jersey, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and Virginia

for state maps, though Hawaii, New Jersey, and Virginia also endow these separate bodies with authority over congressional redistricting. While elected officials may serve as members of these commissions, the mapmaking carried out by these bodies is separate from the typical legislative process, with a significant degree of variation between the states. For example, Arkansas designates commission seats for specific elected officials in shaping state legislative districts. Ohio does the same, though its commission also serves as a “backup” commission (see below) for crafting congressional maps. Most other states usually include a party-balanced slate of nominees from legislative or party leadership and potentially a role for the Governor or Chief Justice of the State Supreme Court to select or appoint members. Alternatively, Virginia’s commission consists of eight legislators and eight citizens and requires approval from six of each to finalize any state or congressional map proposal.

[Special advisory or "backup" commissions](#) are currently used in 15 states, including Connecticut, Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Maine, Maryland, Mississippi, New Mexico, Ohio (see above), Oklahoma, Oregon, Rhode Island, Texas, Utah, and Vermont – where state legislatures still predominate in creating both state and, if applicable, federal maps. Advisory commissions include non-legislators and assist in the mapmaking process before they are voted on by the legislature, whereas “backup” commissions are charged with redistricting duties if legislators do not decide on their maps before a set deadline. States modify the role and structure of these commissions in different ways.

For example, Connecticut and Illinois both use a backup commission selected by legislative leadership, with Connecticut delegating state and congressional mapmaking to its backup commission, while Illinois only delegates state districts. Indiana only delegates congressional districts to its backup commission. Oregon designates the Secretary of State as the backup author of state legislative districts, Mississippi and Texas empower a backup commission of specific statewide elected officials (e.g., the State Treasurer and Attorney General) to draw state legislative lines, and Oklahoma’s backup commission for state legislative districts is comprised of specific statewide officials and selections from legislative leadership.

Advisory commissions have an even greater variety. For example, [New Mexico](#)’s state and congressional district maps are advised by a seven-member commission, including four appointees by legislative leadership, two nonpartisans appointed by the State Ethics Commission, and a chair who is a retired State Supreme Court or Court of Appeals judge. [Rhode Island](#) uses an 18-member advisory commission for drafting its own state and federal maps. Maryland’s redistricting process incorporates a nine-member advisory commission that assists the Governor in drafting proposals for both state and congressional maps that are submitted to the state legislature, but if the legislature fails to approve a joint resolution on new state legislative lines in time, the state (but not federal) districts revert to the Governor’s proposal, effectively rendering the advisory commission a backup commission as well. Maine, Utah, and Vermont also use advisory commissions for all their respective maps.

[Iowa’s unique system](#) allows for a pseudo-independent process, whereby state and congressional lines are drawn by the legislature and subject to gubernatorial veto, but with legislators heavily

informed by the nonpartisan Legislative Services Agency and a five-member bipartisan advisory commission which draft up to three maps for legislators to accept, reject, or modify.

[State legislatures retain complete control over redistricting](#) in 20 states including Alabama, Delaware, Florida, Georgia, Kansas, Kentucky, Louisiana, Massachusetts, Minnesota, Nebraska, Nevada, New Hampshire, North Carolina, North Dakota, South Carolina, South Dakota, Tennessee, West Virginia, Wisconsin, and Wyoming. In general, redistricting efforts in these states are indistinguishable from the typical legislative process, originating in committees chosen by legislative leadership which draft initial maps that, after revision and finalization, must pass with a majority vote in both state chambers and either avoid a gubernatorial veto or have one be overridden by the legislature. This general process includes some variation between the states. For example, veto override thresholds range from a simple to a 2/3 majority, and Florida and North Carolina state legislatures redistrict through joint resolutions immune to gubernatorial veto.

Studies of Effectiveness

Studies Indicating Benefits

Warshaw, McGhee, and Migurski, “[Districts for a New Decade – Partisan Outcomes and Racial Representation in the 2021-22 Redistricting Cycle](#)” (2022)

- The authors’ study of the most recent redistricting cycle finds IRCs generally produce less biased and more competitive maps than those produced by partisan legislatures and enable a consistent process across redistricting cycles.

Keena et al., [Gerrymandering the States: Partisanship, Race, and the Transformation of American Federalism](#) (2021)

- The authors [write](#): “We find systemically less [partisan] bias in districting when the maps are drawn by citizens and other independent bodies...This suggests that [IRC] represent an effective solution against partisan gerrymandering.”

Stephanopoulos, McGhee, and Rogers, “[The Realities of Electoral Reform](#)” (2015)

- The authors write: “The results support the hypothesis that independent commissions...improve representation at the chamber level. District plans drawn by commissions indeed feature higher levels of chamber-level alignment than plans drawn by the elected branches.”

Lindgren and Southwell, "[The Effect of Redistricting Commissions on Electoral Competitiveness in U.S. House Elections, 2002-2010](#)" (2013)

- The authors find, after controlling for partisan and contextual factors, that IRCs resulted in significantly more competitive congressional districts from 2002 to 2010 by reducing the predicted margin of victory by an average of about 10 points, though backup commissions had an even larger predicted reduction (11.66 points on average).

Studies Indicating Mixed Results

Drutman, "[What We Know About Redistricting and Redistricting Reform](#)" (2022)

- In a systemic analysis of redistricting and IRC literature, the author finds that IRC-drawn maps are fairer than those drawn by partisan state legislatures, but their level of improvement is substantially limited by larger, underlying phenomena (e.g., the single-member district system) that the elimination of gerrymandering cannot address.

McGhee and Paluch, "[Fair Representation and Partisan Leanings in California's Final Redistricting Maps](#)" (2022)

- The authors' review of the most recent district maps produced by California's IRC saw significantly increased representation for Latinos but no meaningful change for Black or Asian Californians.

Edwards et al., "[Institutional Control of Redistricting and the Geography of Representation](#)" (2017)

- The authors write: "We examine a large sample of congressional and state legislative districts and find that, relative to legislatures, [IRCs] tend to draw more compact districts, split fewer political subdivisions, and may also do a better job of preserving the population cores of prior districts." However, they also note that the latter two metrics are inconsistent. The authors find that, for state legislative maps, IRCs split cities and counties less than and preserve the cores of prior districts better than state legislatures – but not for congressional maps.

Stephanopoulos, "[Arizona and Anti-Reform](#)" (2015)

- The author finds, after assessing the efficiency gap ([a measure of partisan gerrymandering](#)) for all state and congressional elections from 1972 to 2012, that IRCs cut the median efficiency gap for congressional maps (12%) in half, but were not as effective for state legislative maps, suggesting moderate but limited overall gains in partisan neutrality.

Cain, "[Redistricting Commissions: A Better Political Buffer?](#)" (2012)

- The author's analysis suggests that IRCs effectively eliminate the conflict of interest inherent in legislature-managed redistricting, but they fail to eliminate distrust in commissioners and the fear that they might influence the redistricting process in secretly partisan ways.

Kogan and McGhee, "[Redistricting California: An Evaluation of the Citizens Commission Final Plans](#)" (2012)

- After analyzing the results of California's first map produced by an IRC, the authors write, "The new process has produced important improvements in terms of both the criteria voters said they cared about and the representational implications of interest to academics and political observers. In many respects, however, the magnitude of these gains has fallen short of what many political reformers may have hoped for. Perhaps the most important lesson from the 2011 round of redistricting is that a fair process, no matter how nonpartisan and participatory, cannot avoid the reality that any redistricting scheme produces both political winners and losers." Expounding on these points, they indicate that IRCs are inherently limited in improving maps because "maximizing certain criteria, such as keeping communities intact and protecting the voting rights of historically underrepresented groups, makes achieving other goals, such as increasing competitiveness, more difficult."

Studies Indicating No Benefits (or Harms)

Henderson, Hamel, and Goldzimer, "[Gerrymandering Incumbency: Does Non-Partisan Redistricting Increase Electoral Competition?](#)" (2017)

- The authors write: "We find that the redistricting process, on the margin, helps sustain the electoral security of incumbents. Yet, counter to reformers' expectations, we find that independent redistrictors produce virtually the same degree of insulation as plans devised in legislatures or by politician commissions. Overall, our results suggest caution in overhauling state redistricting institutions to increase electoral competition: independent commissions may not be as politically-neutral as theorized."

Masket, Winburn, and Wright, "[The Gerrymanders are Coming! Legislative Redistricting Won't Affect Competition or Polarization Much, No Matter Who Does It](#)" (2012)

- After assessing state legislative elections across the 2000s, the authors find that "the effects of partisan redistricting on competition and polarization are small, considerably more nuanced than reformers would suggest, and overwhelmed by other aspects of the political environment," indicating that IRCs would ultimately have no meaningful impact. Additionally, however, the authors find that the states with nonpartisan redistricting methods became more polarized during the 2000s, while states without them experienced slight depolarization, on average.

Forgette, Garner, and Winkle, “[Do Redistricting Principles and Practices Affect U.S. State Legislative Electoral Competition?](#)” (2009)

- The authors, after examining district-level election data following the 1990 and 2000 redistricting cycles, determine that IRCs produce less competitive races, with margins of victory 10% higher than their modeling would suggest.

Tentative Conclusions on Effectiveness

Holistically, academic analyses of IRCs have generally found that they produce fairer maps than partisan state legislatures but inconsistently promote minority representation or preserve community compactness (i.e., there is a continued presence of bizarrely shaped election districts). However, multiple studies by political scientists, including a systemic analysis of existing literature [cited above](#), suggest redistricting’s effects on polarization and competition in American politics overall are minimal compared to the [geographic self-sorting](#) of Democrats and Republicans and the single-member district status quo. Several other case studies and commentary from those with experience with the process suggest commissions have had an impact on the governing approach of those elected.

2. Eliminating Closed Partisan Primaries

While November general elections usually receive far more attention and higher voter turnout ([even if low compared to most developed democracies](#)), primary elections, which determine who will appear as the parties’ candidates in the general election, are arguably more significant. In the great majority of districts that are uncompetitive and sure to be won by one party, it is really the primary election that matters.

Closed partisan primaries – in which only registered political party members are allowed to vote for their party’s nominee and independent voters are barred from participating ([~30% of registered voters](#)) – are common across the United States. It is argued that these partisan processes incentivize candidates to be more extreme and uncompromising than their competitors to win the party members’ votes and are frequently highlighted as drivers of our polarized elections and partisan governing environment.

Because of this – in addition to congressional gridlock and because laws and policy concerning the conducting of elections generally fall under state purview – a wide swath of state-level proposals has been put forward to open closed partisan primaries to voters who are not party members and remove or lessen partisanship in deciding who appears on Americans’ general election ballots. When these and other reforms are combined with, for example, [redistricting reform](#), advocates argue that candidates and elected officials will be incentivized to appeal to a broad general electorate in a competitive district rather than a hyperpartisan primary process in

an uncompetitive district, thereby reducing voter dissatisfaction with and polarization in the nation's government(s) and elections. Detractors, meanwhile, argue that the primary system's design inherently benefits populists and limits the capacity of [party leaders to serve as candidate-quality gatekeepers](#).

Open Primaries

In contrast to closed primaries, in which only registered Republicans can vote in Republican primaries, registered Democrats in Democratic primaries, and so on, open primaries allow participation from a wider range of voters. The extent of this increased range [falls into two categories](#). Semi-open primaries allow participation from independent voters but exclude registered members of other parties, while fully open primaries not only allow unaffiliated voters to vote for a party's candidates but members of other political parties as well. Regardless of the open primary format, however, voters are limited to voting in one primary per election cycle.

Supporters of open primaries promote them as a way to reduce the perceived degree of separation between candidates and average voters by allowing all citizens to participate in the elections [their tax dollars are paying for](#), in addition to forcing politicians to consider [moderating their stances and expanding their platforms](#) to cater to voters outside their partisan base. Meanwhile, opponents of open primaries argue that (1) "crossover voting" (i.e., voters affiliated with Party A submitting a ballot in Party B's primary), when permitted, enables opposing partisans to game the system and vote for a weaker and/or more extreme candidate that their own party's candidate might defeat more easily in the general election and (2) that this primary format may infringe on party members' [First Amendment rights to free association](#).

Nonpartisan Top Two Primaries

Like open primaries, nonpartisan primaries increase voter access to primary races, but instead of a series of separate party primary elections, [nonpartisan primaries operate with a single ballot featuring all candidates](#), regardless of party affiliation, made available to all voters. The most prevalent form of nonpartisan primaries is known as [Top Two](#), in which the two candidates who receive the most primary votes, regardless of party affiliation, advance to the general election.

Those in favor of Top Two primaries argue that they offer the candidate-moderating benefits of open primaries while also [avoiding the threat level posed by crossover voting in open primaries](#), in addition to offering an [alternative to an outdated primary system](#) that enables entrenched, ideologically extreme party bases to shape general election outcomes before they occur. Those opposed criticize Top Two primaries because of the threat of "[vote splitting](#)," whereby voters from the dominant party break up their votes among multiple primary candidates in such a way that none of them receive enough votes to advance to the general election. Critics also condemn Top Two primaries because most elections still feature [one Democrat and one Republican](#), major party candidates are still able to continue [secretly promoting extreme or weaker opposing](#)

[party candidates](#) to produce an easier general election victory, and it has failed to protect against toxic or antidemocratic partisanship (e.g., not preventing House GOP Trump impeachment voters from [getting “primaried”](#) by Trump-endorsed challengers).

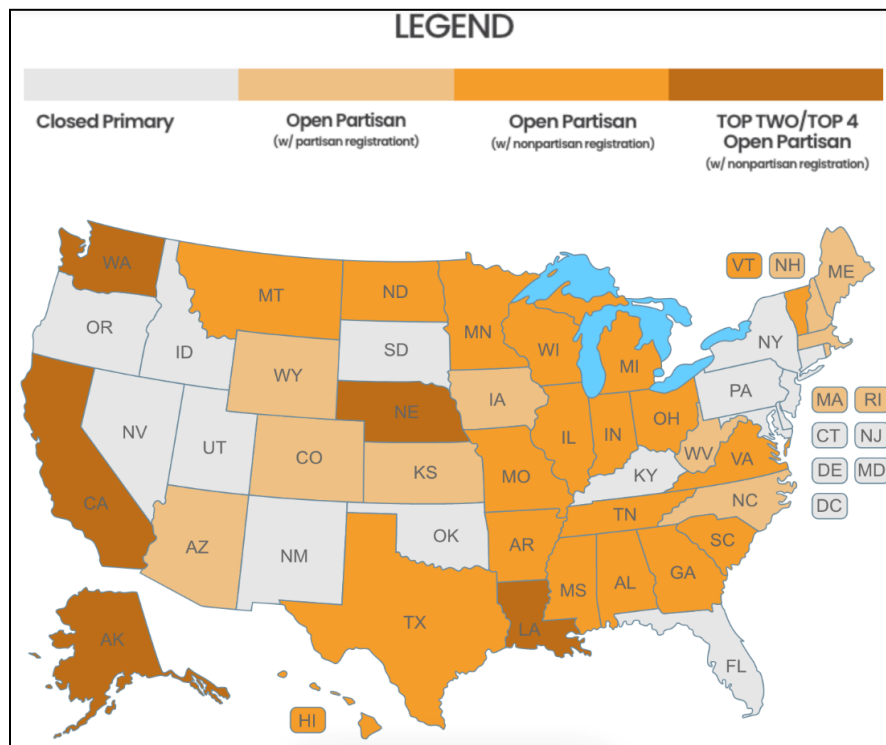
Nonpartisan Top Four/Final-Five Primaries

Top Four and Final-Five primaries, like Top Two, are nonpartisan primaries, under which all candidates appear on a single ballot made available to all registered voters. However, instead of advancing the two leading candidates, these formats send the four or five leading vote-getters to the general election. But the [most distinguishing aspect of Top Four and Final-Five primaries](#) is the implementation of [ranked-choice voting](#) (RCV) in the general election to decide the winning candidate from the four or five candidates who advanced.

Proponents of Top Four and Final-Five primaries hold that the combination of nonpartisan primaries and RCV ensures the general election victor is the one who has the greatest support from the greatest portion of the electorate possible while avoiding the drawbacks, like vote splitting, attributed to the Top Two format. Skeptics, meanwhile, state that these are [confusing, intensive systems](#) for less-engaged voters that will only fuel frustration and disillusionment at ballot boxes.

Implementation in the States

Fifteen states conduct closed partisan primaries for their state and congressional elections (the states in gray in the figure below). The remaining **35 states**, meanwhile, **enable participation from nonpartisans (and other partisans) – 30 states have semi-open or fully open primaries (shown as open partisan in figure below), four** have some form of a **Top Two** system in place, and **Alaska** has the lone **Top Four** system in place.



(Source: [Open Primaries](#))

[Open primaries](#) are currently used in 30 states, including Alabama, Arizona, Arkansas, Colorado, Georgia, Hawaii, Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Maine, Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, Mississippi, Missouri, Montana, New Hampshire, North Carolina, North Dakota, Ohio, Rhode Island, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Vermont, Virginia, West Virginia, Wisconsin, and Wyoming. However, the degree to which these primaries are “open” varies. While most of these states are fully open and neither require voters to affiliate with a party to vote in a primary nor prohibit members of other parties from voting in another party’s primary, ten states – Arizona, Colorado, Iowa, Kansas, Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Rhode Island, West Virginia, and Wyoming – are only semi-open and do not allow crossover voting.

A [Top Two primary](#) system has been adopted, at least to some extent, and in different formats, in 4 states: California, Louisiana, Nebraska, and Washington. California and Washington operate under a Top Two system for all statewide elections, and Nebraska conducts a Top Two election process for state legislative races in which candidates run [with no party affiliation](#). Louisiana, meanwhile, eliminated its primary system outright for state and congressional elections, opting instead for a single election, wherein all candidates vie for office on the same November ballot; though Louisiana does not officially follow the Top Two format, the two leading vote-getters in the general election face off in a December runoff election if no candidate wins a majority.

[The Top Four primary](#) system is currently only used in Alaska, which became the first state in the country to adopt a Top Four system for state and congressional elections when it did so in 2020 and implemented it for the first time in 2022. Also in 2022, however, Nevada voters [approved a ballot measure to institute a Final-Five primary](#) system for state and congressional elections; if the measure is reapproved in 2024, then [it will go into effect in 2026](#).

[Closed partisan primaries](#) for state and congressional elections are in place for the remaining 15 states, including Connecticut, Delaware, Florida, Idaho, Kentucky, Maryland, Nevada, Oklahoma, New Jersey, New Mexico, New York, Oregon, Pennsylvania, South Dakota, and Utah. Primaries in these states are not universally restricted to party members, however, as the Democratic Party in 4 of them – Idaho, Oklahoma, South Dakota, and Utah – allow independents to vote for their state and congressional candidates.

Studies of Effectiveness

Studies Indicating Benefits

Barton, “[California's Top-Two Primary: The Effects on Electoral Politics and Governance](#)” (2023)

- The author, after analyzing California according to seven different criteria for measuring a reform’s impacts on electoral politics and governance, finds that Top Two primaries have decreased polarization, increased voter participation and turnout, and increased electoral competitiveness since their implementation in 2012.

Reilly, Lublin, and Wright, “[Countering Polarization or ‘Crooked as Hell’? Alaska’s New Electoral System](#)” (2023)

- Assessing the results of the 2022 midterm elections in Alaska, the first full-scale usage of the state’s new Top Four primary system since its adoption in 2020, the authors find that the reform “was both consequential and largely beneficial, promoting greater choice for voters, more accommodative campaigning, and generally more moderate outcomes than likely under the old rules.”

Barton, “[Louisiana's Long-Term Election Experiment: How Eliminating Partisan Primaries Improved Governance and Reduced Polarization](#)” (2022)

- In a holistic analysis of Louisiana’s governance and electoral system, which eliminated partisan primaries in 1975, the author finds the state’s unique runoff (i.e., Top Two) system fosters high turnout in competitive races (and, therefore, meaningfully impacts campaign conduct and policymaking), contributes to Louisiana’s position as one of the least-polarized state governments in the country, and also enables innovation and effective governance overall.

Grose, "[Reducing Legislative Polarization: Top-Two and Open Primaries Are Associated with More Moderate Legislators](#)" (2020)

- Assessing US House members from 2003 to 2018, the author finds that both incumbent and newly elected legislators show evidence of reduced ideological extremity and reduced prevalence of successful extremist candidates when states use open or Top Two primaries compared to closed partisan primaries.

Sparks, "[Polarization and the Top-Two Primary: Moderating Candidate Rhetoric in One-Party Contests](#)" (2019)

- After analyzing state legislative candidate websites during the 2016 election, the author finds that candidates in races with Top Two primaries in place "use more moderate, bipartisan, and vague messaging when [facing same-party opponents] compared to those facing candidates of the opposite party."

Armstrong, "[Reflections on the Impact of a Decade of Political Reforms in California](#)" (2018)

- In a survey of California legislators, association leaders, and political consultants, most respondents felt the imposition of a Top Two system "has empowered more independent-minded, moderate, mainstream, and centrist candidates" and shifts decision-making power away from the political extremes.

Olson and Ali, "[A Quiet Revolution: The Early Successes of California's Top Two Nonpartisan Primary](#)" (2015)

- In this early report following California's Top Two system going into effect in 2012, the authors indicate that legislative dysfunction decreased as elected officials became more incentivized to appeal to diverse voter coalitions rather than continue observing the party line.

Studies Indicating Mixed Results

Crosson, "[Extreme Districts, Moderate Winners: Same-Party Challenges and Deterrence in Top-Two Primaries](#)" (2020)

- After analyzing election returns data from 2008 through 2014, the author finds that the Top Two primary states of Washington and California elect more moderate legislators than states that do not require a similar level of primary competition, though this effect is only observed when the final two candidates are of the same party. The author also finds that elite political actors may still be able to use reforms such as Top Two primaries to their benefit, as they "appear able to strategically avoid [same-party] competition."

McGhee and Shor, “[Has the Top Two Primary Elected More Moderates?](#)” (2017)

- After studying the Top Two primary states of California and Washington, the authors find an inconsistent effect across the two states and suggest that the stronger candidate depolarization effect observed in California may primarily stem from other recently implemented reforms (e.g., independent redistricting commissions and/or term limits) rather than a Top Two primary.

Grose, “[The Adoption of Electoral Reforms and Ideological Change in the California State Legislature](#)” (2014)

- In this in-depth assessment of the first legislative session after California’s Top Two system took effect in 2012, the author finds that political polarization receded in both houses of the California State Legislature from 2011 to 2013, though the reduction was more pronounced in the Assembly than the state Senate, and several other reforms and political developments (e.g., establishing an independent redistricting commission and demographic and partisan changes among registered voters) may have had a greater impact than the implementation of a Top Two primary.

Studies Indicating No Benefits (or Harms)

Drutman, “[What We Know about Congressional Primaries and Congressional Primary Reform](#)” (2021)

- In a systemic analysis of research on primary reform and its relationship with legislative compromise and moderation, the author writes, “the overwhelming conclusion across multiple studies is that the differences across primary types do not have much of an impact on who votes, who runs, or who wins.”

Ahler, Citrin, and Lenz, “[Do Open Primaries Improve Representation? An Experimental Test of California’s 2012 Top-Two Primary](#)” (2016)

- The authors, through a statewide experiment conducted just before California’s first Top Two primary election in 2012, find that voters elected more ideologically extreme congressional and state senate candidates than moderates under the new ballot model due to a failure to distinguish between them.

Nielson and Visalvanich, “[Primaries and Candidates: Examining the Influence of Primary Electorates on Candidate Ideology](#)” (2015)

- In an assessment of congressional district electorates and candidates, the authors find that open primaries produce more extreme congressional candidates than their closed counterparts.

McGhee et al., "[A Primary Cause of Partisanship? Nomination Systems and Legislator Ideology](#)" (2014)

- The authors find that "the openness of a primary election has little, if any, effect on the extremism of the politicians it produces."

Tentative Conclusions on Effectiveness

Overall, scholarly studies of primary systems have found that the level of openness alone has neither definitive nor consistent positive impacts on candidate or policymaking polarization or extremism, though [some recent studies have shown more promise](#) and newer formats such as Top Two, and especially Top Four, still have a small enough sample size at the state and congressional level that some of [their effects may yet to be seen](#). Instead, these analyses, including a systemic analysis of existing literature [cited above](#) tend to suggest that larger political phenomena (e.g., existing hyperpolarization and animosity between party leaders and their base) and deeper underlying institutional norms (e.g., the predominance of single-winner plurality elections) are more significant factors for discouraging moderation in (potential) legislators than the primary election format in place.

3. Ranked-Choice Voting

The standard American general election process is based on a plurality, winner-take-all system, whereby voters cast a single vote for a single person, and whichever candidate receives the most votes is declared the winner, even if they fail to obtain a majority ([save for Georgia and Louisiana](#), which conduct runoff elections between the two leading general election candidates so that a majority is obtained).

However, in an era where many Americans feel increasingly dissatisfied with both major parties and desire candidates who better represent them, many have advocated for the enactment of a ranked-choice voting (RCV) system, whereby instead of the standard plurality, winner-take-all system, voters rank candidates according to their preferences. When these and other reforms are combined with, for example, [primary election reform](#), advocates argue that election polarization and voter disillusionment can be significantly reduced.

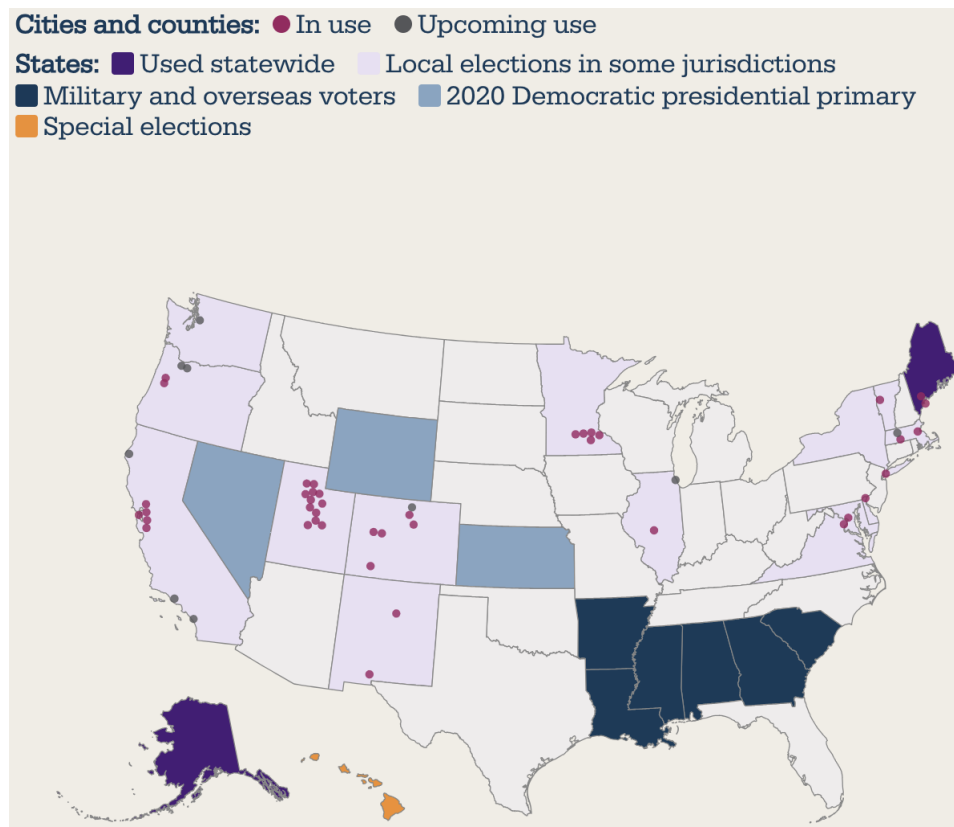
In general, under RCV, voters rank all the candidates (or as many or as few candidates as they want) according to their preferences. After the initial vote counts are tallied, the candidate with the fewest first-place votes is eliminated, and their supporters' votes are distributed to the other candidates according to the voters' ranked preferences (i.e., their votes would instead go to their second-favorite candidate). This process is repeated until a candidate obtains a majority of the vote, assuming this does not occur after first-place votes are tallied.

RCV supporters – who focus their efforts at the state and local level due to congressional gridlock and because laws and policy concerning the conducting of elections generally fall under state purview – promote the reform as a means to prevent plurality winners, [encourage more civil campaigning](#), and offer voters who feel unrepresented by either major party, and who often feel that they must choose between the lesser of two evils, an opportunity to [more accurately express their policy preferences](#) at the ballot box. Supporters say RCV allows for the existence of third parties in ways in which existing electoral and political processes do not, because RCV eliminates the “spoiler effect” – voters can vote for third-party candidates without fearing that their least favorite candidate will win due to the third-party candidate “taking votes away from” a more aligned major-party candidate.

RCV’s critics, however, argue that its [candidate elimination format disfavors moderates](#) who would be [preferred by a majority of voters](#) over more ideologically extreme or partisan candidates. Critics also hold that it is [confusing](#) and [strikes at the heart of democracy](#) when defined as “a majority of the people choosing between two different competing visions of governance” and incentivizes candidates to be the least objectionable rather than make their principles and ideologies apparent.

Implementation in the States

Currently, **only two states** – Alaska and Maine – **use RCV** to a significant degree for their state and/or congressional elections, with some differences in their processes. In the remaining 48 states, the standard pluralistic, first-past-the-post election process continues to determine who emerges victorious from statewide and congressional general election ballots. However, these states combine to produce **60 cities and counties** that conduct elections for local offices according to an **RCV format**.



(Source: [FairVote](#))

[The Top Four primary](#) system is currently only used in Alaska, which became the first state in the country to incorporate primary reform *and* general-election RCV into state and congressional elections when it did so in 2020 and implemented it for the first time in 2022.

[The first state to enact RCV](#) for state-level primaries and congressional primary and general elections – Maine – did so in 2016 and implemented it for the first time in 2018. RCV was also introduced to presidential general elections in 2020 and will be expanded to presidential primaries in 2024.

[Major cities that use RCV](#), at least to some extent, include Minneapolis-St. Paul, New York City, Oakland, and San Francisco. This list is slated to expand as, for example, Seattle adopted RCV for primary elections in 2022.

Studies of Effectiveness

Studies Indicating Benefits

Center for Campaign Innovation, “[Measuring the Effects of Ranked Choice Voting in Republican Primaries](#)” (2022)

- In a survey of Republican primary voters in Virginia’s 7th and 10th congressional districts, the latter of which used RCV for nominee selection, (1) RCV voters and plurality voters each preferred the system they used, (2) more RCV voters than plurality voters said that campaigns were run positively, and (3) the runners-up under RCV were viewed more favorably than the victor under the plurality system.

Donovan, Tolbert, and Gracey, “[Campaign civility under preferential and plurality voting](#)” (2016)

- The authors, in a survey of residents of American cities with RCV and cities utilizing the standard plurality method, find that residents of RCV cities are much more satisfied with local campaign conduct, less likely to describe campaigns as negative, and less likely to say that candidates frequently criticized each other while campaigning than their plurality-city counterparts.

Studies Indicating Mixed Results

Colner, “[Running Towards Rankings: Ranked Choice Voting’s Impact on Candidate Entry and Descriptive Representation](#)” (2023)

- The author, after studying candidate pools in cities that have implemented RCV, finds that RCV does produce larger, higher-quality, and more diverse candidate pools, but that these benefits are temporary, disappearing after several election cycles.

Donovan and Tolbert, “[Civility in Ranked-Choice Voting Elections: Does Evidence Fit the Normative Narrative?](#)” (2023)

- In a test of RCV’s influence on campaign civility, the authors find that candidates are more likely to moderate attacks on their election opponents and appeal for second-place votes, but that this increased civility (in comparison to the plurality election standard) is limited in scope.

Cerrone and McClintock, “[Ranked-Choice Voting, Runoff, and Democracy: Insights from Maine and Other U.S. States](#)” (2021)

- After assessing a dataset of a dozen competitive 2020 federal elections, the authors write that Maine’s implementation of RCV enabled new parties and candidates to have greater electoral participation and somewhat alleviated ideological polarization. However, in an

accompanying survey of registered voters across the US, the authors also found that participants were more favorable towards a plurality system than RCV.

Drutman & Strano, "[What We Know About Ranked-Choice Voting](#)" (2021)

- In a systemic analysis of RCV literature, the authors find that RCV correlates to more civil and positive campaigns and that voters exposed to it like it and find it easy to use. However, they also find that younger voters are much more receptive to it than older ones, and find no conclusive evidence that RCV has a positive impact on candidate diversity, voter turnout, party viability, or policy creation.

Fischer, Lee, and Lelkes, "[Electoral Systems and Political Attitudes: Experimental Evidence](#)" (2021)

- After simulating different electoral systems for randomized groups of study participants, the authors find that RCV reduces the difference in winners' and losers' perceptions of election fairness compared to plurality systems and that this difference is further reduced with the introduction of more parties (which does not have an impact under plurality systems). Additionally, the authors find that interparty bias does not exist in RCV systems with several parties. However, the authors also find that the use of RCV does not increase perceived election legitimacy.

Kimball and Anthony, "[Public Perceptions of Alternative Voting Systems: Results from a National Survey Experiment](#)" (2021)

- After surveying American voters, the authors find that respondents prefer a plurality system and believe it is a fairer system than RCV. The authors also find younger, more educated, and Democratic or third-party voters are more favorable to RCV implementation than older, less educated, and Republican voters.

McCarthy and Santucci, "[Ranked Choice Voting as a Generational Issue in Modern American Politics](#)" (2021)

- After analyzing several surveys, the authors find that RCV has the potential to constitute a major generational divide between younger voters who, out of dissatisfaction with "the way that democracy works in America," support the reform, and older Americans, who do not. The authors also suggest that racial and partisan divides may worsen demographic contention over RCV, as black and Republican Americans are less supportive of the reform as well (though both subgroups were also subject to the same generational divide).

Studies Indicating No Benefits (or Harms)

Cerrone and McClintock, “[Come-from-behind victories under ranked-choice voting and runoff: The impact on voter satisfaction](#)” (2023)

- After conducting a survey of US voters, the authors find that, in the absence of education on how RCV works, voter dissatisfaction increases significantly in the presence of “come-from-behind victories” under RCV (i.e., situations in which a candidate without the most first-place votes ends up winning the election).

Vishwanath, “[Electoral Institutions and Substantive Representation in Local Politics: The Effects of Ranked Choice Voting](#)” (2022)

- The author, following an analysis of municipalities that have enacted RCV in the last decade or so, finds that RCV’s implementation did not result in increased representativeness of local legislatures or candidates, whether by the ideology of candidates or winners or by policies enacted.

Baker, “[Voters Evaluate Ideologically Extreme Candidates as Similarly Electable under Ranked Choice Voting and Plurality Voting](#)” (2021)

- After conducting a survey experiment, the author argues that voters have a more difficult time under RCV than a plurality system in evaluating candidates and forming preferences between them and finds that “extreme and moderate candidates are viewed equally as electable under RCV and plurality voting.”

Blais, Plescia, and Sevi, “[Choosing to vote as usual](#)” (2021)

- After surveying Americans on ballot formats, the authors found that participants preferred a plurality system to RCV, preference for a plurality system increased with age (but was unrelated to education), and those with personal experience with RCV viewed RCV more favorably (suggesting a status quo bias).

Clark, “[Rank Deficiency? Analyzing the Costs and Benefits of Single-Winner Ranked-Choice Voting](#)” (2020)

- After conducting a survey experiment and data analysis following Maine’s 2018 elections – the first under the state’s new RCV system – the author finds that RCV reduces voter confidence and satisfaction, lengthens the time required to vote, and is more difficult to use than the standard plurality system.

Nielson, “[Ranked Choice Voting and Attitudes toward Democracy in the United States: Results from a Survey Experiment](#)” (2017)

- After conducting a survey experiment, the author indicates that RCV does not increase voter confidence in elections or the democratic process, and most voters do not prefer RCV over a plurality system.

Tentative Conclusions on Effectiveness

In general, [surveys and academic studies of RCV](#) have found that (1) it is viewed with some hesitancy by those who have not used it but preferred by voters after testing it, with young Americans more supportive of changing the status quo than older citizens, and (2) it produces more civil and positive campaigns than the dominant plurality system, though any impact on polarization is inconclusive. However, an important caveat to these findings is that the adoption of RCV at the state and congressional level is so new and unusual nationwide that the small sample size may be hiding or overemphasizing any potential effects at these larger scales over time.

4. Eliminating “Sore Loser Laws”

Reforming our primary election system's role in selecting general election candidates has been a focus of many reformers hoping to address the drivers of hyperpartisanship. Yet relatively less attention has been given to the legal infrastructure buttressing our election processes, including the various laws and regulations dictating which political candidates are and are not eligible to appear on a general election ballot. These laws often favor and reinforce the power of the existing major parties by limiting the ability of alternative candidates to appear on the ballot.

For example, “sore loser laws” exist in many states and take several forms, including express prohibitions and effective bans through insurmountable filing requirements (e.g., being prohibited from running in a party primary and as an independent in the same race without filing for both circumstances before the primary occurs), but they all ultimately prohibit candidates who lose in a partisan primary from running in the general election as an independent or as another party's nominee.

Reformers – who focus their efforts at the state level due to congressional gridlock and because laws and policy concerning the conducting of elections generally fall under state purview – argue that eliminating sore loser laws could have a significant depolarizing effect on candidates and elected officials by enabling party primary losers – who were likely not partisan enough to win their primary but might [better represent the broader electorate](#) – to run as independents or third-party candidates in the general election and offer the people a more agreeable representative in government. Those who criticize this reform effort, however, state that eliminating these laws without [also implementing ranked-choice voting](#) would simply render the primary loser a general election spoiler.

Implementation in the States

All but three states – [Connecticut, Iowa, and New York](#) – **currently have sore loser laws** in place and efforts to eradicate them are presently minimal.

Tentative Conclusions on Effectiveness

Scholarly studies of sore loser laws in the US are extremely rare, but the [preeminent 2014 study of these laws and their \(possible\) relationship with political polarization](#) finds that sore loser laws have a significant polarizing effect on congressional candidates and elected officials and suggests that eliminating them might reduce as much as 10% of the ideological divide between the major parties in Congress.

5. Multimember Districts with Proportional Ranked-Choice Voting

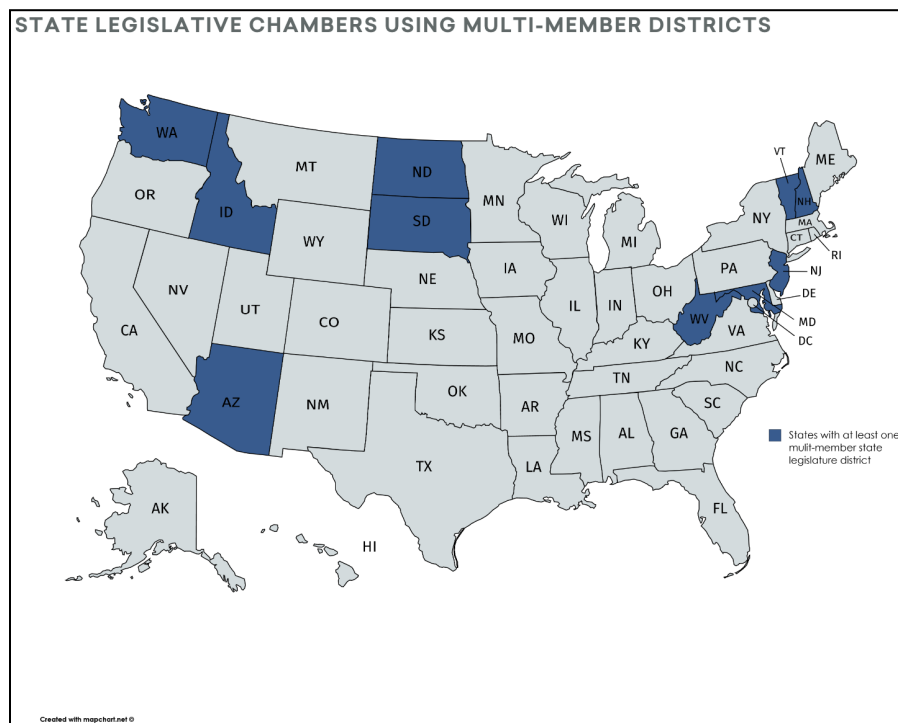
The United States is dominated by [single-member election districts](#), in which voters choose a single individual to represent them in a legislative body. In [multimember districts](#) (MMDs), citizens vote for at least two representatives for each electoral district they reside in. Reformers advocate allowing voters to elect those several representatives through a system of [proportional ranked-choice voting](#) (RCV).

In general, under this system, existing districts are either combined into larger ones to maintain legislature size or preserved to increase legislature size, and a vote threshold is set based on the number of seats available (*ex.*, *25% for three seats*). Like the more typical [RCV](#) process, voters rank all the candidates (or as many or as few as they want) according to their preferences between them. Candidates who exceed the established vote threshold after the first round of ballot counting are guaranteed a seat and then have their excess votes passed to their voters' second-favorite candidate (*ex.*, in a race for three seats with a 25% threshold, a candidate who receives 33% of first-place votes is given a seat, then the 8% of "excess" votes are instead given to those voters' second-favorite candidate). Assuming all seats are not filled after first-place votes are tallied or excess votes reassigned, the last-place candidate is eliminated, and their voters' ballots are reassigned to their next-favorite candidate. [This process](#) is repeated until the appropriate number of candidates exceeds the percentage threshold and each seat is filled.

Proponents of this reform – who focus their efforts at the state and local level due to congressional gridlock and because laws and policy concerning the conducting of elections generally fall under state purview – argue that MMDs and proportional RCV would empower political and demographic minority voters and legislators by giving them legislative decision-making power they are typically excluded from by the US single-member district and plurality election standard, [encourage collaboration](#) between policymakers, and [prevent gerrymandering](#) by devaluing the incentives to do so. Meanwhile, detractors argue this dual reform would [confuse voters](#) unnecessarily and [dilute the accountability of individual legislators](#) to the people.

Implementation in the States

Currently, only **ten states** – Arizona, Idaho, Maryland, New Hampshire, New Jersey, North and South Dakota, Vermont, Washington, and West Virginia – **use MMDs to any extent in their state legislative elections**. Federal law has mandated single-member congressional districts **since 1967**, and **proportional RCV** is only in place (or will soon be implemented) in **seven American locales** – **Albany and Palm Desert, California; Arden, Delaware; Amherst and Cambridge, Massachusetts; Eastpointe, Michigan; and Minneapolis, Minnesota**. Therefore, proportional RCV elections do not yet exist anywhere in the US at the state level or higher.



(Source: [Ballotpedia](#), by means of the [American Academy of Arts & Sciences](#))

Studies of Effectiveness

Studies Indicating Benefits

Benade et al., “[Ranked Choice Voting and Proportional Representation](#)” (2021)

- The authors, after devising an experiment for testing proportional RCV ballots conducted in polarized elections across the US, find that proportional RCV generally produces

proportional representation in government for minority groups, while the single-member plurality standard varies significantly with local circumstances.

Garg et al., “[Combatting Gerrymandering with Social Choice: the Design of Multi-member Districts](#)” (2021)

- After algorithmically generating several congressional maps under MMDs and different electoral processes (e.g., plurality and RCV) and assessing map proportionality, the authors find that districts represented by three members elected by proportional RCV could result in proportional representation in every state, significantly limited gerrymandering capabilities, and preserved geographic cohesion, especially when redistricting is managed by IRCs.

Santucci, “[Evidence of a winning-cohesion tradeoff under multi-winner ranked-choice voting](#)” (2018)

- The author, after reviewing electoral and legislative data drawn from American cities that have previously experimented with proportional RCV, suggests that the reform produces an environment in which parties and candidates solicit support from beyond their typical voting bases.

Farrell and McAllister, “[Voter satisfaction and electoral systems: Does preferential voting in candidate-centred systems make a difference?](#)” (2006)

- After devising a study of 29 countries with varying election infrastructure according to voter satisfaction with their country’s system, the authors find that preferential voting systems like proportional RCV “promote a greater sense of fairness about election outcomes among citizens, which in turn is a major component of the public’s satisfaction with the democratic system.”

Bowler, Farrell, and Pettit, “[Expert Opinion on Electoral Systems: So Which Electoral System Is ‘Best’?](#)” (2005)

- In a survey of 169 election system experts, the authors find that proportional RCV is second only to mixed-member proportional systems ([an election process for parliamentary systems](#) that shares some similarities with proportional RCV) as experts’ preferred election system, well ahead of both RCV and especially the single-member plurality standard in the US.

Studies Indicating Mixed Results

Santucci, “[More Parties or No Parties: The Politics of Electoral Reform in America](#)” (2022)

- In a historical analysis of two dozen American cities that implemented proportional RCV on the heels of the Progressive movement a century ago, the author finds that the reform produced bipartisan coalitions that lasted some time. However, the author also notes

that 23 of those cities repealed the reform in the coming decades and in polarizing ways, [suggesting that](#) the reform failed to permanently promote nonpartisan cooperation among the major parties or break from the two-party system.

Fischer, Lee, and Lelkes, “[Electoral Systems and Political Attitudes: Experimental Evidence](#)” (2021)

- After simulating different electoral systems for randomized groups of study participants, the authors find that proportional systems reduce the difference in winners’ and losers’ satisfaction with democracy compared to plurality systems and that this difference is further reduced with the introduction of more parties (which does not have an impact under plurality systems). Additionally, the authors find that interparty bias does not exist in proportional systems with several parties. However, the authors also find that proportional RCV systems produce more intergroup animosity than plurality systems.

Tentative Conclusions on Effectiveness

Overall, election system scholars have found proportional RCV is effective at increasing representation in government for underrepresented groups compared to the single-winner plurality standard. However, they have also found that proportionality does not imply political depolarization or increased voter satisfaction. Additionally, because proportional RCV only exists on a large scale in other countries, results may vary (somewhat) in the US, and to obtain more reliable analyses, both further adoption and research in the US would be required.

6. Money-in-Politics Reforms

Donors and elected officials, particularly in Congress, have long faced controversy over the amount of money involved in the political machinery that helps put individuals in office and how it might impact their decision-making once in office. For example, members of Congress [spend substantially more time fundraising](#) than meeting with constituents, drafting legislation, or attending hearings, with each election cycle becoming increasingly more expensive. When adjusted for inflation, the 2000 congressional and presidential contests cost totals of [\\$2.5 billion](#) and [\\$2.1 billion](#), respectively, whereas their 2020 contests cost totals of [\\$8.7 billion](#) and [\\$5.7 billion](#).

In addition to increased costs, the federal level has seen significant volatility in campaign finance policy over the last two decades, as the last significant federal campaign finance reform law, the [Bipartisan Campaign Reform Act of 2002](#) (i.e., McCain-Feingold) – which banned “soft money” (political donations not meant to directly benefit a particular candidate) and limited advertisements not sourced from a candidate or their campaign – has seen provisions repeatedly struck down by the Supreme Court, most notably in [Citizens United v. FEC](#) (2010). These

substantial, repeated changes have [long contributed](#) to [popular feelings](#) of [disillusionment](#) with the nation's political financing system.

For these and other reasons – and for [well over a century](#) – numerous state, local, and other federal-level reforms have been proposed to increase transparency around funds used to influence elections and decision-makers. Proponents of illuminating and limiting the role of private, secretive money in politics and governance hold that it would significantly reduce opportunities for wealthy bad actors to influence candidates and policymakers to benefit themselves – while avoiding any public scrutiny – and increase the public's trust in elected officials to seek the betterment of everyday Americans over the elite.

Meanwhile, detractors argue that reforms aimed at boosting small-dollar donors have [disproportionately benefited extreme candidates](#) and would only worsen polarization if implemented further – and that attempts to limit individuals' (and groups thereof) ability to affect political change based on their income would [violate their First Amendment rights](#) to petition their government.

Requiring Transparency from “Super PACs” by Illuminating “Dark Money”

“[Super PACs](#)” are politically active organizations that must disclose their donors and expenditures but may receive and spend unlimited amounts of money so long as their activities are executed “[independent](#)” of campaigns. “[Dark money](#)” refers to political donations and expenditures that cannot be used to target specific candidates (often by “issue advocacy” organizations) but come from entirely undisclosed sources. When these phenomena are combined (i.e., when dark money groups donate to Super PACs), the current American campaign finance system allows individuals, businesses, and organizations to spend unlimited amounts of money to influence election outcomes – and to do so, ultimately, in secret.

This secrecy could be removed by requiring that all money that could be classified as dark money be publicly reported, just as contributions to political campaigns and parties [normally are](#). This reform could be implemented through [legislative action](#), regulatory changes by the [Federal Election Commission](#), the [Securities and Exchange Commission](#), or the [Internal Revenue Service](#), or any combination thereof.

Those who advocate for increasing transparency argue that observation of the “independence” requirement, whereby funders are [forbidden](#) from supporting or producing material while communicating with candidates or parties – or any of their affiliates – is [often dubious at best](#) due to the close relationships campaigns and donors maintain with each other. They also argue that donors may be driven to direct their contributions to less controversial candidates – or causes less harmful to the functioning of democracy – if their activities were subject to public scrutiny.

Opponents of such reform argue that [disclosure requirements could be used to silence disfavored speech](#) and [violate donors' First Amendment rights](#) of free speech and association.

They also argue that only the most informed voters will take the results of increased disclosure into account because [people rely on shortcuts](#) to understand who is on their ballot, therefore limiting its impact.

Increasing Public Financing of Campaigns

Public financing of campaigns refers to [voluntary programs](#) funded by local, state, or federal governments that [provide limited funds to candidates for campaign expenses on the condition that they accept certain campaign terms](#) (e.g., only accepting small-dollar donations and limiting expenditures). While there are [numerous proposed avenues](#) for increasing public financing of campaigns, the two most popular involve (1) matching individual small-dollar donations with equivalent or proportional amounts from government budgets or (2) operating with full public financing (aka conducting “clean elections”) by restricting campaigns to a certain amount of money appropriated from the government’s budget.

Advocates for greater public financing of campaigns argue it would allow a [greater and more diverse array of individuals to run for office](#) than would normally be able to due to formidable campaign costs, ameliorate the [disproportionate fundraising capacity](#) of extremist candidates, reduce the influence of special interest groups, and allow elected officials to spend [more time engaging with constituents than appealing to \(wealthy\) donors](#). Critics of this reform, meanwhile, hold that the voluntary nature of these programs incentivizes candidates to decline participation and raise as much money as they can on their own and that [governments should not be involved in raising funds](#) (e.g., increasing taxes or redirecting existing spending) for political campaigns and should instead focus their appropriations on other issues.

Implementation in the States

Money-in-politics reforms can be found in states across the country. However, only **22 have implemented them** to any degree, leaving a majority of states that allow comparably unrestricted amounts of money into their election processes and no oversight over the money’s sources.

States by Money-in-Politics Reform Implementation		
State	Limiting Dark Money/Super PACs?	Increasing Public Campaign Financing?
Alaska	x	
Arizona	x	x
Connecticut		x
Delaware	x	
Florida		x
Hawaii		x
Idaho	x	
Maine		x
Maryland	x	x
Massachusetts	x	x
Michigan		x
Minnesota		x
Montana	x	
New Jersey		x
New Mexico		x
New York	x	x
North Dakota	x	
Oregon	x	
Rhode Island	x	x
Texas	x	
Vermont	x	x
West Virginia		x

* Note: Washington, DC, has also increased public campaign financing.

[Thirteen states](#) – Alaska, Arizona, Delaware, Idaho, Maryland, Massachusetts, Montana, New York, North Dakota, Oregon, Rhode Island, Texas, and Vermont – have taken steps to limit the prevalence of dark money and/or Super PACs in state elections, though the exact parameters vary significantly between each state.

For example, Alaska approved a [ballot initiative](#) requiring the disclosure of any donor who provides more than \$2,000 to a Super PAC engaged in a state political campaign in 2020, with the state implementing it for the first time in 2022. [Arizona](#) approved a ballot initiative requiring any organization that spends at least \$50,000 in an election to disclose its donors of \$5,000 or more this year. Delaware requires Super PACs that spend \$500 or more on electioneering communications and any entity that contributes over \$1,200 in an election cycle to a party or political action committee to disclose the source of those funds. Idaho requires any individual or organization that spends over \$100 on electioneering communications to disclose all donors of \$50 or more and bans indirect contributions given through third-party entities.

Maryland requires political nonprofits and Super PACs to report their election spending and their five largest donors if they spend over \$6,000. Massachusetts requires advertisements from Super PACs to list the names of the organization's five largest donors in the ad so long as they spend \$5,000 or more.

Additionally, Montana requires all political groups to disclose their funders if they spend money on electioneering communications if they mention a candidate or use their image. New York requires limited liability corporations to disclose all their direct and indirect owners and limits them to contributing \$5,000 in aggregate to a campaign, like other corporations. [North Dakota](#) approved a constitutional amendment ordering the state legislature to enact legislation to require online and consumable disclosure of donors who provide over \$200 for electioneering communications in a 2018 ballot initiative. Oregon approved a constitutional amendment enabling state and local governments to implement campaign contribution limits and force dark money disclosure in a 2020 ballot initiative. Rhode Island requires Super PACs that spend over \$1,000 on electioneering communications to disclose their primary donors. Texas requires politically active organizations engaged in electioneering communications to disclose their donors. And finally, Vermont requires entities engaged in electioneering communications to disclose donors who give \$2,000 or more in their advertisements.

Meanwhile, [15 states](#) – Arizona, Connecticut, Florida, Hawaii, Maine, Maryland, Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, New Jersey, New Mexico, New York, Rhode Island, Vermont, and West Virginia – plus Washington, DC, have implemented “clean elections” and/or matching public funds for certain (or all) state or DC races. Five of these – [Arizona, Connecticut, Maine, New Mexico](#), and [Vermont](#) – operate with clean elections for some or all races, while the remaining states use matching funds. For states with clean elections, eligible candidates (gubernatorial and state legislative candidates in Arizona, Connecticut, and Maine; elected judges in New Mexico; and gubernatorial candidates in Vermont) must collect a large enough number of small donations (e.g., [\\$5 from at least 200 people](#) in Arizona in 2014) to qualify for the program; after accepting, they are allocated with an amount of public money depending on their position (e.g., [about \\$1.13 million for gubernatorial candidates and about \\$23,000 for legislative candidates](#) in Arizona in 2014) that they are restricted to for the duration of their campaign.

States with matching funds, meanwhile, will contribute to participating candidates public funds equivalent to the amount received from small donors, up to a certain amount (e.g., in 2014, Hawaiian candidates faced a general election spending limit of about \$1.6 million and [could receive up to 10% of that amount in public funds](#) if they were able to raise an equivalent amount themselves). However, Washington, DC, combines the clean elections and matching funds formats into its hybrid system, [offering both a lump sum and a 5:1 small-donation matching rate](#) for participating candidates.

Studies of Effectiveness

Studies Indicating Benefits

Heerwig and McCabe, "[Broadening Donor Participation in Local Elections: Results from the Seattle Democracy Voucher Program in 2021](#)" (2022)

- In an analysis of Seattle's 2021 elections, the third under the city's new "voucher" public campaign financing program in which voters receive four \$25 vouchers to allocate to local candidates, the authors find participation in the program increased across all demographic groups (with some of the largest relative gains found among residents of color and younger and lower-income residents) and that voucher users were generally representative of Seattle voters.

Mancinelli, "[Does Public Financing Motivate Electoral Challengers?](#)" (2022)

- The author, after assessing all state legislature races from 1976 to 2018, finds that the number of candidates generally increases when public funding is available and is accentuated when larger amounts of public funds are available and with a greater length of time since the implementation of public funding.

Malbin, "[A Neo-Madisonian Perspective on Campaign Finance Reform, Institutions, Pluralism, and Small Donors](#)" (2021)

- Using empirical analysis and predictive modeling of a New York state matching funds program, the author finds that small-dollar donors do not foster partisan extremism. Furthermore, the author argues that using public money to empower small-dollar constituents "can help correct pluralism's flaws" and "simultaneously serve institutional goals for the common good."

Oklobdzija, "[Public positions, private giving: Dark money and political donors in the Digital Age](#)" (2019)

- After comparing the ideological scores of donors to a dark money group supporting a pair of California ballot initiatives with the scores of other donors supporting those initiatives, the author finds evidence that social pressures do encourage concealing donations through dark money groups and that disclosure laws affect individuals' decisions to donate to political causes.

Wood, "[Show Me the Money: 'Dark Money' and the Informational Benefit of Campaign Finance Disclosure](#)" (2017)

- After designing a survey and experiment concerning voter considerations of campaign finance matters, the author finds that "voters value disclosure of campaign finance information and will reward voluntary disclosure while punishing candidates supported by dark money groups."

Malhotra, “[The Impact of Public Financing on Electoral Competition: Evidence from Arizona and Maine](#)” (2008)

- After assessing state legislative races in the “clean election” states of Arizona and Maine, the author finds that public financing programs significantly increase electoral competition in districts where competitors participate in such programs.

Studies Indicating Mixed Results

Rhodes, Franz, Franklin Fowler, and Ridout, “[The Role of Dark Money Disclosure on Candidate Evaluations and Viability](#)” (2019)

- After designing an experiment testing how groups of individuals, when viewing political advertisements, incorporate partisanship and dark money usage in their political decision-making, the authors find that support for a candidate is usually reduced when their acceptance of dark money is disclosed. However, when their partisan alignment is also revealed, individuals generally demonize the candidate’s opponent from the opposing party, as the advertisement intends.

Hall, “[How the Public Funding of Elections Increases Candidate Polarization](#)” (2014)

- The author’s analysis indicates that public campaign financing significantly decreases incumbents’ financial and electoral advantages but also increases polarization and candidate divergence. A contributing factor, the author finds, is that access-oriented interest groups, in general, overwhelmingly support moderate incumbents, but this practice is undone by public campaign financing.

Studies Indicating No Benefits (or Harms)

Cox, “[Dark Money in Congressional House Elections](#)” (2022)

- After analyzing advertising data and designing a model of voter choice influenced by spending, the author finds that dark money spending “do[es] not have significant effects on candidate vote share when accounting for the spending of candidates, parties, PACs, and Super PACs.”

Kilborn, “[Public Campaign Financing, Candidate Socioeconomic Diversity, and Representational Inequality at the U.S. State Level: Evidence from Connecticut](#)” (2021)

- The author, after comparing Connecticut state legislative candidates with candidates in two states without public campaign financing, finds that fewer individuals of lower socioeconomic statuses run for state legislative office when public financing is available, and those who do run are less likely to participate in the public financing program and no more likely to win.

Kilborn and Vishwanath, “[Public Money Talks Too: How Public Campaign Financing Degrades Representation](#)” (2021)

- After analyzing Arizona’s, Connecticut’s, and Maine’s public financing programs, the authors find that candidates who solely rely on public campaign financing are more politically extreme and less representative of their districts than candidates who do not participate in the state’s public financing program.

Masket and Miller, “[Does Public Election Funding Create More Extreme Legislators? Evidence from Arizona and Maine](#)” (2021)

- After assessing state legislative candidates in the “clean election” states of Arizona and Maine, the authors find no significant difference in ideological extremity between candidates who are publicly or privately funded.

Keena and Knight-Finley, “[Are Small Donors Polarizing? A Longitudinal Study of the Senate](#)” (2019)

- The study finds that small dollar donors do not necessarily lead to more polarization among legislators. However, legislators who take extremist floor positions during reelection tend to raise more money from small donors, which implies that the implementation of a small donor matching program might incentivize strategic polarization by political candidates.

Pildes, “[Small-Donor-Based Campaign-Finance Reform and Political Polarization](#)” (2019)

- The author’s analysis suggests that small-donor matching programs for political campaigns worsen polarization because the most successful fundraisers under these programs are those who generate national media coverage, usually due to their ideological extremity and/or propensity for generating virality.

Barber, “[Ideological Donors, Contribution Limits, and the Polarization of American Legislatures](#)” (2015)

- After analyzing state campaign contribution data, the author writes: “Individual donors prefer to support ideologically extreme candidates while...PACs tend to support more moderate candidates.”

Klumpp, Mialon, and Williams, “[Leveling the Playing Field? The Role of Public Campaign Funding in Elections](#)” (2015)

- The authors, after developing a comparative election model, find that public funding programs do not have a consistently positive effect on increasing the political speech capabilities of all candidates.

La Raja and Schaffner, "[Campaign Finance and Political Polarization: When Purists Prevail](#)" (2015)

- After analyzing two decades of state and congressional campaign finance data, the authors find that efforts to limit the effects and presence of large political contributions have failed and have increased polarization, as campaign funding is now dominated by direct donations to candidates from wealthy ideological "purists." Instead, the authors propose loosening regulations on political parties to mitigate the influence of wealthy "purist" donors and the likelihood that extremist candidates run for office or that moderate candidates adopt more extreme views to obtain adequate funding.

Tentative Conclusions on Effectiveness

Generally, scholarly studies of campaign finance have found that the acceptance of dark money harms images of candidates when revealed, and the prevalence of disclosure laws gives donors pause when considering contributing to a particular candidate, party, or cause. However, they also suggest that other factors, such as partisan cues and the enormous level of political spending, are more significant factors for influencing voter perception of candidates and trust in the elected officials' integrity and government more broadly. Regarding public financing, meanwhile, [holistic assessments of such reforms](#) have found that they do increase campaign competitiveness by reducing incumbent financial advantages but have no significant effect on incumbents' reelection rates. Additionally, studies have found inconsistent impacts on candidate political extremity and district representativeness (political and socioeconomic).