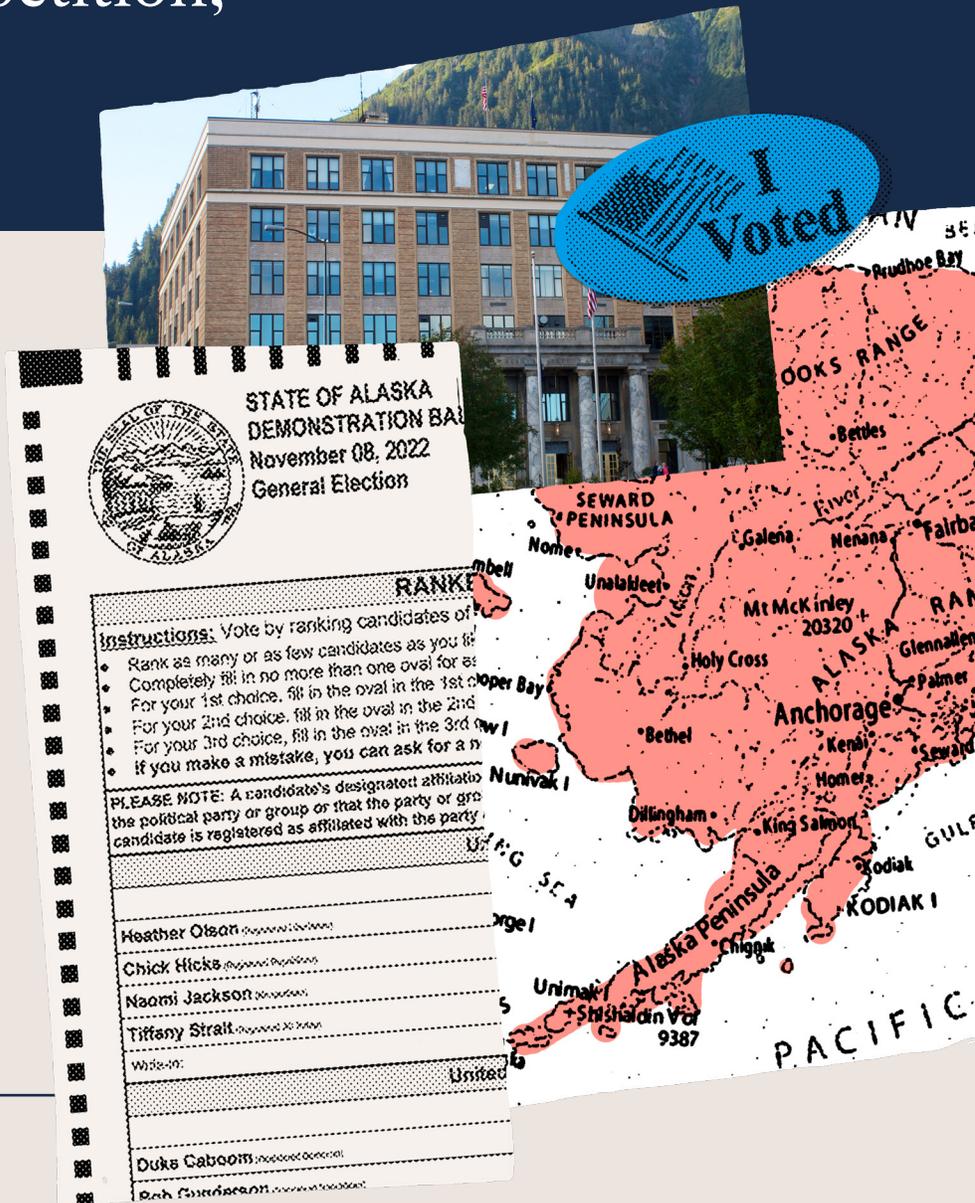


ALASKA'S ELECTION MODEL

How the top-four nonpartisan primary system improves participation, competition, and representation



Executive Summary

Though nicknamed the “Last Frontier,” Alaska is now very much the first frontier when it comes to election innovation in the United States. In the coming years, election reforms with the greatest impact on the health of our democracy will be those that improve political incentives: how candidates run for office, and how they govern once elected.

Approved by voters in 2020 and used for the first time in 2022, Alaska’s new election system pairs a top-four nonpartisan primary with an instant runoff general election. Already, our research finds that Alaska’s reform has given voters more voice and power in who represents them and significantly increased electoral competition, tempered political extremism, and delivered a voting system that is viewed as both simple and popular among voters.

Importantly, the reform did not advantage one party over the other: a conservative Republican, moderate Republican, and moderate Democrat were elected by the same electorate to statewide offices. Republicans retained legislative majorities, while Alaska’s tradition of cross-partisan governing coalitions continued throughout the 2023 legislative session.

In this report, we survey existing research published on the impact of the policy and introduce original analysis. Overall, our key findings include:

The Alaska System increased the share of Alaskans casting “meaningful votes” — ballots cast in competitive elections that are not effectively pre-determined by party affiliation. Most importantly, meaningful participation in elections was a record high.

- There was a 58% increase in Alaskans casting a meaningful vote compared to 2020 pre reform;
- Alaska had the highest share of meaningful votes among all states.

For the first time since 2000, all Alaska voters had the right to vote for any candidate in every election, regardless of party.

- Voters who participated in the 2022 primary did not have to choose one party’s primary ballot. Prior to reform, voters could not vote for a Republican for one office and a Democrat for another, even if those candidates best represented their views.

The 2022 election saw an increase in primary voters over the most recent midterm (2018), while general election turnout remained largely consistent with prior elections. Given confounding variables, parsing out the new system’s impact on turnout is premature.

- Primary election participation (37%) was the third highest in the country.¹
- Despite claims that instant runoffs would deter or confuse voters, there was only a small decrease in turnout from the 2018 election. Alaska saw similar turnout rates in two of the last five midterm elections.

The Alaska System made general elections significantly more competitive.

- The share of uncontested state legislative elections was cut in half from 2020, and was lower than any cycle in the previous decade (12%).
- Intraparty competition materialized for the first time: half of all 2022 general election races included two or more candidates from the same major party, ensuring these elections mattered

ⁱ This paper measures turnout by dividing the number of voters by Alaska’s Voting Eligible Population (VEP) in order to make comparisons to other states and to control for Alaska’s recent implementation of Automatic Voting Registration.

even in districts considered “safe” for one party or another.

- 40% of independent candidates won their elections, up from 17% in 2020. Six independents now serve in the Alaska legislature, more than ever before in Alaska. Independents hold 10% of state legislative seats, higher than any other state.

While it’s too early to know what the new system’s impact was, women and people of color running for the state legislature performed better than in 2020.

- The historic election of Mary Peltola to the U.S. House made her the first Alaska Native to serve in Congress and the first woman to hold the seat;
- Alaska state government is more racially diverse than ever before, with 14 people of color serving, representing 23% of the legislature;¹
- More female candidates (19) ran for statewide office in 2022 than all five previous election cycles combined (16);² women won more than a majority of open seats;
- More than half of surveyed Alaska Native and American Indian voters (54%) and almost half of other people of color (47%) said their vote mattered more than in previous years, while only 20% and 18% said it mattered less, respectively.³

The Alaska System likely helped the state to mitigate escalating national polarization trends by rewarding candidates who broadly represent the whole electorate, including those who went on to form cross-partisan governing coalitions.

- U.S. Senator Lisa Murkowski (R) won re-election with support from a majority of all voters, at a time when many other compromise-oriented legislators were

primaried out of office by a fraction of voters within their own party. Murkowski likely would not have survived a primary challenge under the old system, as 58.2% of Republican primary voters supported her opponent, Kelly Tshibaka, in the primary, according to exit polling.

- Based on analysis of candidate policy positions dating back to 2018, candidates with more moderate policy positions were more likely to win elections than in the previous two election cycles.
- Both the Alaska State House and State Senate re-established cross-partisan governing coalitions and many issues — including the state’s budget crisis — were addressed on a bipartisan basis.¹

Most Alaska voters found ranking simple, cast their ballot correctly, and supported the continued use of the election model.

- The rate of spoiled ballots was very low: 99.9% of ranked choice ballots in the November election were cast correctly
- 79% of November voters reported the election system being “simple,”⁴ and 85% of August special election voters reported the system being “simple.”⁵
- Approval for the new election system — 57% in August 2022 and 54% in November 2022 — was higher than when Alaska voters approved it by a 1% margin.

ⁱ Alaska has a long history of cross-partisan caucuses. The new voting system cannot be credited with establishing them, though may have reinforced incentives to govern in a cross-partisan way. For example, it’s very rare for both chambers to have such caucuses at the same time.

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Introduction

Political reform has been advancing in Alaska for the last decade. In 2016, 65% of Alaskans approved Ballot Measure 1, a referendum supported by a broad coalition of partisans and good government reformers that led to an automatic voter registration system.⁶ Two years later, an effort called “Alaskans for Integrity” forced the legislature to act on issues related to ethics and corruption; HB 44 established “no budget, no pay” rules, reformed travel policies, closed lobbying loopholes, and enacted stricter conflict of interest policies.⁷

Reformers came together again in 2020 proposing an overhaul to the state’s election system with the boldest proposal yet — one that reflects Alaskans’ independence and values, and improved upon the model of top-two primaries used in three other states.

The “Alaskans for Better Elections” coalition included current and former elected representatives from both major political parties, good government groups, Alaska Native tribal leaders, and leaders from key Alaska industries — including teachers, union workers, fishery operators, mine operators, and more.⁸ Their campaign also faced intense opposition, including from both major political parties, political groups including Planned Parenthood and Americans for Prosperity, and notable statewide elected officials and candidates. One headline from 2020 read: “Current, former leaders from both major political parties oppose election reform ballot initiative.”^{9, i}

Ultimately, Alaskans approved the measure by 3,781 votes, a margin of just 1.1%.¹⁰ The policy would immediately impact all future state and federal elections in the state with three major changes:

1. Partisan primaries would be replaced with nonpartisan primaries. Instead of separate

elections for the Republican and Democratic nominations that did not guarantee a *right* for independents to participate, a nonpartisan primary open to all candidates and all voters would be ushered in. The top four finishers for each race would advance to the general election.

2. Instant runoffs would guarantee majority winners in general elections. Instead of separate elections for the Republican and Democratic nominations that did not guarantee a right for independents to participate, a nonpartisan primary open to all candidates and all voters would be ushered in. The top four finishers for each race would advance to the general election.

3. Dark money would be curtailed. Instead of allowing outside interest groups to obfuscate the source of their revenues, the “true source” of any expenditure to support or oppose a candidate for state or local office would need to be disclosed, allowing Alaskans to know the identities of the donors influencing their elections.ⁱⁱ

The policy package was an Alaska answer to Alaskans’ concerns: First, in 2020, in a growing trend in-state and nationally, five lawmakers were “primaried” out of office after working collaboratively across the aisle.¹¹ Second, the state had experienced a run of three-way general election contests, leading to unrepresentative outcomes.ⁱⁱⁱ Third, donors from the “lower 48” had been flooding the state with advertisements trying to sway elections without their names being disclosed.¹² These dynamics made the state especially ripe for reform.

To design a solution commensurate with the size of the problem faced, election reformer and Alaska Attorney Scott Kendall brought together a suite of reforms that had been tried elsewhere. States like California, Washington, Nebraska, and Louisiana had done away with partisan primaries, allowing the

i Note & Disclosure: The Unite America Institute is a funder of Alaskans for Better Elections and has supported the implementation of election reform in Alaska, including to evaluate the impact of the reform through commissioned research which is summarized throughout this paper.

ii Analysis of this component of the ballot measure is not addressed in this report, but it is included here as it was an important policy change that was voted on in the same package as the other two reforms.

iii In 2014, the Democratic nominee for Governor dropped out of the race to join a “Unity” ticket with an independent, Bill Walker, out of fear of splitting the vote. Four years later, Walker dropped out of his re-election effort seeking not to spoil the election as an independent. In the 1990s, Governor Tony Knowles (D) benefited from vote-splitting among his opponents twice. In 2008, Mark Begich (D) ousted the incumbent U.S. Senator Ted Stevens (R), lost votes to a far right spoiler candidate based on Stevens’ moderate views on social issues.

top two finishers to advance from primaries open to all voters and candidates.ⁱ Cities in Utah, Colorado, New Mexico, Minnesota, and on the coasts had begun experimenting with instant runoffs using ranked choice ballots. Maine voters began using the system in 2018 to elect their federal representatives.

Proponents of both systems said they would improve participation, competition, and representation while tempering polarization. Some advocates had suggested that combining these reforms, as Kendall did, would amplify their benefits.¹³

Following the initiative's approval by voters in November 2020, the policy was litigated in both state and federal courts as opponents sought legal pathways to overturn the initiative.¹⁴ Each time, courts rejected the claims made by plaintiffs — including to find that the reform does not interfere with a political party's freedom of association, does not violate the state constitution's rules for electing the Lieutenant Governor, and would not place a burden on voters to make a knowledgeable choice.¹⁵

In the leadup to the system's first use, the state's Division of Election embarked on a public education campaign to educate voters about their new election process.¹⁶ All voters would participate in a "top-four" nonpartisan primary in which all candidates appeared on the same ballot. Each voter would get one vote, and the four candidates with the most vote would advanced to the general election. The general election would voters to rank their choices in order of preference, and an "instant runoff" would then be used to guarantee a majority winner in each contest.

The system was first used in a highly unusual and especially competitive special election; one Washington Post headline — "Alaska is Having the Wildest Election of 2022" — captured it well.¹⁷ Following the unfortunate passing of Don Young (R), who had served as the state's lone U.S. House representative for 49 years, 48 candidates filed to fill the vacancy. To administer the June special primary election, the state held its first ever all-mail election.

After the field was narrowed to four candidates, the special general election was held in August on the same day as the primary election was held for the regular election. The circumstances around the state's first use of the system — a 48-way race for a seat that was open for the first time in a half-century — make it hard to parse out firm conclusions about the reform's impact on voter turnout.

Eventually, the system was used for all offices: U.S. Senator, U.S. House, Governor and Lieutenant Governor, the State Senate, and the State House. With only one election cycle to examine after the first use of the system, all of our findings are limited by a small sample size. Yet, the early evidence from Alaska suggests that the "Alaska System," as it's referred to throughout this paper, serves as a powerful model for other states looking to give voters more power and increase electoral competition, and that it may also help improve representation, and temper polarization.

The remainder of the paper is organized into five major sections: Electoral competition, voter participation, representation, polarization and governance, and the voter experience. Each section presents a premise for investigation, the problem with the status-quo, and the theoretical benefits of reform, followed by analysis of based on data made available by other scholars and our own original analysis.

We evaluate each premise across three dimensions:

Our Conclusion - Is the premise validated by the data?

- Yes - There is enough evidence to back up the claim.
- No - There is not enough evidence to back up the claim.

Effect Size - How impactful is the Alaska System?

- Large - The impact of the Alaska System is significant.
- Medium - The impact of the Alaska System is modest.

ⁱ Nebraska only uses top-two nonpartisan primaries for state legislative offices, while Louisiana officially does not hold primaries at all. All candidates compete in the general election and if no one earns a majority, the top two candidates advance to a runoff.

-
- Small - The impact of the Alaska System is small.
 - Not Applicable - If the conclusion is “No.”

Our Confidence - How sure are we that the conclusion and effect size are right?

- High - There is a lot of evidence to back up our conclusion and effect size evaluations.
- Medium - There is some evidence to back up our conclusion and effect size evaluations.
- Low - There is limited evidence to back up our conclusion and effect size evaluations.

A case study on Alaska’s “Meaningful Vote Percentage” combines the impact of voter turnout and electoral competition to measure the power of individual votes. A final section surfaces critics’ claims and identifies remaining research questions.

How it Works & Who Won

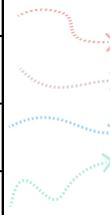
Alaska's Election System in Practice

Primary Election

All candidates appear on the same ballot, regardless of party. Voters pick one candidate.

United State Senator (Vote for one)	
Murkowski, Lisa (Registered Republican)	<input type="radio"/>
Tshibaka, Kelly C. (Registered Republican)	<input type="radio"/>
Chesbro, Patricia R (Registered Democrat)	<input type="radio"/>
Kelley, Buzz A. (Nonpartisan)	<input type="radio"/>
Nolin, Pat L. (Registered Republican)	<input type="radio"/>
Blatchford, Edgar (Registered Democrat)	<input type="radio"/>
Taylor, Ivan R. (Registered Democrat)	<input type="radio"/>
Thorne, Sean M. (Registered Libertarian)	<input type="radio"/>
Gungurstein, Shoshana (Nonpartisan)	<input type="radio"/>
Stephens, Joe T. (Registered AK Independence)	<input type="radio"/>
8 More Candidates	

The top four advance to the general election



General Election

The top four candidates advance from the primary. Voters have the option to rank up to four candidates based on preference.

United State Senator					
	1st Choice	2nd Choice	3rd Choice	4th Choice	5th Choice
Murkowski, Lisa (Registered Republican)	<input type="radio"/>				
Tshibaka, Kelly C. (Registered Republican)	<input type="radio"/>				
Chesbro, Patricia R (Registered Democrat)	<input type="radio"/>				
Kelley, Buzz A. (Nonpartisan)	<input type="radio"/>				
Write-in:	<input type="radio"/>				

Tabulating Final Results

First Round

In the first round of tabulation, voters' first-choice votes are tallied. If a candidate receives a majority (50%+1), they win the election.

Second Round

Since no candidate received a majority, the candidate with the fewest votes was eliminated. Voters who supported Kelley, in this case, had their votes transferred to their next choice (indicated in green).

Final Round

Pat Chesbro was eliminated in the third and final round. People who voted for Chesbro had their votes transferred to their next choice. Lisa Murkowski reached a threshold of 53.7% (a majority), and was declared the winner.

Candidate	1st Round	2nd Round	Final Round
Murkowski, Lisa	113,800 (43.4%)	115,429 (44.5%)	135,972 (53.7%)
Tshibaka, Kelly C.	111,886 (42.6%)	115,090 (44.3%)	117,299 (46.3%)
Chesbro, Patricia R.	28,185 (10.7%)	29,078 (11.2%)	Eliminated
Kelley, Buzz A.	8,540 (3.3%)	Eliminated	Eliminated

Statewide Election Outcomes

Republicans, Democrats, and independents all prevailed under the new system in both statewide and state legislative elections. Alaska voters, a majority (58%) of whom are unaffiliated with both major parties, were able to evaluate candidates beyond

simple party dynamics and instead based on their individual merits and issues — ultimately electing a politically and demographically diverse slate of leaders that reflect Alaska.

Governor



Governor Mike Dunleavy (R)
won an outright majority (50.3%) in the general election. The race did not require an instant runoff tabulation.

U.S. Senate



Senator Lisa Murkowski (R)
led with first place votes (43.4%) and ultimately won on the third round of the instant runoff tabulation with majority support (53.7%).

U.S. House



Rep. Mary Peltola (D)
led with first place votes (48.6%) and ultimately won on the third round of the instant runoff tabulation with majority support (54.9%).

State Legislative Election Outcomes

Of the 59 state legislative races on the ballot, 22 had three or more candidates in the general election. Twelve of those were decided in the first round because a candidate earned more than 50% of first-choice votes. The remaining 10 were decided by instant runoffs, three of which were won by a candidate who did not lead in the first round; in all three cases, the winner earned enough second-choice votes from the eliminated candidates who were members of the same

political party.

Republicans won a one-seat majority in both the state house and state senate. Both bodies are organized with bipartisan governing majorities: The senate majority caucus includes eight Republicans and nine Democrats and the chamber is led by Senate President Gary Stevens (R). The house majority caucus includes 19 Republicans, two Democrats, and two independents and the chamber is led by Speaker of the House Cathy Tilton (R).

Figure 01

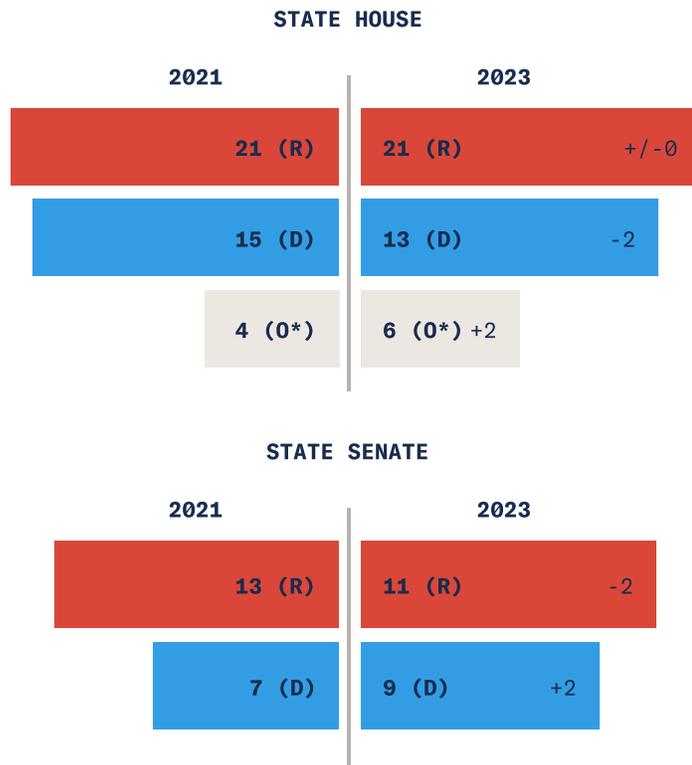
ALASKA LEGISLATURE PARTY COMPOSITION

Small shifts in party membership between 2021 and 2023 suggest that Top Four does not favor one major party over the other.

Note: The letter “O” represents “Other,” consisting of registered independents or nonpartisans.

- Republican
- Democrat
- Other*

Source: Alaska State Legislature



Definitions

INDEPENDENT VOTER & CANDIDATE

In Alaska, voters who do not register with a political party are registered as either “undeclared” or “nonpartisan.” According to the Division of Elections, “‘Nonpartisan’ means that a person is not associated with or does not support the policies or interests of a political party; ‘undeclared’ means that a voter does not wish to declare an affiliation.” For the purposes of this paper, we refer to the two groups together as “independents.”¹⁸ American voters regularly self-identify as “independent” — with a higher share (49%) saying they do not belong to either political party than ever before.¹⁹

PARTISAN PRIMARY

A primary in which only candidates from the same party compete, and the candidate with the most votes advances to the general election.ⁱ The rules determining who can vote vary by state, but sometimes only voters registered with the party can participate.

NONPARTISAN PRIMARY

A primary in which all candidates compete, regardless of party membership. In most state or federal nonpartisan primaries, candidates are still affiliated with parties via labels on the ballot.

TOP-FOUR PRIMARY

A nonpartisan primary in which all candidates compete on the same ballot open to all voters, and the four candidates with the most votes advance to the general election. Voters select one candidate; some Alaskans refer to their top-four primary as a “Pick One Primary.” It will be referred to in this paper frequently as simply “Top Four.”

INSTANT RUNOFF VOTING

A system in which voters can rank candidates in order of preference. If one candidate earns 50%+1 of the vote, they win. If no candidate earns a majority, the candidate with the fewest votes is eliminated one at a time and voters’ backup choices are counted until one candidate has majority support. Instant Runoff Voting is also known as Ranked Choice Voting, and will be referred to in this paper frequently as simply “instant runoffs.”

THE ALASKA SYSTEM

The combination of a top-four nonpartisan primary followed by an instant runoff general election. Approved by Alaskans in 2020, this system was used for the first time ever in 2022. The Alaska system is referred to as “Final-Four Voting” by some advocates.²⁰

ⁱ Prior to the reform, political parties in Alaska were allowed to include candidates from different parties on the same primary ballot. For example, 2020 Democratic primary ballots included independent candidates and Alaska Independent Party candidates.

Competition

PREMISE

The Alaska System will increase competition in elections.

FINDING

Electoral competition improved significantly across many dimensions, including a smaller portion of uncontested general elections (cut in half from 2020); closer general election margins; newfound intra-party competition in general elections; and, more successful independent candidates.

OUR CONCLUSION

YES

OUR CONFIDENCE

HIGH

EFFECT SIZE

LARGE

The Problem

A functional democracy requires competitive elections. Without them, voters have no say in who represents them, nor the ability to hold those in power accountable. Today, American elections are more uncompetitive than ever before.

In 2022, a shocking 41% of state legislative seats nationwide were not contested by one major party, the highest rate of uncompetitive general elections since 2016.²¹ The problem is so bad that even before election day, 22 legislative chambers across 16 states were already guaranteed a majority for either Democrats or Republicans because the minority party did not put forward a candidate in most seats.²² Given the lack of general election competitiveness, most elections are decided in primaries — but only 20% of state legislative primaries last year had more than one candidate.²³

Without real competition in either primaries or general elections, the vast majority of American elected officials can put partisan and special interests over voter interests. Evidence-based solutions to pressing public policy problems Americans largely agree on will not see the light of day if voters do not have the ability to hold our elected leaders accountable for their performance.

The ultimate impact of partisan primaries is that elected officials are not held accountable to the majority of their voters. While Congress had just a 22%

approval rating in November 2022,²⁴ 95% of Congress was reelected that same month.²⁵

The Theory

In a 2013 paper that first proposed the combination of top-four nonpartisan primary and instant runoffs, Drew Spencer and Rob Richie argued that the system, “allows for greater access, widens the diversity of voices, and enhances competition compared to a limit of two in the general election.”²⁶ Katherine Gehl and Michael Porter later posited that Top Four will inject competition into the “politics industry.”²⁷

Advocates for the reform in Alaska promised this policy would deliver competition in their state. The campaign manager for Ballot Measure 2, Shea Siegert, claimed: “[O]ur goal is to return that competition and to return free-market elections back to Alaska.”²⁸

Campaign advertisements encouraging voters to vote yes featured a “more choice, more voice, more power” tagline — promising Alaskans the reform would give them more candidates to choose from, which would ultimately deliver them greater say in who represents them.²⁹

“[O]ur goal is to return that competition and to return free-market elections back to Alaska.”

Why might the Alaska System lead to more electoral competition?

- The system may encourage *more candidates to run*. When four candidates advance to the general election, prospective candidates may see a clearer path to winning.
- Second, the system may encourage a *more ideologically diverse set of candidates to run*. In particular, more moderate candidates who otherwise may believe they cannot win a low turnout partisan primary among the most politically engaged voters may choose to run knowing that the primary and general will be open to all voters.
- Third, the system will induce more *intraparty competition*. In the general election, candidates will need to not only compete with members of the other party, but also — at least in some cases — against candidates within their own party. This could have a positive impact, forcing candidates to compete on more than the label next to their name, and instead campaign on their experience, legislative record, and more nuanced and multidimensional policy positions.³⁰
- Fourth, the system may introduce competition to the two major parties by *lowering the barrier to entry for independent and third party candidates*. These candidates, who traditionally are not covered by media or considered by voters during primaries, will now be relevant in primaries, and they will no longer face the critique that voting for them will “spoil” the general election, because voters have the ability to rank candidates.
- Finally, even third and fourth place candidates who lose may *force a more healthy competition of ideas*. With more general election candidates on the ballot, there are more opportunities for candidates with diverse views to influence policy debates and interject priorities. The

potential impact is on the marketplace of ideas, an important part of the theoretical impact of the reform distinct from other dimensions of competition.

In the first election cycle following the implementation of the Alaska System, the portion of state legislative seats with only one candidate was cut in half.

The Evidence

There are many ways to evaluate whether competition is increasing in the political sector, including how many candidates run, the margins by which victors are elected, whether candidates from outside the two major parties are successful, and the quality of the candidates who do run.

Perhaps the clearest indicator of a lack of electoral competition is the number of general election races that were uncontested. When races are uncontested, meaning voters have only one option on their general election ballot, there is quite literally no competition.

In the first election cycle following the implementation of the Alaska System, the portion of state legislative seats with only one candidate was cut in half — from 24% to 12%.³¹ Further, according to a report published by the think tank R Street Institute, the 2022 election in Alaska had fewer uncontested races and was significantly below the average rate of uncontested contests in the decade prior to reform (24.5%). The high rate of competitiveness in 2022 is especially notable when compared to 2012, the most recent cycle following redistricting: 2022 saw less than half as many uncontested races as 2012.³² In line with competitive state legislative elections, none of the states’ three statewide elections were uncontested in the general election.

As noted, a key theory behind the Alaska System, and

many other electoral reforms, is that voters have a greater variety of choices on their ballot. We don't yet know exactly what effect the system had on the total number of candidates: At the state legislative level, there were 2.49 candidates per legislative seat, which is slightly more than the average number of candidates in 2020 but about the same as in 2018. For now, the reform's impact on the total number of candidates at the legislative level seems null. However, the reform did bring more intraparty competition from the primary to the general election, allowing voters to have more nuanced choice in their representation.

More notably, the number of candidates for statewide contests was significantly higher than normal. No statewide 2022 primary — including both the U.S. House and U.S. Senate contest — featured fewer than ten candidates. In previous Alaska elections, ten candidate fields were rare.³³ The U.S. House special primary election was especially notable, featuring 48 candidates. At least one candidate credited the election system with his decision to enter the race: “In the old system, I would not have run because the

major parties had it pretty much tied up.”³⁴ While the reform likely had some impact on the number of statewide candidates, there are many reasons why candidates might have entered statewide races: the U.S. House seat was open for the first time in 49 years; the incumbent U.S. Senator and Governor were each politically vulnerable; and the trend nationally was toward more candidates³⁵ — potentially because hot-button issues compelled civic-minded leaders to run.

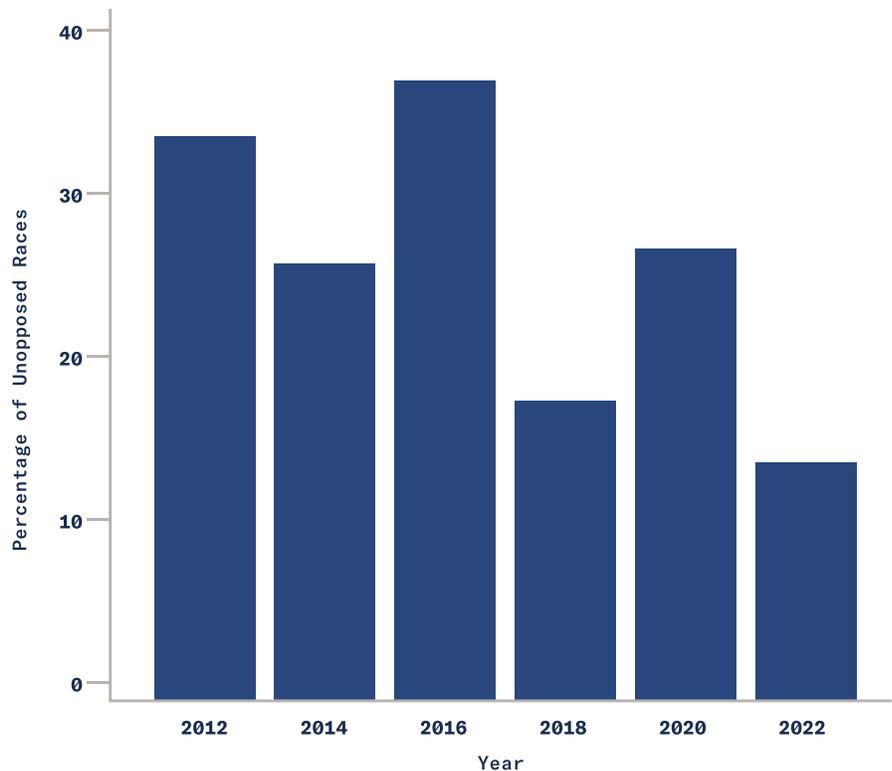
However, for both statewide and legislative races, the reform did appear to increase the number of choices in the *general election*, where voter participation is historically higher. The reform allowed more candidates from the two major parties and independents to reach the general election ballot. An average of 2.39 candidates per general election was 16% higher than any of the three previous election cycles.

Electoral competition can also be measured by the margins of general election outcomes. In Alaska in 2022, 30% of state legislative seats were won with less

Figure 02

PERCENTAGE OF UNOPPOSED STATE LEGISLATIVE RACES IN ALASKA, 2012-2022

Data was obtained for each year from official returns provided by the Alaska Division of Elections. Unopposed races are classified as those in which only one candidate was named on the ballot.



Source: Adapted from the R Street Institute, sourced from Alaska Division of Elections

than 55% of the vote, one commonly-used threshold for measuring competition; this was nearly double the state's recent historical average.³⁶ All four of the state's statewide elections were competitive by this measure, too, including for U.S. Senate (53.7%), U.S. House (51.5% in the special election and 55.0% in the general election), and Governor (50.4%).

The Unite America Institute has compiled a dataset to allow for comparisons across states. 32.5% of Alaska state house races were won by fewer than 10 percentage points; this was 44 percent higher than the state's rate in 2020, and the second-highest in the nation in 2022 behind only Nebraska, another nonpartisan primary state, at 34.7%.

The Alaska System also introduced a new kind of competition to the state. Under the traditional primary system, candidates only competed against co-partisans in partisan primaries but not in general elections. The Alaska System allows intraparty competition in general elections — requiring candidates compete on ideas and not mere partisanship. The general election

ballot shows that this kind of competition was fully present in the first year of the reform.

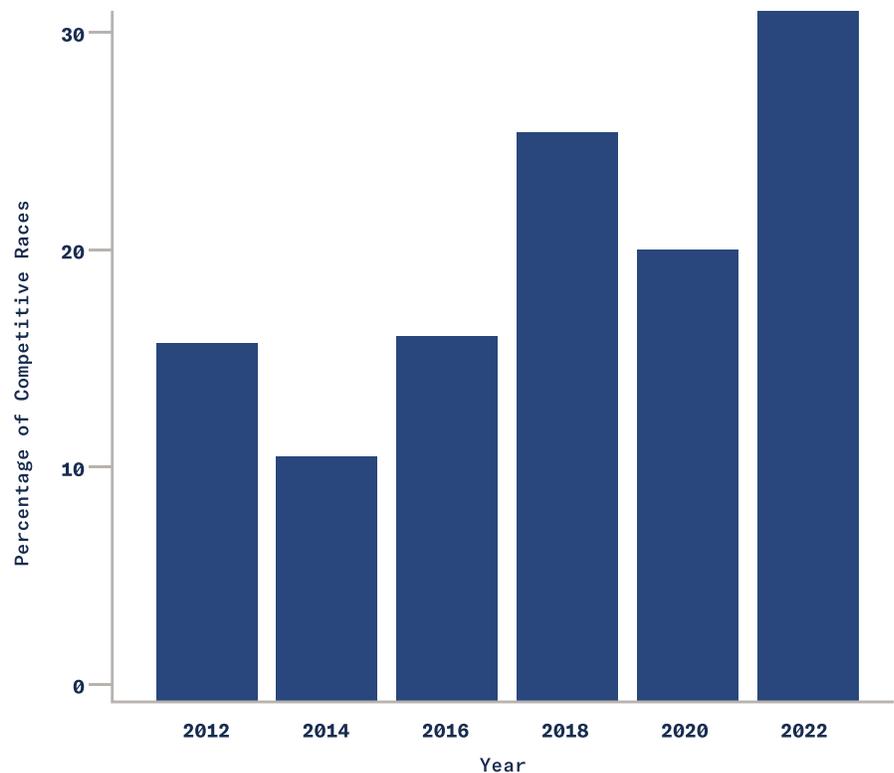
32.5% of Alaska state house races were won by fewer than 10 percentage points; this was 44 percent higher than the state's rate in 2020, and the second-highest in the nation in 2022

Half of all 2022 general election races, including statewide races, featured two or more candidates from the same major party: in these races, general election voters had more representative choices than ever before.³⁷ Thirteen races featured multiple candidates from only one party, each a case where races would have likely been uncontested in the general election under the old system. When partisan dynamics in a district strongly favor one party, the Alaska System allows all voters to weigh in on which candidate best represents the community. This stands in contrast to

Figure 03

PERCENTAGE OF COMPETITIVE STATE LEGISLATIVE RACES IN ALASKA, 2012-2022

Data was obtained for each year from official returns provided by the Alaska Division of Elections. Competitive races are classified as those in which the winning candidate received 55 percent or less of the vote.



Source: Adapted from R Street Institute, sourced from Alaska Division of Elections

what Figure 4 shows: nearly 58% of races in 2020 were either uncontested or featured just a Republican and a Democrat.ⁱ In 2022, only 29% of races fell into these categories.

Given how slanted the traditional primary system is towards the major parties, a more competitive system with lower barriers to entry should allow other parties and candidates to be exposed to voters and eventually get elected. Six independent candidates won their elections in 2022, giving Alaskans a larger independent delegation in Juneau than ever before. While Alaskans have elected a fair number of independents in recent years, 40% won their general election race in 2022.ⁱⁱ In 2020, 4 out of 24 (17%) nonpartisan/undeclared candidates won seats. Independents had a better chance of getting elected in 2022 than they did in 2020. Representing 10% of the state legislature, Alaska has a higher share of independent legislators than any other state.

Representing 10% of the state legislature, Alaska has a higher share of independent legislators than any other state.

Commenting on the record-breaking number of independents in Juneau, Jeannette Lee, an Alaska-based researcher for the Sightline Institute, opined that, “The new system, more than any other factor, was the most obvious game-changer for political diversity in the Alaska legislature.”³⁸

Despite the increased competition, both the majority party and incumbents performed well under the new system. As Figure 5 shows, the minority Democratic party has averaged control of 22 seats since 2012, the same number they hold following the 2022 election. Numerically, Republicans also retained their legislative majority. They were also able to form

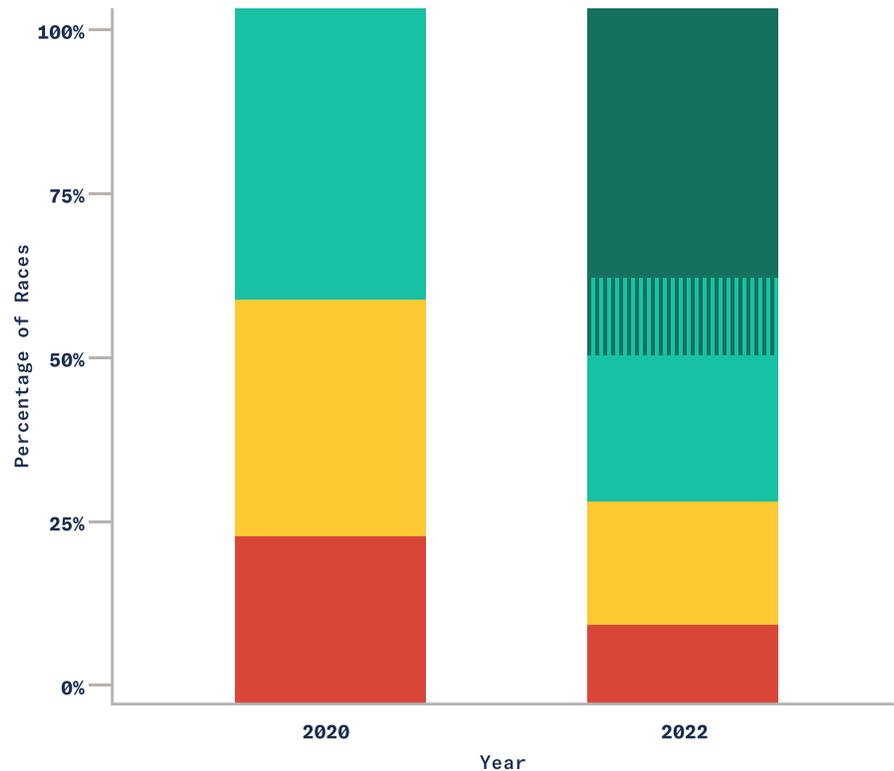
Figure 04

PARTISAN COMPOSITION OF ALASKA'S GENERAL ELECTIONS

Half of all 2022 races included intraparty competition, breaking the mold of the typical Republican vs Democrat election.

- Intraparty competition
- Independent or Third Party competition
- ▨ Intraparty and independent / Third Party competition
- R vs. D
- Uncontested

Source: General Election Results Statewide, State Senate, State House, Alaska Division of Elections. *Write-in candidates were not included.



ⁱ As in 2022, Alaska had previously allowed write-in candidates to compete in the general election. This occasionally led to intraparty competition. Intraparty competition at the level seen in 2022 was implausible under Alaska’s partisan primary system.

ⁱⁱ General Election Candidates for Statewide, State Senate, State House Alaska Division of Elections. Can be found at the [Candidates](#) page of the Alaska Division of Elections website and on Unite America’s website ([link](#)).

coalitions in both the state house and state senate, where Republicans serve in leadership positions. In his analysis for R Street, Ryan Williamson looked at the ratio between the average Republican vote share and the percentage of legislative seats won by the Republican Party in each election cycle. Williamson concluded that “Republicans had one of their best years in recent history.”³⁹

Further, the aforementioned R Street study finds, “the 2022 cycle saw 90 percent of incumbents win reelection, which is one of their best showings in the last decade.”⁴⁰ There are a number of possible reasons for this. For example, fewer incumbents ran in 2022 relative to any year prior, going back at least to 2010.⁴¹ So, it’s possible that legislators self-selected and those who anticipated they would do poorly under the system decided not to run again.

Quantitatively it is easy to measure electoral competition by tabulating how many candidates ran, how much they won by, and what the partisan makeup of each race was. On these measures, it’s clear that elections were more competitive in 2022

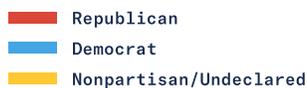
than in previous years. On a more qualitative basis, researchers also observed there was a broad range of ideological diversity and policy difference between candidates — suggesting that proponents’ claims the system would create a more competitive marketplace of ideas may be true. Scholars Benjamin Reilly, David Lublin, and Glenn Wright concluded in their review of the statewide contests: “Most importantly, there was a genuine diversity of ideological options presented, including hardliners and moderates from both the left and the right, running on a range of issues and platforms.”⁴²

Further, surveys of voters indicate that they experienced the impact. When asked in post election polls, Alaska voters assessed the quality of candidates to be better than in previous election years. After the November election, 47% of survey respondents reported having “better” candidates compared to previous elections, with only 24% saying they were “worse,” and 25% saying their choices were about the same. An August survey also found voters thought they had better candidates, though the findings were not as strong, perhaps a result of only having one

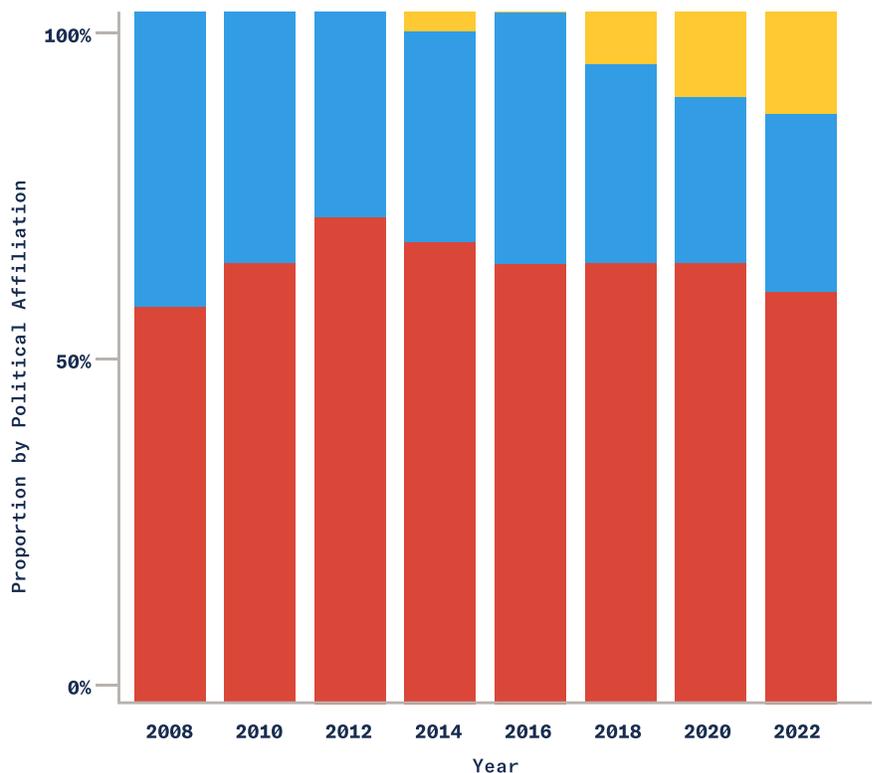
Figure 05

ALASKA LEGISLATURE BY POLITICAL AFFILIATION

Independent representation in Alaska’s state capital is increasing. Currently, 10% of seats are held by independents.



Source: Sightline Institute Analysis



statewide general election on the ballot.

This sentiment in statewide polling is confirmed by anecdotes of voters’ experiences all across the state. For example, in testifying before the state legislature, two Alaska voters captured the sentiment of more competitive elections. Catherine McCarthy said of the new system: “I feel liberated because I am no longer forced to deal with this closed primary where the whole list of choices that I have are controlled by either the Republican Party or the Democratic Party.”⁴³ And Idette Edgar said: “I have voted in every state election since I moved to Alaska in 1970, and I was very pleased with the open primary and the results of the 2022 elections. I had a larger field of candidates to choose from, not just from the party that I would normally vote for.”⁴⁴

Revisiting the Premise

Proponents of reform have argued “The Alaska System will increase competition in elections.” Incumbents performed well, there was not a major shift in partisan control of the state legislature, and the number of state

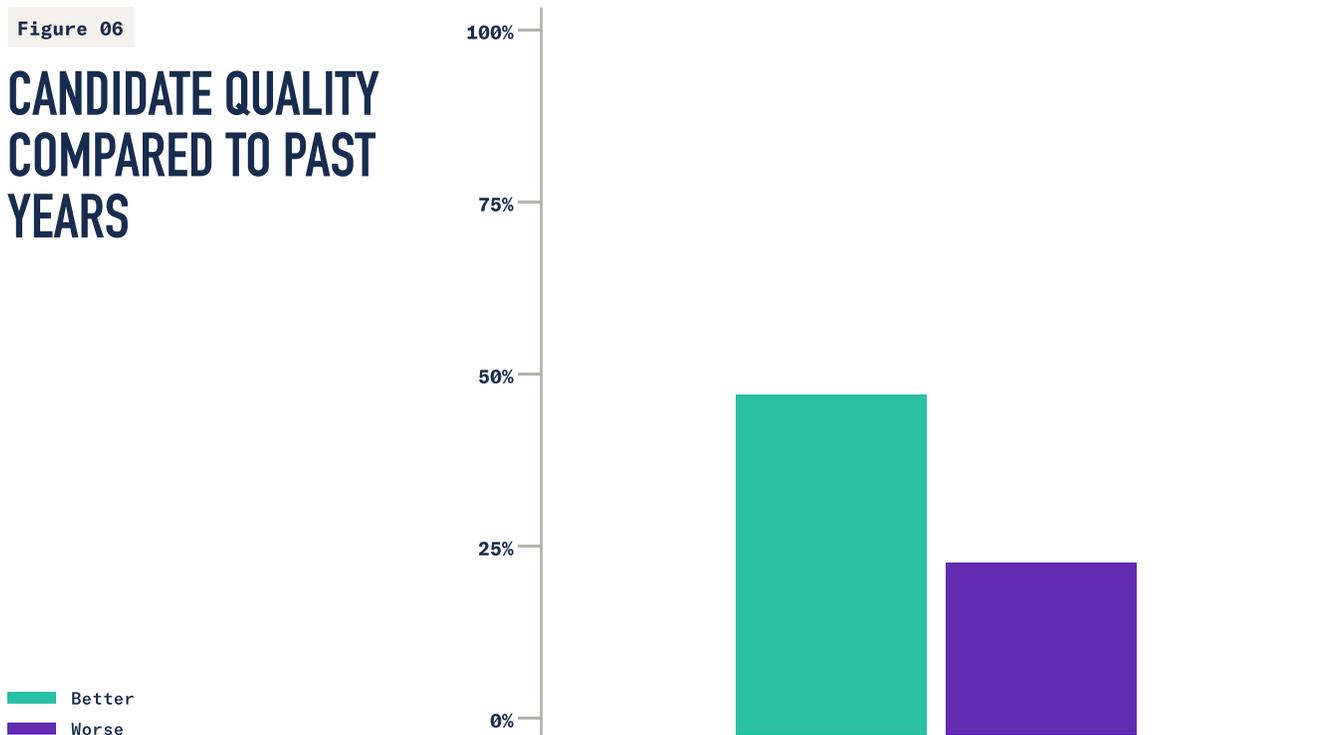
legislative candidates was on par

with previous years. However, on other important dimensions, it is clear electoral competition increased — measured by the decreased frequency of uncontested races, the introduction of intraparty competition and decrease in elections where only Republicans and Democrats compete, and the improved performance of independent candidates. The new top-four nonpartisan primary pushed competition from low-turnout primaries to higher-turnout general elections.

There is strong reason to believe the system is responsible for the increased competition, so we evaluate the effect size to be “high,” and the amount of evidence makes us highly confident in our conclusions.

The new top-four nonpartisan primary pushed competition from low-turnout primaries to higher-turnout general elections.

Figure 06
CANDIDATE QUALITY COMPARED TO PAST YEARS



Source: McKinley Research Group analysis of November Patinkin Research Poll

Participation

PREMISE	The Alaska System will increase voter turnout.	OUR CONCLUSION	NO
FINDING	Primary turnout was high in Alaska, both compared to the state's historical average and other states; however, too many confounding variables make increased turnout hard to attribute to the reform. General election turnout was on par with previous elections, rebutting claims that instant runoffs confuse or deter voters.	OUR CONFIDENCE	LOW
		EFFECT SIZE	N/A

The Problem

Voting is the most basic of civic duties, offering citizens the opportunity to choose who represents them in passing the laws that they are governed by. Yet, voter turnout in American elections trails most global peers. With just 62.8% of Americans participating in national elections, we rank 31st among OECD countries — between Colombia (62.5%) and Greece (63.5%).⁴⁵

Turnout in partisan primaries is even worse, despite the fact that they determine the vast majority of our elections. Only 21.3% of eligible voters participated in primaries in 2022.⁴⁶ Only seven states had turnout above 30%, and four states had turnout below 10%.⁴⁷

The Theory

Although not central to their concerns, advocates for the Alaska System suggested the reform would boost turnout in both primary and general elections.

Why might the Alaska System increase voter turnout?

- First, *voters may feel that their vote matters more* because elections are more competitive. Especially in seats that were historically safe for one party or the other, the opportunity for multiple candidates of the same party to compete in the general election could motivate voters to participate.

- Second, *voters may participate because they believe there are better choices*, with candidates that better represent their views. For example, with more opportunities for third party and independent candidates, voters who support these candidates may be more likely to turnout.⁴⁸
- Third, *independent voters are enfranchised*. In Alaska, independent voters were already able to participate in Republican and Democratic primaries. However, it could be expected to increase turnout in other states with closed primaries.

While there is some reason to expect the Alaska System may increase turnout, there are also skeptics. Critics of the Alaska System tend to focus on instant runoffs and suggest that it will decrease general election voter turnout.⁴⁹ On the campaign trail, congressional candidate Sarah Palin said the system was, “bizarre, it’s convoluted, it’s complicated, and it results in voter suppression.” A recent lawsuit in Washington, D.C. by the local Democratic Party opposing instant runoffs claimed the system “would introduce an additional layer of confusion to the electorate.”⁵⁰

Further, for some offices — especially those down ballot like state legislative races — primaries may not attract enough candidates to make the contest

consequential. If four or fewer candidates run in a given primary, all of the candidates will advance to the general election. This means voters will have less incentive to weigh in during the first round.ⁱ

The Evidence

There are many factors that may increase or decrease election turnout. As such, tying any change in turnout, especially a small one, to the first year of a reform is difficult. The Bipartisan Policy Center's research suggests that consolidating primary dates so state and federal primaries are on the same day, holding primaries on the same date as other states, and eliminating nominating conventions are policies states can adopt to boost turnout. Other factors, including whether there are statewide referenda on the ballot, the number of candidates on the ballot, and the competitiveness of statewide contests can heavily influence turnout.

Yet, even as other factors were likely at play, in the first year under the new election system, primary turnout in Alaska increased and was among the top three states nationwide, in line with a growing body of research that shows nonpartisan primaries increase voter turnout.

Alaska's August primary turnout was 36.6% of eligible voters in 2022. This participation rate was the third-highest over the previous two decades, and was a recovery from a major dip in turnout in 2018, the most recent midterm election: 76,815 more voters participated in 2022 than in 2018.

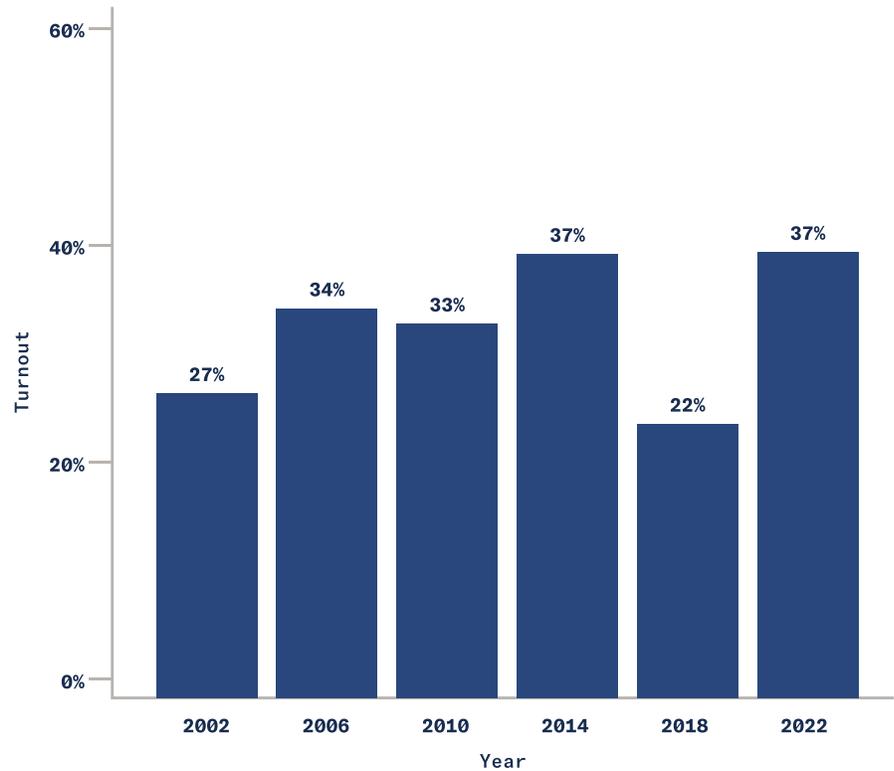
Alaska's primary turnout was also third highest among all states, only trailing Kansas (48%), which had a highly controversial abortion ban on the same ballot, and Wyoming (42%) where interest in the eventually successful effort to unseat incumbent Rep. Liz Cheney (R) was high.

Figure 07

2002-2022

PRIMARY ELECTION TURNOUT BY VOTING ELIGIBLE POPULATION

After a dip in 2018, Alaska returned to its place as a national leader in primary turnout. Primary turnout increased by over 14 percentage points to 37% in 2022, the third-highest in the nation.



Source: Primary voter turnout statistics, Alaska Division of Elections & U.S. Elections Project

ⁱ This, however, is not a feature of only top-four nonpartisan primaries. Plenty of partisan primaries at the state and federal level only have one candidate, potentially dissuading voters from participating.

Evaluating the Alaska System’s impact on turnout is hard because of the aforementioned variables, and also because of unique circumstances in 2022. Most importantly, the August primary was on the same date as the special general election to fill the U.S. House vacancy, the only seat Alaska has in the House of Representatives. Interest in this race likely increased the number of voters participating.

It is also possible that the system did help to boost turnout. For the first time since the state’s blanket primary was struck down in 2000, all Alaskans had the ability to vote for all candidates in the primary election.

For the first time since the state’s blanket primary was struck down in 2000, all Alaskans had the ability to vote for all candidates in the primary election.

Voters could now choose a Republican for one race, and a Democrat for another. If they wanted, Republican voters in safe Democratic areas of the state could now weigh in on which Democrat best represented their views, while Democratic voters in safe Republican areas could cast ballots for Republican candidates that best represented their views.

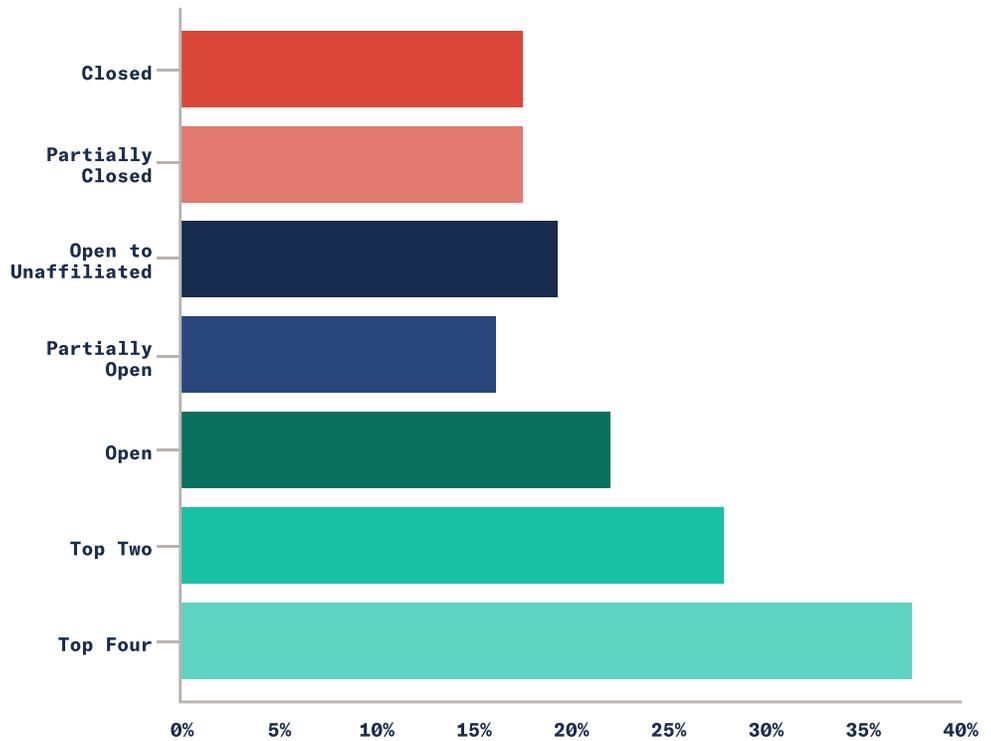
Alaska’s high voter turnout in nonpartisan primaries fits a national trend. One comprehensive study on the impact of primary systems on voter turnout in 2020 found that nonpartisan primaries can increase turnout by up to 6 percentage points.⁵¹ The Bipartisan Policy Center’s assessment of 2022 primaries found that, on average, voter participation was higher in open and nonpartisan primary systems than any other type of primary system; see Figure 8.⁵²

Alaska’s general election turnout was on par with both its own historical trends and national averages. General election turnout was 51% of eligible voters.

Figure 08

MIDTERM PRIMARY TURNOUT BY ELECTION TYPE

2022 primaries showed that states with open primaries have higher turnout than those that do not.



Source: Bipartisan Policy Center analysis of state election data.

Alaska general election turnout in midterm years has ranged between 51%-55% since 2006, and 2022 turnout was very similar to turnout in 2006 and 2010. Turnout compared to 2014 and 2018 elections decreased by 18,402 and 17,962 voters, respectively, or only about 3.5% of Alaska’s current voting eligible population.

There are many factors that could contribute to low turnout, including voter fatigue: Alaska voters were asked to go to the polls three times in five months. Further, turnout in the 2022 general election was down three percentage points nationwide, compared to the last midterm in 2018.⁵³ Alaska still ranked fifteenth in general election turnout nationwide and trailed four states with all-mail elections, a policy that increases turnout considerably.⁵⁴

Revisiting the Premise

Proponents of reform have argued “The Alaska System will increase turnout.” Based on Alaska’s experience in 2022, our conclusion is there is no evidence to assert that the reform was responsible for increasing turnout over what it otherwise would have been without reform. However, in a similar manner the reform also cannot be attributed to decreasing turnout. General election turnout rates do not substantiate critics’ claims that giving voters the option to rank their candidates would deter or confuse them. In evaluating turnout there were too many other variables that could have had an impact, so our confidence in the conclusion that turnout was not positively impacted by the reform is low. Future election cycles will allow for more definitive conclusions to be drawn on the reform’s impact on voter turnout.

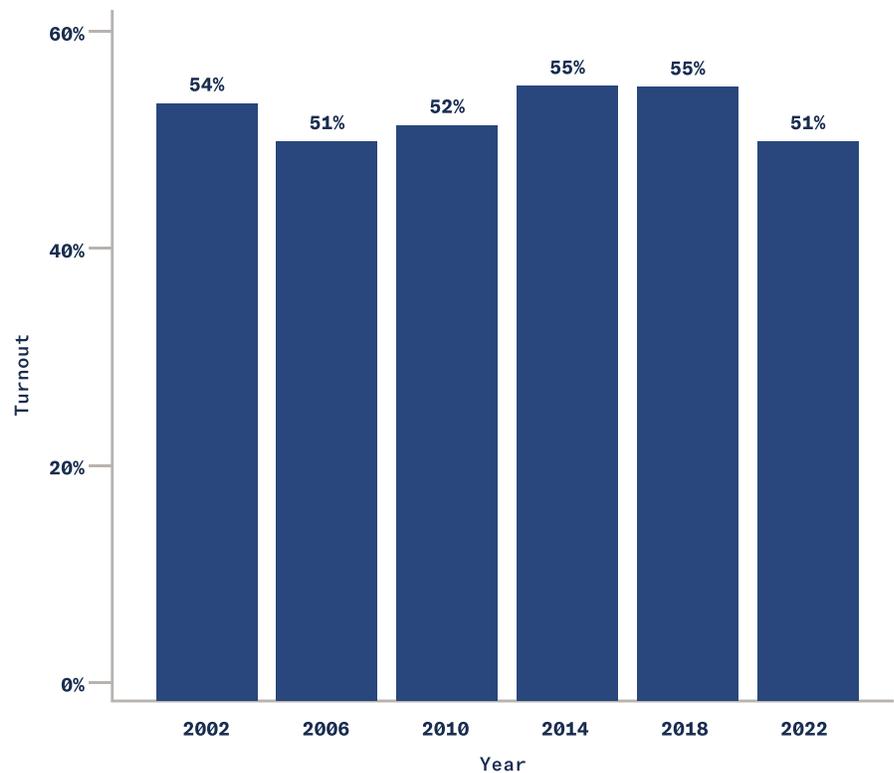
Figure 09

2002-2022

GENERAL ELECTION TURNOUT BY VOTING ELIGIBLE POPULATION

Alaska’s general election turnout in 2022 was not a notable departure from recent midterms. Forty-eight percent of age-eligible voters participated in 2022, the same rate as in 2006 and 2010.

Source: General election turnout statistics, Alaska Division of Elections & U.S. Elections Project



MEANINGFUL VOTES

It is an unfortunate reality of U.S. elections that not all participation is equally influential.

Voters in areas where both major parties have a chance of winning in November have more say in who represents them, because general elections are not forgone conclusions. Only 17% of U.S. House elections were competitive in 2022.⁵⁵

The balance of elections have historically been decided in partisan primaries, where, on average, just 21.3% of voters participated in 2022.⁵⁶ But even in primaries, not all votes matter the same. Some voters only have one candidate on their ballot, while others have a choice among multiple candidates. Meanwhile, votes cast in the dominant party’s primary matter more than votes cast in a primary for a party that, in a noncompetitive district, is all but guaranteed to lose in November.

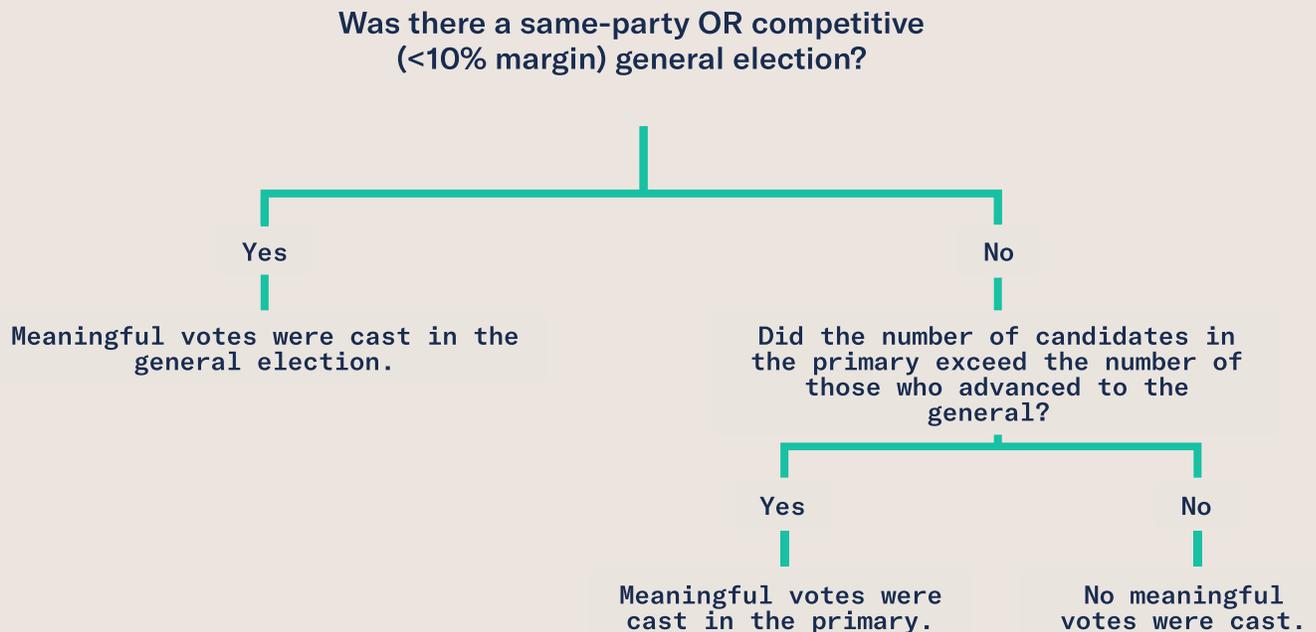
Judy Andree, president of the Alaska League of Women Voters, argued in 2020 that the Alaska

System would address this problem. She opined: “Primary turnout for the 2020 election measured 22.7% of the registered voters [in Alaska]. This means that, under the current system, in the general election we will be voting on candidate choices selected for us by less than a fourth of the voting population.” Andree was indicting a system that empowered a small number of primary election voters to select just two candidates for general elections, which often are not competitive.

To evaluate the impact of Alaska’s reform, we look beyond traditional measures of turnout, or how many voters cast a ballot. Instead, we look at how many voters cast a ballot that meaningfully contributed to deciding the outcome of an election. Which voters cast

Figure 10

WHAT DETERMINES MEANINGFUL VOTES CAST IN ALASKA’S TOP-FOUR ELECTIONS?



meaningful votes? Voters who participate in elections where candidates, campaigns, and policy positions matter. In these contests, party affiliation alone cannot carry a candidate to victory.

There are three ways in which voters can cast a meaningful vote:

- 1. Voters cast meaningful votes when they participate in a general election decided by less than a ten percentage point margin.** In a competitive general election, candidates, campaigns, and policy positions can be decisive. Successful general election candidates in competitive districts must appeal to persuadable, moderate, and independent voters, and these appeals determine the outcome of the race.
- 2. Voters also cast meaningful votes when there are two or more candidates from the same party in the general election.** When candidates experience intraparty competition in the general

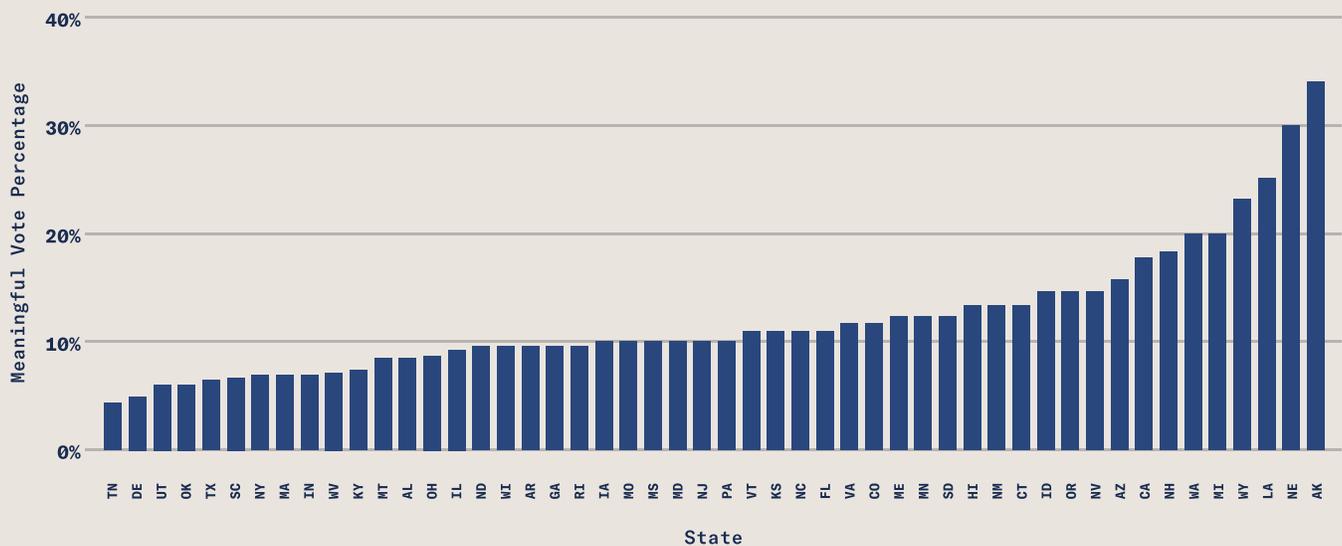
election, the quality of their campaigns, and their policy platforms determine the outcome. In Alaska, California, Louisiana, and Washington, general election voters can be presented with multiple choices from the same party.ⁱ

- 3. Voters cast meaningful votes when they participate in a competitive primary where at least one candidate is eliminated from contention.** When candidates face off against members of their own party in a primary, their partisan affiliation alone cannot determine a voter’s choice.

When you compare the number of Alaskans casting meaningful votes in 2022 to the number of voters in other states doing the same, it reinforces how the system has given Alaskans more say in who represents them than voters in other states. The portion of Alaska’s voting eligible population who had a meaningful say in the make-up of their state houseⁱⁱ — nearly 35% — was the highest in the nation.

Figure 11

MEANINGFUL VOTE PERCENTAGE BY STATE 2022



In 2022, the share of Alaska voters who had a meaningful say in the make-up of their state house was the highest in the nation.

Source: Original analysis, Unite America Institute

i This is also true of state legislative elections in Nebraska.

ii We calculate meaningful vote share based on participation in state house contests to draw cross-state comparisons; senate chambers typically have fewer members, and are not all elected each election cycle.

It's notable that the only states to come close to the percentage of Alaskans who cast meaningful votes were Nebraska (30.6%) and Louisiana (25.2%), which also hold nonpartisan primaries.ⁱ

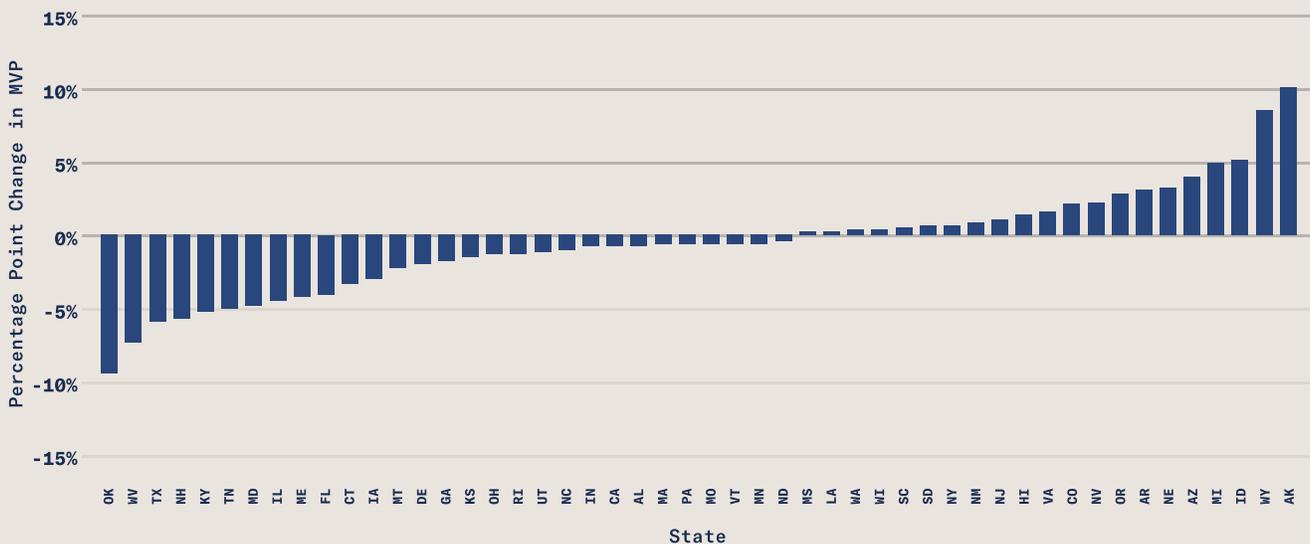
The share of eligible voters in Alaska who cast meaningful votes in 2022 represented an increase within the state, too.ⁱⁱ Only 22% of Alaska voters in 2020 and 25% in 2018 cast meaningful votes to elect the state house. In fact, while the number of voters casting meaningful votes decreased in most states in 2022, Alaska's increase since the last midterm year (2018) was the largest of any state.ⁱⁱⁱ

Wyoming is the only state whose gains came close to Alaska, having the second-largest meaningful vote share increase from 2018 to 2022 (8.4 percentage points). The Wyoming increase was driven by the increase in primary voters,^{iv} who were likely looking to weigh in on Representative Liz Cheney's bid for re-nomination. If that's the case, the state may regress again in 2024.^v

Alaska also had high-profile federal races and saw an increase in voter turnout in the primary. However, in contrast to Wyoming, few of Alaska's primary elections were consequential. Nearly all meaningful

Figure 12

CHANGE IN MEANINGFUL VOTER PERCENTAGE: 2018-2022



Alaska's MVP increased by more than 10 percentage points, the largest of any state.

Source: Original analysis, Unite America Institute

i Louisiana is one of two states whose meaningful vote share is based on 2019, which was the most recent year the state held state legislative elections.

ii Ideally even Alaska should have a higher percentage of Alaskans casting a meaningful vote. The seemingly still low number of voters casting a meaningful vote is constrained by the fact that only 51% of eligible voters participated.

iii Louisiana and Mississippi are not included in this analysis because they only held 1 election cycle during this period we were examining. The change in meaningful vote share for states with odd election years (New Jersey, and Virginia) was calculated using data from 2021 and 2019.

iv About 41% of Wyoming's voting-age population voted in the '22 primary as compared to about 32% in 2018 and 2020. The last time voter turnout in Wyoming reached over 40% of turnout was in 1994. ("[Wyoming Voter Registration and Voter Turnout Statistics](#)," Wyoming Election Division (November 2022).) In addition to an increase in primary turnout, primary races were also more competitive than in previous years.

v On the other end of the scale, Oklahoma and West Virginia saw large decreases in meaningful vote share. Potential reasons for this include the large number of uncontested races in Oklahoma and a shift in West Virginia from Multi-member to single-member legislative districts. According to one source in 2022 nearly 60% of the legislative seats in Oklahoma were uncontested, The total number of uncontested seats, "Is more than the combined number of uncontested legislative races during the 2018 and 2016 election cycles." See: Brown, Trevor. "[No Options: Uncontested races cost thousands of Oklahomans a key vote](#)," *The Oklahoman* (October 2020); also, see: Hanshaw, Roger. "[House Passes Historic Single-Member District Bill](#)," *West Virginia Legislature* (October 2021).

votes were cast in the general election where, as we have noted, turnout was slightly lower than 2018. Therefore, Alaska’s increase in the number of voters casting meaningful votes is likely a more enduring one driven by the structural changes in the election system that shifted competition from the primary to the general election and created more intraparty competition.

The Alaska System increased competition in general

election races and created the opportunity for same-party competition, and as a result it had a profound effect on the power of individual voters.

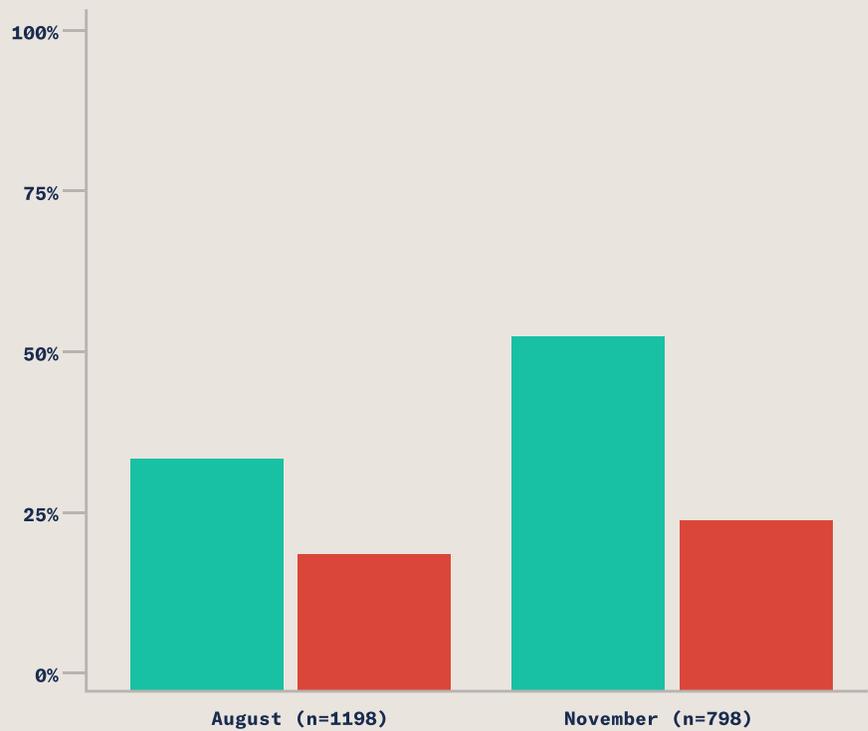
Exit polling also found that Alaskans believe that the new voting system delivered them a more meaningful say in election outcomes. After the November election, 52% of surveyed Alaska voters said their vote “mattered more” compared to previous years, while only 25% said it “mattered less.”

Figure 13

ALASKANS SAY THEIR VOTE MATTERED MORE

More
Less

Source: McKinley Research Group



Representation

PREMISE

The Alaska System will temper political polarization and improve governance.

FINDING

The state elected broadly popular candidates to both federal offices on the ballot. Further, problem-solving candidates and incumbents who experienced setbacks in 2020 regained power. The ultimate impact on polarization and eventually governance will be evaluated with more data.

OUR CONCLUSION

YES

OUR CONFIDENCE

MEDIUM

EFFECT SIZE

MEDIUM

The Problem

The share of women, people of color, and people from other historically disenfranchised communities serving in office nationwide is significantly below parity. Only 28% of members of Congress are women, and state legislative representation is only slightly better (33%).⁵⁷ Only 25% of members of Congress are people of color, while people of color comprise 40% of the U.S. population;⁵⁸ representation for people of color is even worse at the state legislative level (18%).⁵⁹ Across other demographics — including age, veteran status, class, sexual orientation, and education — gaps remain, too.

While there are many factors that have led to the underrepresentation of these communities, our election system is a significant one. Changing election rules may eliminate vote splitting among similar candidates, create a more welcoming environment by encouraging more positive campaigning, and create new pathways to competition that reduces incumbent advantage.

The Theory

In a 2021 analysis, scholars Andrea Benjamin and Barry Burden assessed the potential effects of a top-four style of voting by looking at studies of instant runoff and top-two elections. They concluded, “Although it is difficult to reach firm conclusions about a reform that has yet to be implemented, the potential upsides of [the model] for communities of color appear to be larger than potential downsides.”⁶⁰

The ability of Top Four and instant runoffs to improve representation was one of the main arguments made by proponents of the reform in Alaska. A campaign steering committee member argued in favor of reform, writing to endorse Ballot Measure 2 in an opinion editorial: “The suffrage movement, of course, gave women the right to vote. Now it is time to make sure that vote continues to count and our voices are truly heard.”⁶¹

Why might adopting the Alaska System benefit candidates from different backgrounds?

- First, the system creates more electoral competition and *lowers the barrier to getting into the general election*. Winning nominations in traditional partisan primaries is highly influenced by party leaders, and only one candidate from each primary advances to general elections. The Alaska System makes qualifying for the November election much easier. With more competition, leaders from diverse backgrounds may be able to win contests against those from majority demographics.
- Second, the system may *eliminate vote splitting*. When multiple candidates from the same background are on the ballot together, votes may be divided among them. With instant runoffs, voters can rank multiple candidates from the same demographic.⁶²
- Third, the system may inspire more diverse

candidates to run, since a broader set of voters can participate.

The Evidence

The two most important questions in assessing whether election reform interventions promote representation from historically underrepresented groups are: “Who runs? And who wins?” It is too early to tell the ultimate impact of the Alaska System on representation for women, people of color, and other historically disenfranchised populations, but initial data and some case studies suggest the system leads to better representation for these groups.

According to an analysis conducted by the Sightline Institute, a higher share of female candidates ran for statewide office than ever before: 31% of all candidates were women. More women ran for statewide offices in 2022 (19) than ran in all five previous elections combined (16).⁶³ Two of the state’s three statewide offices were won by women: U.S. Representative Mary Peltola (D) and U.S. Senator Lisa Murkowski (R). Further, Nancy Dahlstrom was elected Lt. Governor on a ticket with Gov. Mike Dunleavy.

At the state legislative level, there is also evidence that more women are both running and winning in Alaska. According to RepresentWomen, there were 15 open seatsⁱ for the state house in 2022. In these districts, 11 women ran for office, and eight won. Three of the four open senate seats had women running, and two women won.⁶⁴ Open seats are important because they offer opportunities to advance gender and racial parity; the fact that women won a majority of open seats in 2022 is a sign that representation may improve in the future, too. In all, 20 women won elections at the state legislative level, an increase from 2020 when 18 won. However, this was not a statewide record: 23 women were elected in 2018.⁶⁵

Racial and ethnic representation seemingly improved under Alaska’s new voting system, too. Jeannette Lee of the Sightline Institute analyzed every successful group of candidates since 2008 and found that the 2022 election produced the most racially diverse set

of state legislators. According to Lee, 23% of the state legislature identifies as people of color, including six identifying as Alaska Native, three as Black, two as Asian, two as Hispanic, and one as multiracial.⁶⁶

The election of Mary Peltola was especially notable, and provides an example of how the new election system may lead to improved representation. A Yup’ik Alaska Native, Peltola is the first-ever woman elected to serve the state in the U.S. House, and also the first Alaska Native to serve in Congress. A more unifying candidate who ran on a “Pro-Family, Pro-Fish, Pro-Choice” platform, Peltola benefited from not needing to run through a Democratic primary,⁶⁷ a larger general election field (she came in fourth in the special election primary), and the ability to appeal to all Alaska voters, including independents and Republicans. Outlets including *The New York Times*,⁶⁸ *The Washington Post*,⁶⁹ and *Politico*⁷⁰ reported on how the new election system may have facilitated her election. And, as Shannon Magnuson shared with a roundtable of researchers and analysts, “[Native Youth] were really excited about having a native person running and ultimately winning... they felt connected to her and that their voices would be heard. I don’t think everybody agreed with all of her positions, but it was still a native person who understands rural Alaska.”

For the LGBTQ+ community, Alaska’s outcomes in 2022 were especially notable. Heading into the year, Alaska had never had a legislator who was an open member of the LGBTQ community; it was one of only four states in the country with zero representation.⁷¹ Then, in 2022, four openly LGBTQ+ candidates ran for office and three won — providing representation to a community that had never had it before in Juneau.⁷²

While women, minorities, and members of the LGBTQ+ community performed well in Alaska, it is hard to prove causality of the reform’s impact on each population. These populations are winning more elections nationally, and there are a number of other factors contributing to this trend.

In assessing the impact of reforms on disenfranchised

i “Open Seats” refer to elections in which the incumbent does not run.

communities, it is also worthwhile to understand how minority voters perceive the new system and its impact. Minority voters in Alaska seem to have thought that there were better candidates at higher rates than white voters. Minority voters were also more likely to say their vote had more power compared to previous elections.

When asked, “Do you think you had better or worse candidates to choose from compared to previous years or were things about the same?” Alaska Natives (55%) were particularly more likely to say they had better candidates than white voters (46%). Alaska Natives (54%) and non-Native people of color (47%) were also more likely than white voters (34%) to say their vote mattered more in 2022 than in previous years. See Figure 15.

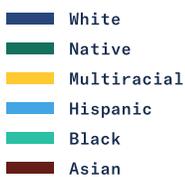
Given the lack of quantitative data available after just one election cycle, qualitative accounts from individuals who run people of color led organizations can inform how the reform is impacting their populations. According to many Alaska leaders, the system is improving representation:

- **La Quen Náay Liz Medicine Crow** who serves as First Alaskans Institute President and CEO, said “Open primaries and ranked choice voting have given us the opportunity to elect people who care about our issues, even if they’re not Alaska Native. The elections system that voters established in 2020 makes candidates care about those who are outside of their party affiliations. Open primaries and ranked choice voting deepen our bench as Alaskans and provides more opportunities for Alaska Natives and people of color who now call Alaska home to run for office and get elected.”⁷³
- **Kevin McGee**, who leads the Anchorage chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, commented on the organization’s support: “We support ranked choice voting because it gives everybody options... The candidate should be able to get the message out, and then let the people decide who they want to vote on. Taking away ranked choice voting means you don’t want people to have more options.”⁷⁴

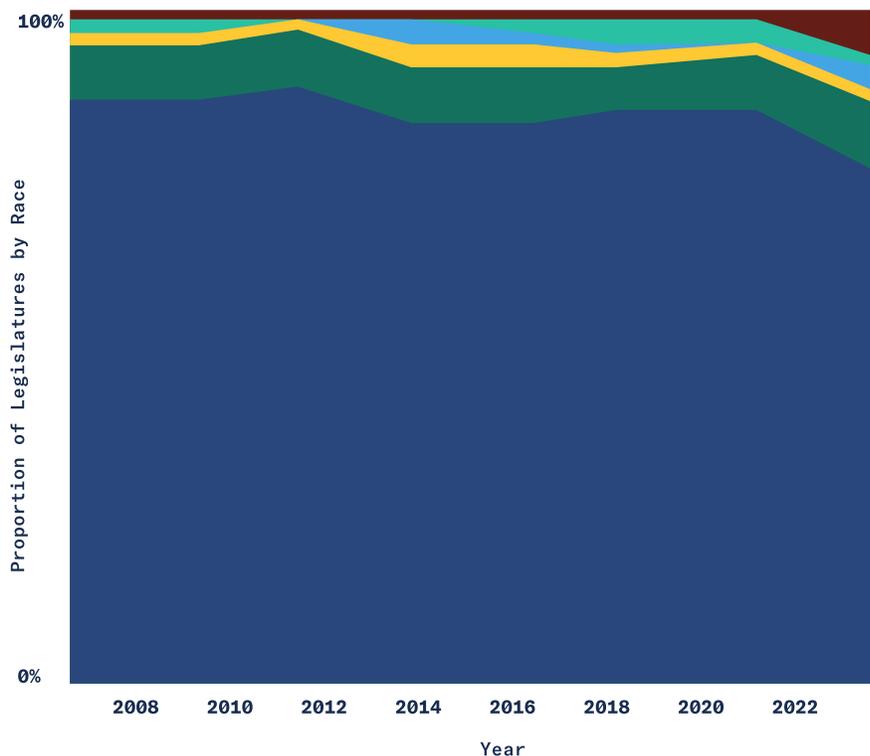
Figure 14

ALASKA STATE LEGISLATURE RACIAL & ETHNIC DIVERSITY

The racial diversity of Alaska’s legislature slightly expanded in 2022.



Source: Adapted from Sightline Institute analysis



- **Nicole Borromeo**, who is the Executive Vice President and General Counsel for the Alaska Federation of Natives reported: “With the results now ascertained, data makes it clear that in this election, Alaskans diverged from party-line voting patterns to elevate a diversity of voices and perspectives, including the historic election of the first Alaska Native to a full term in Congress.”⁷⁵

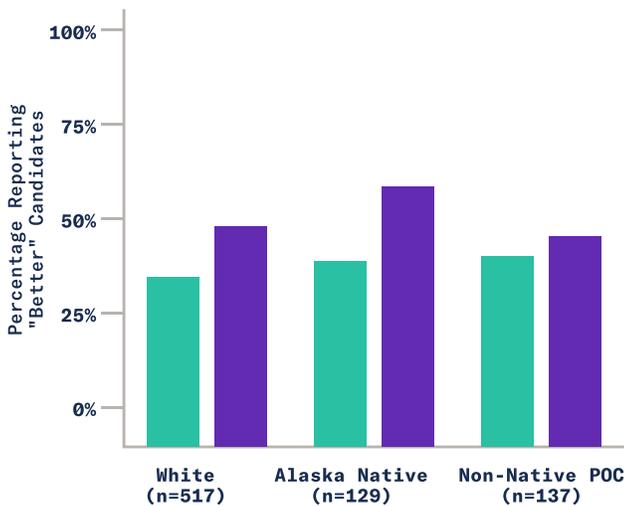
Open primaries and ranked choice voting deepen our bench as Alaskans and provides more opportunities for Alaska Natives and people of color who now call Alaska home to run for office and get elected.

Revisiting the Premise

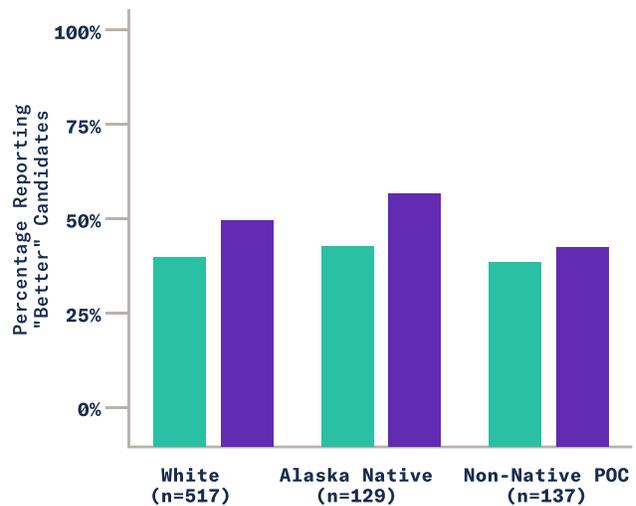
Revisiting the premise that the Alaska System will improve representation for historically disenfranchised communities, our conclusion is yes. There is enough preliminary data, anecdotes, and sentiment from in-state political observers to suggest the new system helped pave the way for improved demographic representation in the state. However, the effect size is medium (i.e., there were notable but not major advancements towards parity) and our confidence is low because there is limited data to draw from (more election cycles will help us better infer causality).

Figure 15

PERCEPTIONS OF CANDIDATE QUALITY BY RACE



PERCEPTIONS OF VOTER POWER BY RACE



August November Source: McKinley Research Group analysis

Polarization and Governance

PREMISE	The Alaska System will temper political polarization and improve governance.	OUR CONCLUSION	YES
FINDING	The state elected broadly popular members to both federal offices on the ballot. Further, problem-solving candidates and incumbents who experienced setbacks in 2020 regained power. The ultimate impact on polarization and eventually governance will be evaluated with more data.	OUR CONFIDENCE	MEDIUM
		EFFECT SIZE	MEDIUM

The Problem

Political polarization in the United States has been increasing for decades, and accelerating rapidly in recent years. According to Pew Research, both Republicans and Democrats in both chambers of Congress have moved to the ideological wings of their parties since the 1970s.⁷⁶

Increasingly, the divide between the two major parties is impacting governance, with major public policy problems going unaddressed. The ability of Democrats and Republicans to work together is now the third largest problem facing the United States, according to voters; other top issues including health care affordability, drug addiction, the federal budget deficit, and immigration have seen no recent major progress in Congress.⁷⁷

Reforming election systems to reward candidates who can appeal to broad coalitions of voters and reward incumbents who take a solutions-oriented approach to governing is critical to delivering functional and representative government.

The Theory

Advocates for the Alaska System have argued that eliminating partisan primaries, requiring majority winners, and incentivizing positive campaigning would reduce polarization and help elect more representative candidates.⁷⁸ An editorial from an Alaska voter in favor of the reform before it passed

promised: “[R]anked choice voting is an antidote to growing cynicism about our democracy. It’s also an antidote to hyper-partisanship. In a ranked-choice system, a candidate can’t afford to appeal to just a narrow segment of their constituency.”⁷⁹

Why might the Alaska System reduce political polarization and improve governance?

- First, *candidates will no longer need to win a partisan primary*. Partisan primaries are low-turnout affairs that require candidates to appeal to a small slice of voters and special interests within their own party who frequently hold the most uncompromising policy positions.⁸⁰ Further, all voters can vote for candidates from all parties in primary elections, which may incentivize candidates to adopt policy positions that are broadly popular and best represent all of their constituents.⁸¹
- Second, *rewarding second place votes may encourage civil campaigning*. When candidates can benefit from second place votes, they are disincentivized to engage in campaign mud-slinging against their opponents.⁸²
- Third, *incumbent legislators may no longer fear “being primaried,”* for working across the aisle and solving problems. Under the old system, more polarizing candidates frequently challenged incumbents who engaged in bipartisan lawmaking.⁸³

The Evidence

Several teams of researchers attempted to assess whether the new election system rewarded more broadly representative, less polarizing candidates. Other research analyzed whether campaigning was more civil, and the tenor of the 2023 legislative session. This section is broken into three parts, addressing each of the theoretical benefits listed above: (i) campaigning: how candidates behaved on the campaign trail; (ii) outcomes: what candidates were elected; and (iii) governance: how incumbents organized and addressed public policy.

Campaigning

One feature of instant runoff elections is that they encourage candidates to build coalitions with each other, and at minimum seek the second place votes of opponents' supporters. Attacking opponents becomes a less sound campaign strategy. In Alaska, there is some evidence the Alaska System made campaign rhetoric more civil, but it is too early to draw definitive conclusions.

The first special election for U.S. House featured two Republican candidates in Sarah Palin and Nick Begich who demonized each other: 20% of Begich voters selected Democrat Mary Peltola over Sarah Palin, and 20% selected no one. Shortly thereafter, Republicans adopted a “rank the red” moniker. The campaign slogan called on voters to rank multiple Republicans for the same race when more than one appeared on the same ballot.⁸⁴

The “rank the red” strategy certainly played a role in at least one close race. In Alaska House District 15, the Republican incumbent Tom McKay narrowly pulled ahead of the Democrat Denny Wells in a “come-from-behind” victory thanks to second-choice votes transferring from Republican David Eibeck. McKay won by only nine votes. After the election, he told the Alaska Beacon, “[Eibeck’s] message to his voters was to rank me second. Publicly I need to thank David for doing that... that obviously enabled me to catch up.”⁸⁵

Republicans adopted a “rank the red” moniker. The campaign slogan called on voters to rank multiple Republicans for the same race when more than one appeared on the same ballot.

Despite the extremely close election, neither the McKay nor Wells campaigns went negative. Both focused on their personal qualifications and the policy positions of their opponent. While we cannot attribute this specifically to instant runoff elections, such a campaign approach is rare under other election systems. There are other examples of politicians reaching outside their party in order to appeal to more voters. In the weeks leading up to the election, gubernatorial candidates Bill Walker (I) and Les Gara (D) gave each other second-choice endorsements, including releasing a shared campaign video.⁸⁶ Walker reflected that earning second-choice votes as a key to campaigning under ranked-choice voting.⁸⁷

During the regular general election for Alaska’s U.S. House seat, Palin and Peltola spoke freely and publicly about the close and productive working relationship they had when they were both serving in Alaska’s capital. During a televised debate, Peltola complimented Palin on her work as Governor and gave her the opportunity to comment on their friendship. This was already a departure from the normal tone. Then, Palin responded, “Our platforms are quite.. opposite of one another’s. But I have great respect for Mary... it’s heartening to get to stand beside someone who gets it. Personally speaking, and professionally someone like Mary and I who can get along, let that be an example.”⁸⁸ It’s hard to overstate how unlikely such a dynamic is in modern politics, considering the two were in a very competitive race.

Electing

Proponents of the Alaska System also emphasize how the system may better reward candidates who better represent the full electorate with more broadly appealing policy positions. Competing in primaries open to all voters, and advancing more candidates to the general election when more people participate, may lead to electoral outcomes that better reflect the population's positions.

One study, conducted by Sarah Anderson, Dan Butler, Laurel Harbridge-Yong, and Renee Marshall, relied on interviews with Alaska-based experts with extensive knowledge of Alaskan politics and focused on state legislative elections.⁸⁹ The researchers present a number of case studies based on their expert interviews, and ultimately conclude that the new system may benefit less polarizing candidates, writing: “[T]he top-four primary creates opportunities for cross-party voting that can enhance the electoral prospects of moderate candidates. Because the median voter is often a moderate voter, this bodes well for the new system’s prospects for leading elected officials to better represent the majority of voters.” Cross-party voting refers to the ability of Democrats to vote for Republicans, and vice versa — something that was not always possible in Alaska primaries prior to reform.

Another study analyzed media coverage and candidate positioning for the three statewide elections and was informed by interviews with in-state political observers. The researchers, Benjamin Reilly, David Lublin, and Glenn Wright, find the system increased the ideological diversity in the types of candidates that made it to the general election, with more moderate candidates winning both congressional seats.⁹⁰ They attribute this outcome to both the top-four primary (i.e., party candidates did not need to win a primary against only members of their own party) and instant runoffs (i.e., candidates could benefit from support from voters’ second place choices).

Similarly, Jerry McBeath — Professor Emeritus of Political Science at the University of Alaska Fairbanks — observes that the congressional delegation of Sen.

Murkowski and Rep. Peltola demonstrated strong cross-partisan appeal and that their moderate policy positioning played well under the new election system.⁹¹ McBeath also asserts that more centrist candidates outperformed much more extreme candidates. He summarizes a number of key legislative races this way:

“[I]n the House, an Alaska Independence Party candidate, Tyler Ivanoff, challenged Democrat Neal Foster, a veteran legislator, with Foster edging out his competitor. In Kodiak and Cordova, Rep. Louise Stutes, a Republican, won 58 percent of the vote against a more conservative Republican challenger. Nonpartisan and independent candidates also defeated partisan rivals. In Ketchikan’s House District 1, Rep. Dan Ortiz, a nonpartisan incumbent, led his Republican challenger by several points. In the Senate, Republican Tuckerman Babcock ran for Senate District D, but lost outright to a more moderate (and less controversial) challenger, Jesse Bjorkman. In south Anchorage’s Senate District E, Cathy Giessel, a moderate Republican, defeated Sen. Roger Holland, a conservative Republican who had beaten her two years previously.”

[T]he top-four primary creates opportunities for cross-party voting that can enhance the electoral prospects of moderate candidates.

McBeath’s findings suggest that more broadly appealing and representative candidates were successful at the state legislative level, as a result of the new system, like they were at the statewide level.

A second study on state legislative candidates by Reilly, Lublin, and Wright employed undergraduate students at the University of Alaska to review campaign materials (e.g., websites, mailers, social media feeds) to analyze positioning on key policy issues, including abortion rights, state budgeting issues, culture war issues, education, and gun rights. Students coded

candidates from 2018 and 2020 (pre-reform) and from 2022 (post-reform). The scholars found that “candidates espousing more extreme positions on many issues were more likely to win in the pre-reform period, whereas candidates expressing more moderate positions have been more likely to win in the post-reform period.”⁹²

The right-of-center think tank R Street Institute analyzed the outcomes for Republicans — and specifically whether the primary system led to more broadly popular general election candidates that made it more likely for the party to win in November. A study analyzed six senate districts (A, C, D, E, L, and R) in which two Republicans competed against each other. These six elections featured a more moderate Republican running against an opponent to their ideological right. The report finds that in all six cases, Republicans with broader appeal eventually won the general election, but each would likely have not won a traditional GOP primary.⁹³

Though a small sample, the research may validate proponents’ claims that the system has influenced the type of candidates that are likely to perform better within parties, not just between them.

In all six cases, Republicans with more broad appeal eventually won the general election, but each would likely have not won a traditional GOP primary.

In addition to broad trends across all of the candidate fields, a number of observers have analyzed the impact of the new election system on polarization in the context of who won specific elections. This is, of course, a very important lens through which to analyze the extent to which a reform can reward pragmatic governing and incentivize elected leaders to represent all of their constituents. Across the various research surveyed, scholars generally confirm

the hypothesis that the system is more conducive to electing more representative lawmakers than the previous one. Three notable examples include:



U.S. Senator Lisa Murkowski won re-election at a time when many fellow moderate Republicans were “primaried” nationally. Murkowski has a bipartisan track record in Washington including on issues like infrastructure, abortion, and the environment, was the only Republican supporter of the Voting Rights Act, and was one of few Republicans to vote to convict Donald Trump. Senator Murkowski faced a challenge from the ideological right, a Trump-endorsed candidate, Kelly Tshibaka.

Jeannette Lee of the Sightline Institute noted how Murkowski advanced in a top-four primary open to all voters on the same day that Liz Cheney lost a Republican primary that only advanced one candidate.⁹⁴ Another group of researchers wrote: “Murkowski was widely seen as a primary beneficiary of the electoral reforms, as she would likely have lost a traditional closed primary to a more hardline Republican.” A post-primary poll found that, of Republican primary voters, 58.2% supported Kelly Tshibaka in the primary, while only 17.9% supported Murkowski; this indicates that Murkowski may not have been able to win a Republican primary.



Mary Peltola was a former Democratic state legislator known for her bipartisan approach and leadership of the state’s “Bush Caucus” (representative of rural Alaskan interests). She had very little support from the state’s Democratic Party, and most political

observers do not believe she would have won a traditional statewide partisan primary that would have overwhelmingly been decided by Anchorage voters and focused on national progressive issues. Peltola — who ran on an issues-based platform focused on challenges facing all Alaska voters — beat conservative firebrand Sarah Palin and Nick Begich, who took extremely conservative policy positions, including on abortion, crime control, and homelessness.⁹⁵

Academic analysis of Peltola’s campaigning indicates she ran a “very positive campaign” that sought the second place votes of her opponents.⁹⁶ The state’s major newspaper, the *Anchorage Daily News*, reported Peltola’s success was in part due to her focus on issues facing Alaska, like the need to protect fisheries.⁹⁷ Upon her election, she appointed the former chief of staff to Republican Don Young to the same role on her team.⁹⁸ In office, Peltola has teamed up with Rep. Jared Golden (D-ME) and Rep. Marie Gluesenkamp Perez (D-WA) to Co-Chair the congressional Blue Dog Coalition, an official congressional caucus made up of pragmatic, fiscally-responsible Democrats working on common-sense bipartisan solutions.⁹⁹



Cathy Giessel has a comeback story that demonstrates both the problems with partisan primaries and the power of nonpartisan primary solutions. A Republican State Senator, Giessel served as Senate President from 2019 - 2020. After bipartisan compromises and work with a cross-partisan legislative caucus, she drew a primary challenge in 2020 from Roger Holland, a conservative with a much more polarizing agenda. Holland ousted Giessel, earning 3,687 votes to do so in a GOP Primary.

Two years later, after the election system had changed, Giessel re-entered the race. With the top four candidates advancing, both Giessel and Holland advanced to a November 2022 rematch. Giessel earned

33.8% of the vote, Holland earned 33.1%, and Democrat Roselynn Cacy earned 33.0% of the vote. When Cacy’s votes were redistributed, Giessel had earned a majority and won a decisive victory by 14%. The two elections tell a powerful story, as Giessel’s ability to serve her constituents hinged on whether the election that mattered most was open to all voters, or only a slice of voters.

Giessel’s 2022 approach to campaigning was different than in her previous elections. She told the *Anchorage Daily News*: “For me, it changed completely how I campaigned, and I believe this is true for other candidates also... In this election, I didn’t buy a database of voters (registration)... I wanted to talk to everyone, so I knocked at every single door.¹⁰⁰ The new election rules incentivized her, and other candidates, to campaign to all constituents, not just likely partisan primary voters (or in this case, registered Republicans alone).

Alaska Government relations strategist Michael “Fish” Pawlowski noted that in the Giessel race, as in the Murkowski Senate race and Peltola House race, the top-four primary “allowed voters from across the spectrum to come together and support a more centrist candidate. And that candidate likely would not have advanced through a closed primary system.”¹⁰¹

Murkowski, Peltola, and Giessel are just three examples of how the Alaska System can reward politicians who take a problem-solving approach to public policy. There are plenty of others — including Democrats, Republicans, and independents — who ran and won under the new election system and are in office with a mandate to serve all of their constituents, not just their primary voters.

Governing

Beyond campaign rhetoric and election outcomes, did the Alaska System temper polarization and incentivize problem solving on major issues once incumbents were in office? One legislative session makes it hard to draw decisive conclusions, but evidence suggests the system at least reinforced Alaska’s history of cross-partisan governing.

Alaska has a long history of independents, Republicans, and Democrats agreeing to caucus together in the state legislature. These cross-partisan caucuses that form agreements on how major policy issues will be addressed and that create power sharing agreements in leadership and in committees is quite rare in American politics. The State House has been governed by a cross-partisan caucus with bipartisan leadership since 2016. However, it's highly unusual to have such coalitions in both chambers at the same time, as is the case following the 2022 election.¹⁰²

The 2023 senate majority caucus includes eight Republicans and nine Democrats — and is led by Republican Senate President Gary Stevens and Republican Majority Leader Cathy Giessel.¹⁰³ The house majority caucus includes 19 Republicans, two Democrats, and two Independents and is led by Speaker of the House Cathy Tilton (R) and Majority Leader Dan Saddler (R).¹⁰⁴ The house minority caucus is also a cross-partisan one, and includes 12 Democrats, three Independents, and one Republican; it is led by minority leader Calvin Schrage (I) and minority whip Louise Stutes (R).¹⁰⁵

The Senate majority coalition was the first bipartisan majority in the Senate since 2012, and formed among members promising to be moderate and consensus-focused.¹⁰⁶ Senate President Gary Stevens (R) said the caucus was a response to unproductive budget negotiations in previous years (among other issues) and that the coalition “[W]ill be working in the middle — not the far-left or the far-right issues.”¹⁰⁷ Democrat Bill Wielechowski said the majority would “put our partisan differences aside” to find solutions, which he said would “require compromise on all sides.”¹⁰⁸

The House majority coalition, led by Republicans, was a flip from the predominantly Democratic coalition that had controlled the chamber since 2017. Despite an overwhelming share of Republican membership, the coalition gave an independent and a Democrat co-chair roles on the powerful House Finance Committee.¹⁰⁹

According to one legislator who served five terms from

2013 to 2022, the formation of such caucuses and the change in attitude that it signaled among legislators was a strong sign of the reform’s potential. “I think this is the most leveraged panacea-like intervention that this country has in terms of the future of democracy and governance,” said former Rep. Jonathan Kreiss-Tomkins, “the reality blew my expectations [of bipartisanship] out of the water.”¹¹⁰

In addition to the formal power sharing agreements, freshman House members from across the aisle joined together in an informal caucus, “to talk and collaborate across party and formal caucus lines,” as they learned to navigate the chamber.¹¹¹ Speaking with a group of researchers and analysts, Michelle Sparck of Get Out the Native Vote observed, “you have a [large] freshman class that... [is] saying we don’t want to do business the way you guys conventionally or traditionally do business. So it’s the older guard...still being purists and that are still adhering to their very tough lines that they can’t cross, whereas the younger freshman conservatives are a lot more interested in solving problems.”¹¹²

“I think this is the most leveraged panacea-like intervention that this country has in terms of the future of democracy and governance.”

The freshman caucus is a reminder that the Alaska System’s impact on governance may take a long time to fully materialize. Changing the governing behavior of incumbents will always be hard as they have already taken policy positions and made issues-based alliances. As more junior members first elected under the system ascend into leadership positions, cross-partisan policy making could become even more normalized in Alaska.

It is hard to prove causation between Alaska’s new election system and the formation of bipartisan legislative caucuses in 2023, especially because the state has a history of them. At minimum, the state

did not go backwards, and the reform may have reinforced incentives to engage in consensus-oriented governing. Additionally, the legislature did not repeat special sessions that have plagued the body in the past. The reform also may have made it more likely the Republican leaders of the Senate Coalition — the first in that body in a decade — prevailed over more ideological candidates; had those more ideological candidates been more successful, the coalition may not have formed.

Revisiting the Premise

Proponents of the reform have argued that the Alaska System will temper political polarization and improve governance. We agree with the premise, based on the available evidence. The effect size seems largest in influencing what types of candidates won elections, while smaller in impacting campaign rhetoric. It also seems too early to tell if the reform has impacted governance.

Of course, no election system will fully inoculate against the macro trends of rising polarization, nor deliver common-sense policy outcomes over night. There will still be polarizing candidates elected and some policy issues will still go unresolved (e.g., despite popular support, education funding did not increase in 2023 as a result of a governor's veto).

Further, it is too early for definitive quantitative measures of how the Alaska System may have impacted polarization in part because other states' legislative bodies remain in session and because the state only has three federal representatives. The reform's ultimate impact on governing outcomes will be measured over the following decades, not years, as political incentives gradually shift and new leaders are elected.

But as explained above, we know that Alaska's system has changed competition in elections, and seems to have liberated problem-solving incumbents from the threat of being primaried by ideologically extreme candidates and interests. As a result, there is early indication that Alaska's federal delegation and state legislature are less polarized, speak to a broader swath of the state's electorate, and are more focused on governing outcomes.

There is early indication that Alaska's federal delegation and state legislature are less polarized, speak to a broader swath of the state's electorate, and are more focused on governing outcomes.

Voter Experience

PREMISE | The Alaska System will be simple for voters to understand, will be implemented equitably, and will not result in widespread errors by voters.

FINDING | 99.9% of Alaska general election ballots were cast correctly in November 2022, and undervotes on primary election ballots were less frequent than previous elections. According to post-election polling, most Alaskans understood the nonpartisan primary and instant runoff general election formats and found each easy to use. Alaskans also felt empowered by the new election model.

OUR CONCLUSION **YES**

OUR CONFIDENCE **MEDIUM**

EFFECT SIZE **N/A**

In introducing any change to when or how voters vote, a first principle is “do no harm.” Voting should not be burdensome, and it should be easy for voters to cast ballots that reflect their preferences. At its best, voting should also be an experience in which voters believe they have power, that their voice is being heard in the democratic process, and that election outcomes are transparent and fair.

A common claim against instant runoffs is that voters will not understand how to use the rankings.¹¹³ This section directly addresses how few errors were made by voters in the new election system, how frequently they ranked candidates, and what voters thought of the experience.

The Evidence

In assessing a new election system’s impact on voters it is critical to investigate whether voters cast valid ballots under the new election system, whether they found it easy to use, and whether they were informed about the system. In the November general election, 99.9% of ballots cast on ranked choice ballots were valid, according to official state records.ⁱ In the August special election, 99.8% of ballots cast in the instant runoff general election were valid; just 295 votes out of 188,582 cast in the state’s first ranked choice

election were invalid.¹¹⁴ Neither election’s share of “residual” votes (i.e., ballots with errors) was higher than previous elections in Alaska under the traditional voting system, nor higher than other states not using instant runoffs.

In the November general election, 99.9% of ballots cast on ranked choice ballots were valid.

James Brooks of the Alaska Beacon observed that the low rates of ballots with errors were “indication that education campaigns by the Division [of Elections] and by Alaskans for Better Elections — a nonprofit that encourages ranked choice voting — were successful.”¹¹⁵ The state’s official educational campaign, overseen by long-time state election chief Gail Fenumiai, provided voters with an impressive set of materials, including fact sheets,¹¹⁶ videos,¹¹⁷ mock elections,¹¹⁸ FAQ pages,¹¹⁹ and more; materials were translated into multiple languages to reach all Alaskans.

Research backs up Brooks’ claim of a successful educational campaign, showing that Alaska voters were educated about the system through multiple mediums. A post-election poll found that 92% of Alaska voters reported receiving instructions on how

ⁱ A ballot was considered valid as long as it was accepted without critical error by the election authority and counted in at least one round. Otis, Deb. “Analysis From Alaska’s RCV Elections In November 2022,” *FairVote* (December 2022).

to rank their candidates — including at least 87% of respondents across all major ethnicities.¹²⁰ These respondents reported hearing about how to vote in the new election system from many sources, including television (44% of respondents), direct mail (42%), radio (31%), social media (31%), websites (20%), and events (13%).¹²¹

A forthcoming research paper by Joseph Anthony, Anita Manion, Martha Kropf, and David Kimball investigated in further detail the number of “residual” ballots cast in Alaska. Residual votes are a commonly-used measure for when voters’ votes don’t count, and include when voters do not vote in an election (i.e., an “undervote”) or when they vote for multiple candidates in an election (i.e., an “overvote”). The scholars analyzed official election results from each state legislative election dating back to 2014, and compared error rates in both primary elections and general elections from previous years to 2022.

Their analysis finds that primary residual vote rates decisively decreased following implementation of Alaska’s new voting system: residual votes went from a 7.0% average from 2014-2020 to 0.8% for the 2022 U.S. House primary, from 16.7% to 12.3% in state house primaries, and from 18.7% to 12.7% in state senate

primaries. This is significant, and the reform likely had a positive impact. Residual votes in primaries are often high because there’s only one candidate to vote for or because voters’ first place choice is on the other party’s ballot from the one they have chosen. A nonpartisan primary ballot with all candidates allows voters to express their true preferences, resulting in fewer undervotes and a lower residual vote rate.

Residual rates also decreased for general elections for the U.S. House, were consistent for state house, and barely higher for state senate races. Even though voters transitioned from the typical “vote for one” system to ranking candidates, they did not make errors at higher rates than in the past. The scholars conclude:

“Contrary to our hypothesis, we tend to see lower average residual vote rates in 2022 than in prior Alaska elections, with an especially large decline in primary elections in 2022. Primary elections typically feature much higher residual vote rates than general elections. Furthermore, there is significant ballot drop-off in the state legislative races, but these rates are also lower in the top-four elections of 2022.”¹²²

Like Brooks, Anthony, et. al. also attribute the low error rates to effective public education efforts of

TABLE 1

Mean Residual Vote Rates in Alaska House Districts: 2014–2022

Years	U.S. House		State House		State Senate	
	Primary	General	Primary	General	Primary	General
2022 (Top 4)	0.8%	1.3%	12.3%	7.8%	12.7%	7.9%
2014-2020	7.0%	2.4%	16.7%	7.8%	18.7%	7.2%

Uncontested races are not included. Data are weighted by the number of ballots cast in each district.

Source: Adapted from Anthony et al., sourced from Alaska Division of Elections

both supporters and opponents of the reform. They comprehensively review paid media and news coverage of the new system, and find that “interest groups and most candidates seem to have resolved themselves to accepting the new system and have shifted efforts to more strategic and educational messaging about how voters can use the new system.”¹²³

Not only did Alaskans understand how to vote without errors, they also used their new power to rank candidates. FairVote, a national advocacy organization that supports instant runoffs, analyzed the state’s Cast Vote Record (CVR) to determine if and how voters used rankings.¹²⁴ 67% of Alaskans ranked more than one candidate for Governor, 65% did so for U.S. Senator, and 67% did so for U.S. Representative. Voters were more likely (78%) to rank a second candidate if their first preference was a last-place candidate, demonstrating voters understood the system would take into account their second choice if their top choice was eliminated. Similarly, voters were more likely to rank candidates in races with more candidates, using, on average, 2.1 rankings in races

with four candidates, and 1.7 rankings in races with three candidates.

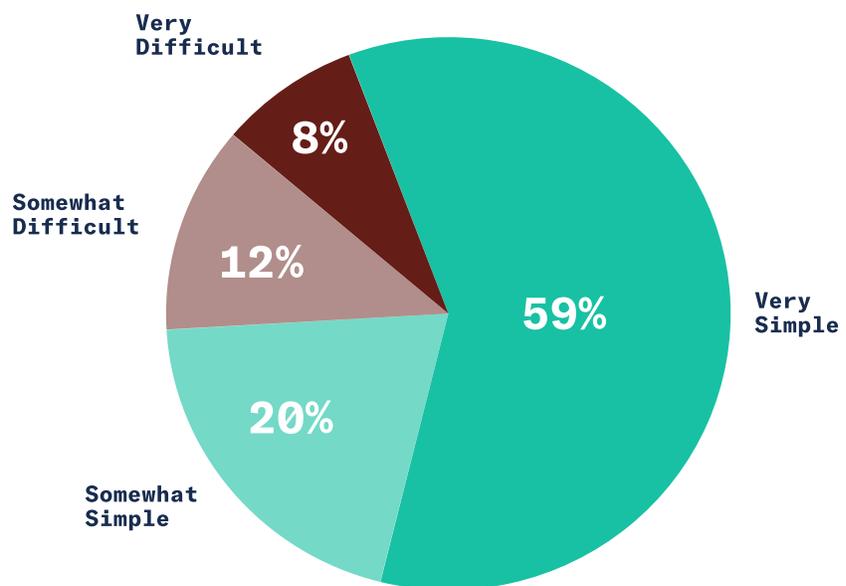
The evidence above shows the simplicity of using the system, and Alaskans saw it too. Post-election polls in August and November found that voters overwhelmingly considered their new voting system “simple.” Asked “How simple or difficult was it for you to fill out your Ranked Choice Voting ballot?” 59% of November respondents said “very simple,” and 20% said somewhat simple, with only 8% finding it “very difficult.”¹²⁵ August survey respondents were even more likely than November respondents to report the system being simple, with 57% saying “very simple,” 28% saying “somewhat simple” and only 6% saying “very difficult.”¹²⁶ In this election, voters had to pick one candidate in five primaries each, while exercising the ability to rank candidates in the special general election on the same day.

A majority across all major ethnicities reported the system being simple. And, tellingly, in the midst of a local and national campaign to turn Republican voters against instant runoffs, an analysis of this same

Figure 16

ALASKANS SAY RCV IS SIMPLE

How simple or difficult was it for you to fill out your ranked choice voting ballot?



Source: Patinkin Research Strategies; 11/9-11/13/22; N=800, MOE=3.46%

polling by the McKinley Research Group found that even a majority of self-identified Republican voters thought Alaska’s ranked choice ballot was simple to use.¹²⁷

The sentiment among survey respondents was captured by a number of voters who testified in favor of keeping the new election system, defending its simple nature. Connie Fredenberg testified “[The new system] is not confusing and I never talked to anybody who thought it was...I voted for a mixed ticket for the first time ever because I didn’t have just extreme options.”¹²⁸ One poll worker, Paul Rodzinski, commented “I’m speaking for myself and my wife and my daughter...It’s a very simple system. We both work the polls. We found no difficulties.”¹²⁹

When the election law was approved in 2020 it only had support of 50.6% of voters, and was opposed by 49.4%.¹³⁰ After voters’ first experience of an election with the new ballots and expanded choices, support

levels have increased. An August 2022 survey of voters found 57% support the new election system, while only 35% opposed it (8% were undecided). A November 2022 survey found support to be at 54%, with 43% opposed.

Revisiting the Premise

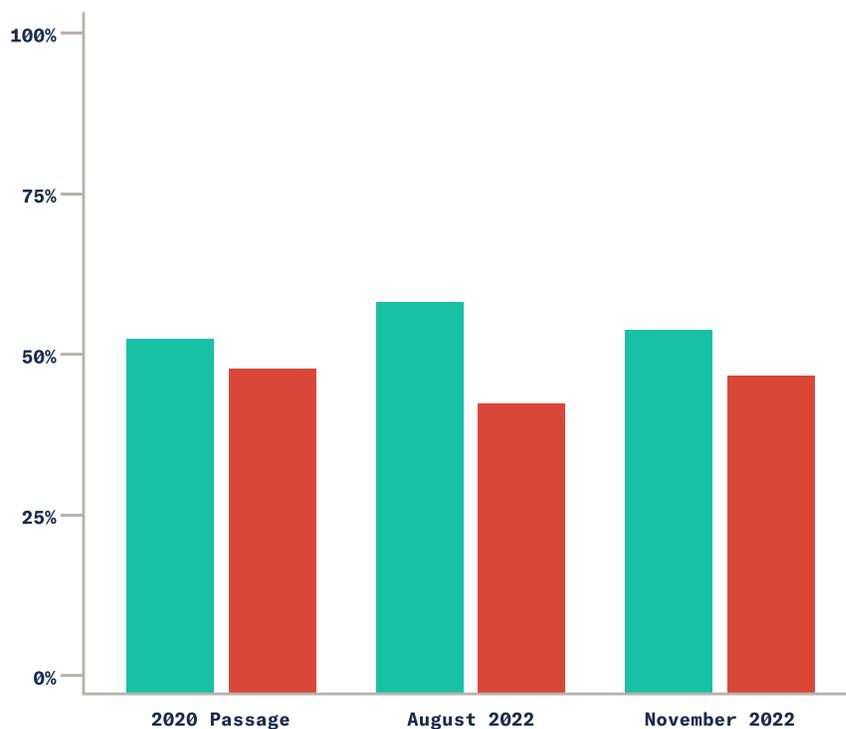
Skeptics of the Alaska System, and especially the ranked choice voting component, have argued that the system is confusing; others have raised alarm that reforms may not be equitably implemented. Proponents argued the Alaska System would be simple for voters to understand, would be implemented equitably, and would not result in widespread errors by voters. The evidence on how few voters made errors, how many found the system simple, and how many support using it in the future, suggest the premise is true. Some voters reported the system being “difficult” and while a majority support the system’s future use, it remains a slim majority; hence, we rate our confidence in our evaluation to be medium.

Figure 17

ALASKA VOTER SUPPORT FOR TOP-FOUR NONPARTISAN PRIMARY

Support
Oppose

Source: Patinkin Research Strategies



Future Research

The conclusions reached in this paper and by other scholars analyzing the impact in Alaska have found early signs of positive impact. Yet, there are limitations to drawing conclusions this early and much still to be determined about the impact of top-four primaries and instant runoffs in Alaska, and what their impact would be if adopted in other states.

There is a very small sample size of data to draw initial conclusions from. Only 63 elections, only four of which were statewide contests, have been conducted under the Alaska System — a paltry sum when

compared to the estimated 519,682 public offices with elected officials across the country. The 2022 election was also especially unique in Alaska. The state conducted its first all-mail election for the June special primary. An incumbent that served the state for 49 years died creating both a special election and a rare federal open seat opportunity. 2022 also followed a redistricting cycle, making an unusually high 59 out of 60 state legislative seats up for election. Research on future elections and legislative outcomes in Alaska can help address these limitations. Outcomes can address these limitations.

Conclusion

The Alaska System has already had a positive impact in Alaska. The most consequential finding of this report is that, under the Alaska System, elections were more competitive and less frequently pre-determined by party affiliation alone — giving voters a more meaningful choice and more powerful voice in who represents them.

Because of the new election rules, the election of greatest consequence was pushed from lower-turnout primaries to higher turnout November elections. Broad intraparty competition happened for the first time in general elections, giving voters not just a choice between the two parties, but also between multiple candidates from them. General elections also featured closer margins, greater ideological diversity, and more choices from outside the two major parties.

As a result of the reform, more voters cast ballots to determine who represented them. This did not require a boost in turnout, but rather a change in when elections were decided (i.e., in the general, not the primary) and the diversity in the candidates voters had to choose from. In 2022, 35% of Alaskans cast meaningful ballots, up from 22% in 2020 and 25% in 2018. Alaska also led the nation by this metric, and significantly outperformed the national average (12%).

Our research also should allay fears that instant runoffs, in which voters have the ability to rank their choices, somehow confuse or disenfranchise voters: voters can easily rank candidates in order of preference, just like they rank other things in their lives on a regular basis.

Conclusions on other dimensions of potential policy impact have less evidence, and/or too many variables make conclusions difficult to disentangle. There is some evidence that representation for historically marginalized communities improved, and reason to believe it may accelerate in the years to come. Campaign messaging seems to have changed in some ways, and less-ideological and more broadly appealing state legislative candidates did better in 2022 than in previous years. There is some evidence that governance may be improving, but it is too early to know for sure.

There is still much to learn about Alaska's new election system — both about its impact on the state and what such a system would mean for other states considering similar reform. The early evidence suggests that reform is worth considering in other American states, our laboratories of democracy. As voter frustration with our political system grows, advocates for a better path forward can look north to Alaska for an alternative.

The most consequential finding of this report is that, under the Alaska System, elections were more competitive and less frequently pre-determined by party affiliation alone — giving voters a more meaningful choice and more powerful voice in who represents them.

ABOUT

The Unite America Institute is a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization that conducts research and provides analysis on the root causes, effects, and potential solutions to political polarization and partisanship.

The Institute is particularly focused on exploring how nonpartisan election reforms — including nonpartisan primaries, independent redistricting commissions, and instant runoffs — increase participation, competition, representation, and accountability in the political system.

This report was written by Rachel Leven, MPP, and Tyler Fisher. It benefited from considerable input and background research from their Unite America colleagues, Dr. Rich Barton, Beth Hladick, Carlo Macomber, and Ross Sherman. It was designed by Fuzzco.

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