

Top Four with Ranked Choice Voting

2014 POLICY GUIDE



State and Local Policy

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States using or considering “Top Two Primaries” can improve it to enhance voter choice and competition and better meet the goals of Top Two primary advocates.

The Problem: The “Top Two” system of election has drawn increasing attention as a means of addressing political issues with electoral reform. It consists of a preliminary election where all candidates seeking office compete and where each voter has one vote, followed by a general election between the two candidates who received the most votes in the preliminary election.

However, limiting the general election to exactly two candidates severely limits voter choice and can lead to bizarre consequences. For example, in California’s congressional district 31 race in 2012, vote-splitting and variable turnout between rounds resulted in a majority-Democratic and majority-minority district advancing only two conservative white Republicans to the general election. In Washington State, political interests almost always avoid vote-splitting and intraparty races by deciding in advance which candidates will advance and then pushing only those candidates in the primary.

The Solution: The use of an all-partisan preliminary election can be retained while resolving the problems with Top Two via two changes: first, advance *four* candidates from the primary; and second, conduct general elections by ranked choice voting to uphold majority rule. These changes keep open primaries, but also open general elections by giving the much bigger, more representative general electorate more choices and more power. Simulations of this system in California and Washington using Top Two results suggest that nearly every general election would include both major parties while also usually advancing more than one candidate from the majority party. Unaffiliated and minor party candidates would also more often advance.

We would further improve Top Two and uphold the First Amendment freedom of association by allowing candidates to list on the ballot at least one endorsement from a private association, including a party.

Key Facts

Washington’s Top Two Primary: Of 58 congressional and statewide elections in 2008-2014, 56 elections in November featured only a Democrat and a Republican.

California’s Top Two Primary: In 2012, congressional Democrats did an average of seven points better in the general election than in the preliminary in competitive races, due to turnout disparities.

Ranked Choice Voting (RCV): Studies show that more than 99.5% of voters cast valid RCV ballots.

Fiscal Impact

States may save money by using a single preliminary ballot rather than separate party primaries. The use of ranked choice voting may require short-term expenditures to update administration practices. Voter education about all such changes is valuable, if not absolutely necessary.

Related Reforms

- Ranked Choice Voting
- Non-Partisan Ballot Labels
- Reasonable Ballot Access

Part Two Resources

- Top Two System in Action: Washington State 2008-2012
- Fixing Top Two in California